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MINISTRIES

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Parashah Points: Shemini – Unauthorized Fire

Welcome to another episode of Parashah Points—short thoughts from the weekly Torah Portion.

This week’s Parashah Point comes from Shemini, which is Hebrew for “Eighth,” and it goes from Leviticus 9:1 to Leviticus 11:47.

This Torah Portion tells of the inauguration of Aaron’s priesthood, the deaths of Aaron’s sons Nadab and Abihu, and lists God’s dietary instructions to His people.

There’s a lot we can talk about in this Torah Portion. Today we’re going to talk about the seriousness of ministry leadership.

Leviticus 10:1-2

Now Nadab and Abihu, the sons of Aaron, each took his censer and put fire in it and laid incense on it and offered unauthorized fire before the Lord [YHWH], which he had not commanded them. And fire came out from before the Lord [YHWH] and consumed them, and they died before the Lord [YHWH].

In contrast to the preceding two chapters, which state several times that everything was done exactly “as YHWH commanded” (Leviticus 8:9, 13; 9:7, 10), chapter ten of Leviticus begins with a story of how Aaron’s two sons did what YHWH “[had not commanded](#).”

Furthermore, the previous chapter tells of the fire from YHWH consuming the sacrifices (Leviticus 9:24), indicating his approval and acceptance toward the people. But chapter ten describes the fire from YHWH consuming *Nadab and Abihu*, showing his disapproval and judgment.

Why did God send fire to consume Nadab and Abihu? As we’ve seen in the passage we quoted earlier, it was because they brought an incense offering that God had not commanded—they brought “unauthorized fire.”

While there are several theories about what exactly Nadab and Abihu did wrong, the most likely

explanation is that they entered an unauthorized area of the tabernacle at an unauthorized time. That is, they tried to approach the most Holy Place at a time not authorized by YHWH.

This suggestion is based on Leviticus 16, the chapter concerning the instructions for Yom Kippur. The chapter begins by mentioning Aaron's two sons who "drew near before YHWH and died" (Leviticus 16:1). The passage goes on to warn Aaron not to enter the most Holy Place "at any time." Why? The reason is "so that he may not die" (Leviticus 16:2).

Leviticus scholar, Jay Sklar, gives a great summary:

In short, the unauthorized fire was an incense offering which they presented at an unauthorized time (one of their own choosing) and at an unauthorized place (attempting to barge into the very throne room of the Lord!). This was considered a severe breach of royal protocol (cf. Esth. 4:11) and thus a sign of gross disrespect to the Lord.

-Jay Sklar, *Leviticus* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2014)

Regardless of the details of the offense, the Lord gives the following explanation directly following the deaths of Nadab and Abihu:

Leviticus 10:3

Then Moses said to Aaron, "This is what the Lord [YHWH] has said: 'Among those who are near me I will be sanctified, and before all the people I will be glorified.'" And Aaron held his peace.

Those "[who are near](#)" refers to the priests, who are instructed to regard God as utterly holy and worthy of their utmost fear and respect. He goes on to say that he will display his glory before all the people, which often takes the form of judgment, as we see here and also elsewhere in Scripture (Exodus 14:4; Ezekiel 28:22). Thus, God is warning the priests that they better regard him as holy—otherwise, their own judgment will serve as displays of God's holiness and glory before all the people.

Since the priests were the spiritual leaders of Israel, there is undoubtedly a message and warning here for ministry leaders today. The priests had to be diligent in their service to God, making sure they lived holy lives and performed their duties with the utmost care. Why? Because, as leaders, their error could lead the rest of Israel into error. This is why Nadab and Abihu were judged so strictly. It was for the sake of the people—that they would not doubt the holiness and glory of YHWH.

In the same way, ministry leaders today are held to a higher standard:

James 3:1

[Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness.](#)

How many times have we seen prominent pastors or ministers abuse their position of influence by not regarding God as holy? How many times have we seen people led astray due to the failure of leadership, either in their bad example or their false teachings or both? God does not take such irreverence lightly. Leaders will be held accountable for how they've led others astray.

May we all take this warning from the story of Nadab and Abihu seriously. May we regard the Lord as

holy, serving him with reverence and awe in all that we do.

Thank you for joining us for another Parashah Point!

We pray you have been blessed by this teaching. Remember, continue to test everything. Shalom! For more on this and other teachings, please visit us at www.testeverything.net

Shalom, and may Yahweh bless you in walking in the whole Word of God.

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