

#### Here's what hit me 4: Strange Fire – 1.31.10 – Leviticus 10

This week I listened through the book of **Leviticus** in large chunks. Here's what hit me:

Of all the books of the Bible, I'm sure that Leviticus contains more uses than any other book of the term "bodily fluids". Much of **Leviticus** is consumed with health regulations, with the priests as public health inspectors trained to spot diseases and molds that could spread to the entire camp and which therefore must be quarantined.

And this: I can see how someone might find evidence here if they believe that religion is just a tool to separate people from their wealth. A command that I heard repeated is that the Israelites were to bring the best of their grain and animals for sacrifice to the Lord, and the priests would offer these and then often they were allowed to keep the leftovers for themselves. Now I grew up in church and went to Bible college so I have always known that this was God's way of providing for the priests and Levities who, after all, were not going to get their own territory where they could grow crops and build wealth, and it makes sense. But when you listen through it and hear that the people are to bring the best of their own hard work to the priest, who got to keep some of it, you can see why a skeptic might say: "That's a pretty good racket you've worked out for yourself."

And this: Blood is life and life is in the blood. You see this in the preponderance of the animal sacrifices themselves, and in the anointing of the altar with blood and in the anointing of the priests with blood and in the prohibition against the people drinking blood or eating meat with blood in it. Blood takes on a sacred quality in **Leviticus**, a quality that has only been enhanced by medical science as we have come to know everything that our blood does for us. This sanctity of blood that is hammered home in Leviticus is essential to understanding the cross and communion.

And this: Ultimately, **Leviticus** describes a nearly impossible system for gaining righteousness, a system that the Israelites often failed to keep and one that was out of practice for years and decades at a time (during the years of national captivity for example).

Paul spoke about the failure of the Law to produce holiness. In **Romans 7**, he says: **<sup>7</sup>What shall we say, then? Is the law sin? Certainly not! Indeed I would not have known what sin was except through the law. For I would not have known what coveting really was if the law had not said, "Do not covet." <sup>8</sup>But sin, seizing the opportunity afforded by the commandment, produced in me every kind of covetous desire. For apart from law, sin is dead. <sup>9</sup>Once I was alive apart from law; but when the commandment came, sin sprang to life and I died. <sup>10</sup>I found that the very commandment that was intended to bring life actually brought death.**

What does that mean? It means that laws tend to point out opportunities for sin that you weren't aware of and gets you thinking about sin. When I was in college, a choir from another school, a strict Christian college, performed for us. Afterward I was talking to some of them about their campus rules, and one student said that on their campus. A guy always had to walk on the right side of a girl, never on the left. Why? Because if you walk on the left, you might be able to see between the buttons of her blouse. I never knew that! Sarah and Casey told me that they had an anti-drug talk at school where someone told them of the dangers of sniffing glue or paint thinner to get high, and many students were saying: "You can get high sniffing glue?" Sometimes you have to make rules, but rules don't make people holy and someone who obeys all the rules isn't necessarily a good person in his mind.

But in the end, this message isn't just about what hit ME. It's also about what hit Nadab and Abihu, the eldest sons of Aaron, in **Leviticus 10**. Now as I listened through **Exodus** and the start of **Leviticus**, it might have been easy to assume that Aaron and his sons had it made. Not only was Aaron the brother and spokesman of Moses, but he was going to be the high priest and his sons would be priests, the ones in charge of offering all of these sacrifices. It's a real honor, right? These guys must be extra special, particularly holy to be selected for such a high calling, right? But holiness, as it turns out, is an especially rare quality, even among those God chooses.

**<sup>1</sup> Aaron's sons Nadab and Abihu took their censers, put fire in them and added incense; and they offered unauthorized fire ("strange fire", it says in the KJV) before the LORD, contrary to his command. <sup>2</sup> So fire came out from the presence of the LORD and consumed them, and they died before the LORD. <sup>3</sup> Moses then said to Aaron, "This is what the LORD spoke of when he said:**

**" 'Among those who approach me**

**I will show myself holy;**

**in the sight of all the people**

**I will be honored.' "**

**Aaron remained silent.**

There's a little bit of Job in Aaron's reaction. The Lord has judged, and neither Job nor Aaron will speak out against it. But in Aaron's case, it may be fear that keep his mouth sealed. What has he gotten his family into? Who can stand before the Lord? Who is he and who are his sons to go before the Lord's altar, to stand before a holy God who cannot and will not tolerate sin in his presence? This system of sacrifices is just getting underway and already they have done it wrong. There is a tendency to depict Nadab and Abihu as especially bad men, but were they? Or was it just carelessness, or ignorance? As it says in **Hebrews 10:31 - It is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.**

**<sup>4</sup> Moses summoned Mishael and Elzaphan, sons of Aaron's uncle Uzziel, and said to them, "Come here; carry your cousins outside the camp, away from the front of the sanctuary." <sup>5</sup> So they came and carried them, still in their tunics, outside the camp, as Moses ordered.**

And there will be no allowance for proper mourning on the part of this grieving father, nor for his remaining sons. **<sup>6</sup> Then Moses said to Aaron and his sons Eleazar and Ithamar, "Do not let your hair become unkempt, and do not tear your clothes, or you will die and the LORD will be angry with the whole community. But your relatives, all the house of Israel, may mourn for those the LORD has destroyed by fire. <sup>7</sup> Do not leave the entrance to the Tent of Meeting or you will die, because the LORD's anointing oil is on you." So they did as Moses said.**

**<sup>8</sup> Then the LORD said to Aaron, <sup>9</sup> "You and your sons are not to drink wine or other fermented drink whenever you go into the Tent of Meeting, or you will die. This is a lasting ordinance for the generations to come. And if there is a moral to this story, a lesson that had to be driven home, it is in the following words. <sup>10</sup> You must distinguish between the holy and the common, between the unclean and the clean, <sup>11</sup> and you must teach the Israelites all the decrees the LORD has given them through Moses."**

Distinguish between the holy and the common. Distinguish between the clean and unclean. God is holy, that is, without sin, set apart, unstained. In this fallen world, people (even his people) are not holy...not in their fallen state, that is. In our fallen state, how could we presume to approach a Holy

God any more than we might approach the mouth of an erupting volcano? Who do we think we are? Do we have any idea at all of what “holy” means, of who God really is? **Leviticus** and the rest of the Law is a listing of ways God chose for his people to approach him and for most of the people, it’s a very indirect approach, and they have to be content with keeping God at a fair distance. For the priests, when they make their more direct approach, they have to know that they are drawing near to a blazing furnace, kind of like dealing with radioactive material. A small mistake, and they’ll get burned. God tells them in **Deuteronomy 4:24 - For the LORD your God is a consuming fire, a jealous God**. So distinguish between the holy and the common, and separate the clean and the unclean.

Philip Yancey summarizes the OT Law in a slogan: No oddballs allowed. That idea hit me too as I listened through **Leviticus**. Think of the food laws. Do you see that snake slithering along the ground? Don’t eat that! It’s weird! And that centipede running along on a hundred legs. Nasty! But it goes beyond food. Do you have a skin disease? Outside the camp you go, if it meets certain criteria which are very well spelled out. And foreigners – you can treat them differently. You can charge them interest on a loan and if one of them is your slave, they don’t have the same rights as a fellow Israelite who has sold himself into your service. And do NOT marry your sons and daughters with these foreigners. No oddballs allowed!

Now with many of these laws, there is a good and practical reason behind it. Intermarrying with people from other nations led quickly to idolatry when the people went ahead and did it against God’s will. Some say that the diet God prescribed was the healthiest possible one for the Israelites, the least likely to lead to bacterial poisoning. And when you lack the ability to treat an infectious disease, the best way to handle it is quarantine. It makes sense. But that isn’t the reason God gave. No, he simply said, “Obey, for I will show you that I am holy”.

And when it comes to oddballs, sinners are the worst. No one was more excluded in the eyes of the OT Law than those who could not or would not behave themselves. Adultery, homosexuality, promiscuity, murder, theft, lying, cheating, attacking the family order by disobeying your parents and attacking God’s established order by breaking the Sabbath – such things were to be severely punished, often by death, sometimes by invoking the oft-repeated penalty, “Such a person shall be cut off from his people”.

Was this effective? It depends on what you mean by “effective”. My father-in-law tells me that Prohibition in the 1920s was effective in that fewer people drank alcohol, since it was harder to get and since you were in danger of going to jail for drinking. But Prohibition is widely regarded as a failure of unintended consequences in that many people still drank and criminals made huge profits by mocking the law. And I would suppose that Israel had fewer adulterers than the nations around them, and during times of revival idols were smashed and God was honored.

But read through the whole OT and you’ll see that idolatry was a persistent sin in Israel, and there were heinous abuses of power by the kings who came on the scene later. King David himself, the best of them all, is as known for his adultery, murder and poor parenting as he was for his Psalms. By the time of Jesus, there is this religious system in place that has a slavish regard for certain details of the Law and a scandalous disregard for the weighty matters of justice and mercy. And then there is Paul’s witness from **Romans 7**, which we heard already, where he says: <sup>10</sup>**I found that the very commandment that was intended to bring life actually brought death**. Paul sort of lived the whole history of Israel in a

single lifetime. He was born into the Law and became one of its chief soldiers, but found that the Law really showed him to be the chief of sinners. Then Christ found him and he realized that the OT Law had been pointing to Christ all along, and he wrote in **Galatians 2 - <sup>15</sup>"We who are Jews by birth and not 'Gentile sinners' <sup>16</sup>know that a man is not justified by observing the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ. So we, too, have put our faith in Christ Jesus that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by observing the law, because by observing the law no one will be justified.** So was the Law effective? It was effective as a schoolmaster, leading God's people to Christ. Paul says in **Galatians 3 - <sup>24</sup>So the law was put in charge to lead us to Christ that we might be justified by faith. <sup>25</sup>Now that faith has come, we are no longer under the supervision of the law.**

Here's what hit me: God is holy, and who do we think we are to come to him any way we want or to say to him: "This is how it's going to be?" Who are we to offer up strange fire to him, or to make up our own religious doctrines? The very modern idea of people fashioning their own religion out of whatever traditions they choose is ludicrous in light of what **Leviticus** reveals about God, and we dare not forget it or begin to treat him as if we are in charge and nothing is sacred.

And here's what else hit me: The only way we could be sure of being right with God is for God to take care of the sacrifice himself. Nadab and Abihu found out you have to be holy to offer the sacrifice, right? And ultimately, only God is holy, and so only his sacrifice could possibly pay the price and make us clean. And that is Calvary.

The OT says you better be careful about God. Don't come close to the mountain while God is up there. Don't come close to the tabernacle with your rashes and your rebellion, with your sins and your sores and your strange fire. Keep back.

The message of the Gospel is: Draw near.

**Hebrews 10:19-23 - <sup>19</sup>Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, <sup>20</sup>by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, his body, <sup>21</sup>and since we have a great priest over the house of God, <sup>22</sup>let us draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water. <sup>23</sup>Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful.**

So what are you waiting for? Is it to get your act together? The Law showed the futility of doing that. But what the law failed to do, God did, and he still does. Come and be cleansed today.

#### **Unless otherwise noted...**

Scripture taken from the HOLY BIBLE, NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION®. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984 International Bible Society. Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved.

The "NIV" and "New International Version" trademarks are registered in the United States Patent and Trademark Office by International Bible Society. Use of either trademark requires the permission of International Bible Society.

Sermon author: Dennis Mullen - Morrison Hill Christian Church P. O. Box 59 Kingston, TN 37763 USA 865.376.5205 [dennis@morrisonhill.com](mailto:dennis@morrisonhill.com) [www.morrisonhill.com](http://www.morrisonhill.com)  
[www.waitingforsunday.com](http://www.waitingforsunday.com)