

LEVITICUS CHAPTER 10

Judgement at the house of God

The joy and ecstasy of chapter nine was quickly reduced to tragedy when Nadab and Abihu offered profane fire before the Lord (10v1). Fire had come from the presence of the Lord to reveal his loving presence (9v24). Now fire came out from the presence of the Lord to devour them (10v2). No sooner had this priesthood been established than it was threatened with extinction.

Structure of Chapter

Fire from the Lord v1-7
Prescriptions for the Priests v8-11
Eating the sacrificial offerings v12-20

1. Fire from the lord v1-7 Four questions need to be asked:

a) *Who were they?* v1

Nadab and Abihu were Aaron's eldest sons (Ex 6v23). They had had a privileged upbringing. The two of them had even been singled out to join Moses and Aaron on mount Sinai (Ex 24v1-2,9). God specifically selected them to be major leaders of the Jewish priesthood (Ex 28v1), and just prior to our story they had been installed in the priestly office with the duty of offering sacrifices in the tabernacle (9v1-24). These two men were authorized to safeguard the worship of God, to lead the congregation in praise, to distinguish between the sacred and profane and to teach the laws of God. All this made them next in importance to Aaron.

b) *What did they do?* (10v1)

This verse tells us that they offered "profane" fire before the Lord. The exact meaning of this statement is ambiguous and hotly debated. It could be translated "unauthorized" or "alien". The following have been suggested; 1. They used common utensils (v1) "Each took his censer". 2. Incense was not prescribed formula (see Ex 30v9). 3. Incense was offered at the wrong time of day (See Lev 16v1,2). 4. They penetrated too far into the tabernacle (see Lev 16v1,2). 5. They used coals from a private source (see Lev 16v12). 6. They simply acted without authorization v1. This seems to be the most likely offence and is in keeping with the context. Up to that moment everything had been done under the direction of Moses and as God intended. The essence of this sin, as Kellog observes, is "will-worship". They followed their own inclinations and did it their way. We must only worship God in the way He has prescribed in His word.

c) *How did it end?* (v2-7)

The profane fire of the priests is now met by the fire of God. They were not cremated. It was like a bolt of lightning that struck them down and they were carried away by their tunics (v4,5).

d) *Why did it matter?* (v3)

The answer is given in a poetic couplet. It announces that God will not allow his sanctity to be violated by the priests. God will be treated as one set apart during worship. If not, God will defend his own honour.

2. Prescriptions for the priests v8-11

Taken in its context, this prohibition suggests that alcohol led Nadab and Abihu to perform this presumptuous act. (Prov 23v20-35; 1 Tim 3v3, Tit 1v7).

3. Eating the sacrificial offerings v12-20

Moses checks that the priests have completed the sacrifices. When Moses later came to check the portion of the sin offering he found that it had been burned (v16). Moses was angry about this further breach in procedure and took them to task (v17,18). Aaron came to the rescue (v19). And his explanation satisfied Moses (v20). "Church leaders need wisdom and grace to discern between those who wilfully disobey God's commands and those whose hearts are in the right place but whose circumstances prevent them from doing what is required".