Congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ,

There are many instances in the Bible where God severely judges the wicked.

* Perhaps the most well-known example is in Genesis 13 where the Lord destroyed the cities of **Sodom and Gomorrah**.
* But in our evening household devotions this week we read about a time when “*the angel of the LORD went out and struck down* ***a hundred and eighty-five thousand [Assyrian soldiers****]*.” 185,000 people!

But while we can see the link between wickedness and judgment with occasions like those, there are other severe judgments that involve the Lord’s people and actions that don’t seem, to us, to be all that wicked:

* The most well known example is surely **Uzzah**, the man who reached out to steady the Ark of the Covenant because it was about to tip over, and was struck dead by the Lord!
* And then there is **Ananias and Sapphira**, the husband and wife who told a lie and were struck dead by the Lord.

And we have another example here in Leviticus 10 where Nadab and Abihu were consumed by the fire of the Lord just because they offered “*unauthorized fire*.” And we read this and it doesn’t seem, to us, to be such a big deal. So why this severe judgment? And of course, what makes this episode even more striking is what happened immediately before it in **chapter 9**. As we saw last week, it was the first congregational worship service in Israel, and it climaxed with verse 23, where “*the Lord appeared to all the people.”* Wow! And then, in verse 24, “*Fire came out from before the Lord and consumed the [offerings].*” And this was all so incredible that “*when all the people saw it, they shouted and fell on their faces*.” But here in **chapter 10:1**, we again read that “*fire came out from before the Lord*.” And because of what Moses says about the offerings in this chapter, it is clear that this was **the same day** as the events of chapter 9. So, very soon after what verses 23 and 24 describe, the fire of the Lord came out again but this time it consumed Nadab and Abihu “*and they died before the Lord*.” And look what it says at the end of **verse 3**, “*And Aaron held his peace*.” Other versions say, “*Aaron was silent*.” So one moment everyone was shouting for joy and the next moment there was total, horrified silence. What a dramatic contrast!

Well, what follows, in **verses 4-15**, are burial instructions, a warning about drinking wine and a command to teach the people, and further instructions about eating parts of the offerings. And then in **verses 16-20**, another worship error seems to be identified, but it receives Moses’ approval!? So, what was that all about? What is going on here? How are we to understand this incredible scene? And then, as usual, we want to know if and how any of this is relevant for us as New Testament believers? And again, most importantly of all, how do these events point us to the Lord Jesus Christ?

So let’s look at the **worship lessons that arise from worship incidents that occur either side of worship instructions**. And we will simply walk through the details of the first worship incident, the worship instructions, and the second worship incident, before we end with some worship lessons.

1. So first of all, verses 1-3 and **the First Worship Incident**.
   1. In **Exodus 6:23** we learn that Aaron had four sons – Nadab, Abihu, Eleazar and Ithamar. Nadab and Abihu were the oldest of his sons. And we are told that both of them“*took his censer and put fire in it and laid incense on it and offered unauthorized fire before the LORD, which he had not commanded them*.”
      1. Now, there are **several theories** about exactly what it is that they got wrong: Back in **Exodus 30**, we learn that incense was to be offered first thing in the morning and at twilight. And the Lord was very clear: “*You shall not offer unauthorized incense on [the altar]*.” And later in **Leviticus 16** we learn that the coals that burned the incense had to be taken from the altar of burnt offering with a tabernacle censer, which was a kind of bowl for carrying coals.
         1. So it could be that Nadab and Abihu did this at the wrong time of the day.
         2. And/or it could be that they did not use coals from the burnt offering altar.
         3. But in terms of what the text says and the context, notice that we are told that “*each took his censer*.” So it may well be that instead of using a tabernacle censer, they used a different censer.
         4. And **verses 8-11** support this possibility. For there the Lord told Aaron not to drink alcohol when he and his sons were on duty, and to “distinguish between the holy and the common.” So it may well be that Nadab and Abihu were tipsy or drunk, which is why they forgot to use the tabernacle censer and instead used another censer. And this explanation has the benefit of connecting verses 8-11 to this episode rather than them being some curiously unconnected instructions. And notice also that **verse 8 was addressed directly to Aaron**. It is the only time in the whole Book that the Lord speaks directly to Aaron. So it may be that verses 8-11 are a kind of Aaron, I will tell you this myself, so that you are clear: Don’t do what your sons did.
      2. Now, having said all that, it does not explicitly say that Nadab and Abihu were drunk and used the wrong censer; what is stated explicitly is that something about what they did was **not as the Lord commanded**.
         1. Ever since chapter 8 began, the pattern has been, The Lord commanded something, and Moses did it. The Lord, through Moses, commanded Aaron to do something, and Aaron did it. But now, despite having the Lord’s commands about offering incense, Nadab and Abihu did something, “*which He had not commanded them*.” It is the first breach in the command – obey pattern.

* 1. And its consequences were shockingly severe, as we have seen: “*Fire came out from before the LORD and consumed them, and they died before the LORD*.” And verse 5 makes it plain that their bodies were not destroyed, because they were carried out in their coats. But at that moment, there lay the bodies of two men in their magnificent priest uniforms, dead, by the fire of the Lord, for everyone to see!
  2. And Moses told Aaron why this had happened, “*This is what the Lord has said: ‘Among those who are near me I will be sanctified, and before all the people I will be glorified*.’” So because Aaron and his sons had been ordained as priests, they wear ‘near’ the Lord, representing the Lord, on His side of the offerings. As priests, they now had to set an example of holiness; they had to show the people the glory of God and be holy. But Nadab and Abihu had failed to do this at a very important moment in Israel’s history. So that is why they had to pay the ultimate price. If the Lord had ‘let them off,’ the message He would have sent the people is that He is not really holy and that His commands don’t need to be taken too seriously.
  3. So I wonder if you can see **the line from this episode to the cross**? For the plain fact is that no one in Leviticus 10 was perfect; not Aaron or his other sons, or the people, or *even* *Moses*. If the fire of the Lord had come out and consumed them all it would have been just what they deserved. And you and me too are far from perfect. We lie and we cheat and we lust and we lose our temper. We too are commandment breakers and we deserve to be consumed by the fire of the Lord. But there is one person who was born who lived a perfect life and did not deserve condemnation. And that person is? Jesus, the Son of God. And He took all our sins on Himself and went to the cross. And God poured out all of His wrath and condemnation and judgment on Him and He died. But unlike Nadab and Abihu, Jesus rose again so that all who would believe in Him would escape judgment and instead enjoy fellowship with God and every blessing. So even Nadab and Abihu, as negative types, point us to Jesus as the priest who has secured our salvation.

1. Well, that brings us next to verses 4-15 and **the Worship Instructions**.
   1. And the first part of this has to do with the removal and burial and mourning of Nadab and Abihu, which is what verses 4-7 are about, but these are still worship instructions, as we shall see.
      1. In the first place, Nadab and Abihu’s **cousins**, Mishael and Elzaphan, were given the duty of lifting the bodies up and taking them outside the camp for burial. And this was because Aaron and his remaining sons had work to do as priests, and contact with a dead body would have made them unclean and unfit to serve as priests.
      2. And then Moses said to Aaron and his remaining sons, “*Do not let the hair of your heads hang loose, and do not tear your clothes, lest you die, and wrath come upon all the congregation; but let your brothers, the whole house of Israel, bewail the burning that the LORD has kindled. And do not go outside the entrance of the tent of meeting, lest you die, for the anointing oil of the LORD is upon you*.” These were typical customs of mourning the dead – you made your hair messy, you tore you clothes, and you started crying at the top of your voice. But the Lord’s command to Aaron and his remaining sons was: You must not do these things; the people can, but you must not, “*lest you die*.”
      3. So I want you to think about this for a moment: If you saw your sons or any close family member die, right in front of your eyes, surely you would want to scream, wouldn’t you? I would. But in verse 3 we see, “*Aaron held his peace*.” And now, when burying their dead and mourning their loss was surely what Aaron and his other sons would have wanted to do, God said, Do not do it or you will die too! And this sounds harsh and unfair of the Lord, until we understand that Aaron and his sons were not any old people; they were **ordained priests of the Lord**. They were not first and foremost father and son and brothers, but priests of the Lord.
         1. So, what message would the people have received if Aaron had of cried out when his sons were struck down? Aaron disagrees with what the Lord had done! But Aaron’s silence, the silence *of a father,* sent a very clear message to the people: Aaron agrees with what the Lord had done.
         2. And if Aaron and his remaining sons had burst out crying and removed their priestly uniforms and picked up the bodies and left the tabernacle, the message that would have been conveyed to the people would have been – family first, God second. But God said that the message they needed to convey to the people was God first, family second.
      4. And we will return to this point when we consider our worship lessons from this episode, but let’s see now that in all of this **Aaron is another shadow that points us to the Lord Jesus**.
         1. For Jesus could have stayed in heaven and enjoyed fellowship with His Father, but He chose to leave that behind and come down to earth and be forsaken of the Father on the cross, so that you and me could become part of God’s family.
   2. Well, the rest of the worship instructions are recorded in **verses 8-15**.
      1. As I said earlier, in my view, the best explanation for **verses 8-11** is that they relate to what Nadab and Abihu did wrong. But they could also be general instructions that relate to verse 3 and the duty of the priests, which is to model and teach the glory and holiness of God:
         1. And so, they were **not to drink any alcohol before going on duty**, lest they die. And just to be clear, there are other places in the Bible that celebrate drinking wine and how it can ‘gladden the heart.’ The Lord Jesus even turned water into wine at a wedding. So the Bible is not anti-alcohol, as some teach. But the priests had to be absolutely clear-headed, while on duty, hence this prohibition.
         2. And, the priests also had to set an example and teach the people about the distinctions between the holy and the common, and the clean and unclean, and teach them all of the laws of God.
      2. And then, in **verses 12-15**, because of what had just happened with Nadab and Abihu, Moses walked through the details of the offerings that still had to be completed to make sure that everything was done exactly as the Lord had commanded. There were only three priests left now, so losing another one because of another worship error would have been an absolute disaster. So Moses was basically checking on everything else: Have you done this? Have you done that? This is what you need to do with this offering and that offering. Have you got it?
2. And that brings us, thirdly, to verses 16-20, and **the Second Worship Incident**.
   1. Back in **chapter 6:26-30**, Moses had explained that if the blood of a sin offering was brought into the tabernacle and sprinkled, then the whole carcass was to be burnt on the altar, but if the blood was not brought into the tabernacle, then after presenting the fat and the kidneys and liver on the altar, the priest was to eat the rest of the carcass beside the altar. And this was as a kind of payment to the priest for his work but it was also a symbol of acceptance; the Lord had accepted the offering and forgiven the people, as the last part of **verse 17** explains. Well, sometime later in that day, Aaron decided that it would not be right for he and his remaining sons to eat the rest of the sin offering goat. And as Moses was checking that everything had been done as the Lord commanded, he learned about this. And you can imagine Moses’ shock! Oh no! Another worship failure! Will more priests die by the fire of the Lord?!
      1. But the first thing to notice is that **Aaron and his remaining sons were very much alive**. With Nadab and Abihu, it was worship failure, dead. But Aaron and his sons were not dead.
      2. And then we learn why: Aaron explained that he had made this decision out of a holy and righteous fear of the Lord. As Aaron saw it, given the sin committed by *his sons*, it might have further displeased the Lord if Aaron ate meat that symbolized the Lord’s forgiveness. So to avoid further guilt, it seemed best to Aaron not to eat the meat and instead to offer it all on the altar.
      3. And because this act had clearly met the Lord’s approval, because Aaron and his sons *were not dead!*, we read, “*When Moses heard that, he approved*.”
      4. So, **even though Nadab and Abihu, and Aaron, both did not do exactly as the Lord commanded**, the difference between them is that Nadab and Abihu casually or willfully disregarded the Lord’s commands, while Aaron’s actions were motivated by the fear of the Lord and a desire to uphold His glory. In other words: Nadab and Abihu’s actions = small god, Aaron’s actions = Big God!
   2. And once again, all of this reminds us of our need for a sinless high priest. For even though Aaron’s actions were approved, sin clung to him and to every other priest that followed. But **Hebrews 4:15** tells is that Jesus is the sinless High Priest that we need. And He was able to offer and be the perfect sin offering. And His offering received the Father’s approval. And the Father’s approval means that all those who believe in Jesus as the Christ have their sins forgiven and receive eternal life.
3. Well, that brings us, fourthly and finally, to the **Worship Lessons** that arise out of this chapter. And there are three lessons for us to consider:
   1. **The first is that** **we too must avoid the self-willed worship of Nadab and Abihu**. Deut. 4:2 says, “*Do not add to what I command you and do not subtract from it, but keep the commands of the LORD your God that I give you*.” Nadab and Abihu ignored or didn’t pay attention to what the Lord had commanded about how He is to be worshipped.
      1. And congregation, this same mistake is made today when people invent what to do in public worship. We have talked about this in an earlier Leviticus sermon, but worship must include what is commanded in Scripture – the reading and preaching of the Bible, singing, prayer, the sacraments, and offerings. We have no command for puppet shows or watch movies or having someone sing a song for us, or many other things that some churches add in to public worship. To do that is to offer ‘unauthorized fire.’ And this principle is known as **the regulative principle of worship** – how we worship God must be regulated or commanded by God.
      2. But related to this, we see from what Aaron did at the end of this chapter that **sometimes divine commandments can be overruled by a higher principle**. When there are good reasons preventing the law being carried out *to the letter*, deviations are graciously accepted by the Lord.
         1. There is another example of this in **2 Chron. 30:18-20**. There King Hezekiah called all the people to come to Jerusalem for a public Passover celebration. But many people who came and celebrated had not consecrated themselves, as the law required, which was punishable by death. But King Hezekiah prayed to the Lord to forgive this error because he and the people were genuinely seeking the Lord. And the Lord did forgive them.
         2. And of course, in recent times, we have not gathered for worship on the Lord’s Day, as we are commanded to. But we did this out of love for neighbour, so that disease would not be spread.
         3. So there may be times when good reasons prevent the law being carried out *to the letter*. But we have to be very careful not to turn this principle into a license for everyone to do whatever they think is right. So as a matter of general wisdom, just as the priests and the king were involved in the examples I mentioned, it would be wise for us to involve our elders in any decisions we have to make about potentially not keeping a some commandment to the letter.
   2. But a second worship lesson arises from verse 3 and the words about those near to the Lord having to glorify God. **And the lesson is that the Lord expects more from those He appoints to leadership in the church**. And **James 3:1** makes this very plain: “*Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness*.” **Hebrews 13:7** says, “*Remember your leaders, those who spoke to you the word of God … imitate their faith*.”
      1. So those of us who serve as elders and deacons must strive to promote the glory of God and strive to be holy, that we may be good examples for members of the congregation to learn from. And I am thankful that the Lord has given us men who seek to be this sort of leader. But we need your regular prayer that we would be kept from temptation and error in doctrine or in life.
   3. **But a third and last worship lesson that arises from this chapter is that just as Aaron had to put the Lord ahead of family, so the Lord calls each of us to put Him before family**.
      1. And we saw, earlier, how the Lord Jesus modelled this for us in leaving His Father in heaven and coming to earth and the cross. But it got even more tangible than that for Jesus while He was on earth. During His public ministry, we read in **Mark 3** of a time when Jesus was healing and preaching, and someone said to Him and said, “*Your mother and your brothers are outside, seeking you*.” So, did Jesus stop what He was doing and run out to them? No. He “*look[ed] about at those who sat around Him [listening to Him teach, and] he said, "Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of God, he is my brother and sister and mother."*” Now, did this mean that Jesus did not care for His family? No. But His priorities were God first, family second.
      2. We see similar language in Matthew 10. There we are commanded to confess Jesus before men. And knowing that this may put us at odds with dearly loved family members, Jesus said, “*Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law. And a person's enemies will be those of his own household. Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me, and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me. And whoever does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me*.”
      3. So in Bible times, for example, if a Jew became a Christian, his or her family would hold a funeral, because in their eyes he or she was dead to them. And even today, in some countries, becoming a Christian can mean that your family disowns you or even persecutes you. But Jesus expects us to pay the price – Him first, family second. But for many of us, where we face this challenge is when our allegiance to Christ means we cannot participate in family activities that would keep us from worship, for example, or when biblical views we hold dear are mocked by our unbelieving family members.
      4. You have surely heard it said that ‘**blood is thicker than water**.’ And this is generally understood today as meaning that family allegiances come before anything else. But taking our text and what Jesus said into account, what we should say is that the water of baptism is thicker than blood, or that the blood of the covenant is thicker than the water of the womb. May the Lord help each one of us to honour Him first, even when that makes things very difficult with family.

So, Nadab and Abihu made a wrong worship decision and Aaron made a right worship decision. But as we have seen, all of this, ultimately points us to Jesus. He is holy. He is the perfect worshiper. He is the High Priest and the sin offering that we need. So “Therefore, (looking to Jesus) … let us be thankful, and so worship God acceptably with reverence and awe, for our "God is a consuming fire."” Amen.