

## EXODUS 24:9-11; LEVITICUS 10:1-11

### THE DANGER OF SEEING GOD

“Moses and Aaron, Nadab, and Abihu, and seventy of the elders of Israel went up, and they saw the God of Israel. There was under his feet as it were a pavement of sapphire stone, like the very heaven for clearness. And he did not lay his hand on the chief men of the people of Israel; they beheld God, and ate and drank” [EXODUS 24:9-11].

“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, which he had not commanded them. And fire came out from before the LORD and consumed them, and they died before the LORD. Then Moses said to Aaron, ‘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.”’ And Aaron held his peace.

“And Moses called Mishael and Elzaphan, the sons of Uzziel the uncle of Aaron, and said to them, ‘Come near; carry your brothers away from the front of the sanctuary and out of the camp.’ So they came near and carried them in their coats out of the camp, as Moses had said. And Moses said to Aaron and to Eleazar and Ithamar his 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.’ And they did according to the word of Moses.

“And the LORD spoke to Aaron, saying, ‘Drink no wine or strong drink, you or your sons with you, when you go into the tent of meeting, lest you die. It shall be a statute forever throughout your generations. You are to distinguish between the holy and the common, and between the unclean and the clean, and you are to teach the people of Israel all the statutes that the LORD has spoken to them by Moses’”<sup>1</sup> [LEVITICUS 10:1-11].

He was unquestionably a gifted pastor who had built a great church in an unlikely location. People looked up to John, admiring him for his commitment to the Word, the sound expositions and the passion witnessed in his powerful messages. He was loved not only by his congregation, but greatly respected by multiple congregations throughout the area. It was evident that God had richly blessed John—he spent time in the presence of the Master reading the Word and spending time in prayer for the needs of the people.

The changes were at first almost imperceptible. Perhaps the content of his messages seemed less honest; he avoided addressing some flagrant sins, even excusing some dreadful sins, though when you spoke with him privately he was adamant that he still was calling for purity. Nevertheless, John clearly was willing to make exceptions for some gross sinful behaviour. Some suggested that he spoke more on subjects that made no one uncomfortable; but more than anything, his preaching no longer seemed authentic. His sermons were perfunctory, having ceased to be messages while retaining all the hallmarks associated with homiletic precision.

Then came the day when John was removed from serving God and serving the church. He had violated the sacred covenant with his wife and destroyed the marriage of another couple. The rejection of righteousness, his infidelity, became quite public when he was caught *in flagrante delicto* by a group of his deacons accompanied by his wife.

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<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from **The Holy Bible, English Standard Version**, copyright © 2001 by Crossway Bibles, a division of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

The descent from lofty heights hadn't been precipitous, rather it was gradual. John didn't wake up one morning and decide to defy God. As is true of many servants of God, it seemed that a little bit of sin couldn't hurt. Playing fast-and-loose with purity and with pleasing God began innocently enough. The grave danger was that sin ceased being seen as "utterly sinful."<sup>2</sup> Consequently, a greatly blessed and powerfully used servant who had walked with God was destroyed when he presumed against God. It is a story as old as mankind. Those who enjoy great privilege are susceptible to great sin. Jesus warned, "Everyone to whom much was given, of him much will be required, and from him to whom they entrusted much, they will demand the more" [**LUKE 12:48b**].

Tragedy and triumph go hand-in-hand throughout the Bible. Those who know God most intimately are precisely the ones most capable of sinning greatly against Him. Can any greater honour be accorded mortal man than that one should see the Living God? Surely any individual afforded such glorious opportunity would never again knowingly disobey God or do anything that would dishonour Him. From among the people of Israel, Moses and Aaron, Nadab and Abihu, and the seventy elders of Israel "saw the God of Israel" [see **EXODUS 24:9-11**]. Think of that—these men all "saw the God of Israel!" They saw the Living God!

Nadab and Abihu are names recognised by Bible students—we have heard of them. These sons of Aaron shared in the priesthood; they were appointed by God to serve Him. They were Aaron's sons and thus in the lineage of those qualified to serve as priests. Yet, these two men were struck down by holy fire as they approached the LORD without permission to do so. How did this happen? What should we learn from their presumption?

Two texts are open before us—admittedly an approach that is discouraged by those who are familiar with homiletics. Nevertheless, I invite us to unite in reviewing these two texts chosen for study today. Each of the texts speak of Nadab and Abihu, detailing the honour they received in being chosen to see God and similarly demonstrating the danger of becoming casualties of the casual. Open your Bibles first to the twenty-fourth chapter of Exodus.

**TO SEE GOD AND LIVE** — Shortly, God would call Moses to ascend the Mount where He would deliver the Ten Commandments. However, before Moses climbed that mountain, seventy-four individuals were called by name to worship God from a distance. The seventy elders of Israel, together with Moses, Aaron, Nadab and Abihu, were called to climb the mountain. On the mountain, these individuals were accorded the unique privilege to see the LORD God. We read, "They saw the God of Israel" [**EXODUS 24:10a**]. The text continues with a description of the setting in which God appeared to these men, concluding with the startling statement, "He did not lay His hand on the chief men of the people of Israel" [**EXODUS 24:11a**]. The text then concludes, "They beheld God, and ate and drank" [**EXODUS 24:11b**].

This statement is startling on several levels. Later, when Moses ascended the Mountain a second time to receive the tablets with the Ten Words chiseled in stone, God permitted Moses to see His back. Before the LORD God acceded to Moses' request, He informed the man of God, "You cannot see my face, for man shall not see me and live" [**EXODUS 33:20**]. Many people assumed that if they were to see God, they would die. However, God did not say that man could not see His form; He said that looking on His face would lead to death. Still, it is the common reaction in the accounts presented in the Old Covenant that those who see either the Angel of God or God Himself to fall in terror because they have seen God. They are confident that they are about to die. Recall a few examples.

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<sup>2</sup> **ROMANS 7:13, New American Standard Bible: 1995 Update** (The Lockman Foundation, LaHabra, CA 1995)

Informed that Esau was coming to meet him, Jacob sent his family to safety across the Brook Jabbok while he spent the night on the opposite side. That night, a man appeared compelling Jacob to wrestle with the mysterious stranger until the early hours of the morning. The man could not best Jacob even after crippling him by disjuncting his hip socket. Though Jacob pleaded with the man to tell him his name, the man refused to tell Jacob his name. The mysterious stranger did, however, bless Jacob, conferring on him the name Israel, which means “He struggles with God.” After this eventful night, Jacob displayed a sense of wonder at all that had taken place. He came to the realisation that something momentous had taken place, for we read, “Jacob called the name of the place Peniel, saying, ‘For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life has been delivered’” [GENESIS 32:30].

Jacob’s response upon realising that he had actually seen God face-to-face is similar to the Gideon’s response after God had called him to deliver Israel. When the Angel of the Lord accepted the sacrifice of a young goat and flour cakes soaked in broth, he disappeared. Then, “Gideon perceived that he was the angel of the LORD. And Gideon said, ‘Alas, O Lord GOD! For now I have seen the angel of the LORD face to face.’ But the LORD said to him, ‘Peace be to you. Do not fear; you shall not die’” [JUDGES 6:22, 23].<sup>3</sup>

At the risk of belabouring the point, recall Isaiah’s response when God called him to serve as a prophet to Israel. Isaiah’s response was to cry out, “Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts” [ISAIAH 6:5]!

Reciting the Ten Words for a second time, Moses concluded the recitation with this summary statement in the presence of Israel. “These words the LORD spoke to all your assembly at the mountain out of the midst of the fire, the cloud and the thick darkness, with a loud voice; and he added no more. And he wrote them on two tablets of stone and gave them to me. And as soon as you heard the voice out of the midst of the darkness, while the mountain was burning with fire, you came near to me, all the heads of your tribes, and your elders. And you said, ‘Behold, the LORD our God has shown us his glory and greatness, and we have heard his voice out of the midst of the fire. This day we have seen God speak with man, and man still live’” [DEUTERONOMY 5:22-24].

Soon after Moses descended the Mountain of God for the second time, carrying the tablets with the Ten Words in his hands, Aaron and his sons were formally consecrated for their service. The consecration of Aaron and his sons is detailed in the eighth chapter of Leviticus; and the ninth chapter of the same book provides an account of the initiation of the priestly ministry. What is important for our study today is the manner in which God set His approval on the ministry of Aaron and his sons. God honoured the priests in dramatic fashion and in the sight of all Israel. The first sacrifices were offered on the altar of the LORD, just as prescribed by God—a calf for himself as a sin offering, a goat as a burnt offering and an ox and a ram as peace offerings. Then, Moses and Aaron went into the Tent of Meeting. After a short while, they came out from the presence of the LORD and blessed the people.

In itself, these actions were not exceptional; they would soon be accepted as routine. However, what occurred next is extraordinary, even stunning. According to the inspired text, “The glory of the LORD appeared to all the people. And fire came out from before the LORD and consumed the burnt offering and the pieces of fat on the altar” [LEVITICUS 9:23, 24]. It should not surprise any of us that as result of this display of the divine acceptance of the priests and of the offerings they presented, the people “shouted [joyfully] and fell on their faces?”

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<sup>3</sup> Gideon’s response is similar to that of Manoah (see JUDGES 13:15-22),

Hold this image in your mind—as part of the leadership of the nation, Nadab and Abihu had gone up on the mountain where they had feasted in the presence of God. These brothers had actually seen God—witnessed His glory! God Himself specifically invited these two men, along with seventy-two others. The twenty-fourth chapter of Exodus opens with this information, “[God] said to Moses, ‘Come up to the LORD, you and Aaron, Nadab, and Abihu and seventy of the elders of Israel, and worship from afar. Moses alone shall come near to the LORD, but the others shall not come near, and the people shall not come up with him’” [EXODUS 24:1, 2].

Soon after they had descended the mountain, Nadab and Abihu were consecrated to serve as priests of God. Together with their father and their brothers, these men were to present the offerings that were prescribed by God. They had participated in the presentation of a sin offering for themselves, received a burnt offering on behalf of the people presenting it before the Lord, and at last they shared in presenting a peace offering. God demonstrated that He was pleased with all that had taken place when fire came out from before Him, consuming all that remained on the altar. No wonder the people loudly rejoiced! God had accepted what they presented!

How privileged was Nadab and Abihu! They received a personal invitation to come up to worship the True and Living God. They shared a meal in His presence. Now they were chosen to share in leading the people in worship. God certified their calling by blessing them, especially by accepting the offerings they had offered. These two men were greatly blessed! And yet, is it possible that they had grown careless in their service to God? Though they had seen the fire come out from the LORD, consuming the offerings, they failed to consider that they were responsible to honour Him by holding Him holy before the people. A casual attitude concerning worship was dishonourable; shortly such an attitude would cost them their lives.

**TO PRESUME AGAINST GOD AND DIE** — From unimaginable blessing to unmitigated censure in such a short span of time is tragically common in the annals of the Faith. The pages of the history of the Faith are littered with the names of individuals who grew overly familiar with the Living God. These individuals, as was true with Nadab and Abihu, became casualties of the casual. Undoubtedly, we will benefit from examining the events that followed the unprecedented blessings they experienced.

These brothers had shared in feasting in the presence of God. They had actually seen God! Then, we read the shocking words recorded in Leviticus, “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, which he had not commanded them. And fire came out from before the LORD and consumed them, and they died before the LORD” [LEVITICUS 10:1, 2].

The text appears to indicate that it was the very next day after national rejoicing because God had accepted the offerings the priests had presented on behalf of Israel when Nadab and Abihu, the two first sons of Aaron, “each took his censer and put fire in it and laid incense on it and offered unauthorized fire before the LORD” [LEVITICUS 10:1]. These two brothers had honoured God before the people; now, they presumed against God.

Whereas the day before heavenly flames lit the altar fires which were to perpetually burn before the LORD, this day the fire of the LORD flashed across the Mercy Seat to strike the two interlopers dead. It is significant to note that a careful reading of the text indicates that the fire crossed the Mercy Seat to strike the two men. Nearing God at the place where mercy was expected, the brothers instead found judgement. Perhaps they cried out for mercy; but any such cries were ignored as being too little, too late. The men who had been chosen for great blessing were struck dead in a demonstration of divine judgement.

The unexpected response was observed by many within the camp. Moses and Aaron were quickly informed of what had transpired. Moses commanded Aaron to put the tragedy in perspective, summoned cousins of the two men who had been judged by the LORD, ordered them to carry the smouldering corpses outside the camp before providing instruction to Aaron and his two remaining sons, Eleazar and Ithamar. That Aaron was silent throughout these proceedings is a strong indication that he recognised the justice of God's judgement. His sons had presumed against God and paid the ultimate price for their presumption.

That this was divine judgement was obvious. Not only was their death immediate and dramatic, but even though their bodies were burned, their tunics and their censers were not consumed. What stunning events occurred within the space of a few hours! One day the fire falls and the people shout for joy; the next day the same fire flashes and all are silent before the LORD. The same fire is observed in either instance with a different impact on the observers. It is an axiom of the Faith that God's holiness at once comforts and condemns. Those who seek to honour Him rejoice in His presence when His glory is revealed. Those who endeavour to exalt themselves will find that the same glory condemns them. It is not the glory revealed that differs; but those in the presence of that revealed glory are affected differently.

Nadab and Abihu were struck dead. A thorough review of the entirety of the Law of Moses provides a number of clues as to reasons God judged them so severely. Perhaps these two men kindled fire in their fire pans with fire from a source other than the altar of God. The flame on the altar was meant to burn forever and all the sacrifices offered to God were meant to be lit from that fire which fell from heaven. Perhaps that was their sin; perhaps that is what is meant by the phrase "unauthorised fire."

Perhaps these two men compounded incense according to a formulation other than what God prescribed. Recall that God provided precise instructions for compounding this incense; no individual was ever permitted to compound this incense for any other use [see **EXODUS 30:1-9**]. The text is silent concerning such possibilities, so at best this can only be speculation. What is important to note is that the brothers ceased serving God by approaching His altar except at His command and in obedience to His directions. At best, they had become careless about worship.

Clearly Nadab and Abihu had not been called to approach God at this time. One could approach God to worship, to seek reconciliation after fellowship was breached, to seek forgiveness of sin; however, such was not the case for these brothers. They were presumptuous in their approach, God had neither commanded to come near nor had He stated what they were to bring when approaching Him. Various commentators have advanced multiple reasons why these brothers might have been killed; I suppose each possibility has its own merit.

I find, however, that the divine text provides insight into their sin. God spoke directly to Aaron in **LEVITICUS 10:8-11**; God's words recorded in those verses are of greater significance than a casual reading might otherwise indicate. If you are familiar with the Pentateuch, you will no doubt have noted that the usual means by which God communicated with Aaron was through Moses. In this instance, because God spoke directly to Aaron it is reasonable to conclude that His words are to be understood as indicative of the cause for judgement.

As an aside, I notice one especially comforting aspect in this direct address to Aaron. That God spoke to Aaron directly was a confirmation of Aaron's high priesthood and a reminder of his continuing duties. This Word of God to Aaron was in effect a reassurance that he still had a part to play in teaching Israel the way of holiness, and thus it is a presaging of Ezekiel's words: "The soul who sins shall die. The son shall not suffer for the iniquity of the father, nor the father suffer for the iniquity of the son" [**EZEKIEL 18:20a**].

What did God say and what did He reveal concerning the sin of Nadab and Abihu? It is reasonable to conclude that *these brothers had minds clouded by drink* [LEVITICUS 10:9]. God warned Aaron, “Drink no wine or strong drink, you or your sons with you, when you go into the tent of meeting, lest you die” [LEVITICUS 10:9]. From this, I draw the conclusion that the two men approached God casually because their senses were clouded, even inflamed through alcohol. You find multiplied cautionary statements throughout the Word against drinking alcohol to excess. You will find no command in the Word to abstain from alcohol, although you will find warnings against abuse of drink and against drunkenness. Nevertheless, it is evident that individuals cannot think clearly when their minds are fogged as result of strong drink or through abuse of drugs. Thus, it is reasonable to conclude that Nadab and Abihu died because they were incapable of discerning the holiness of God through reason of their own indulgence.

Let that knowledge serve as a warning to the people of God that we are to worship God with understanding; we are to enter into His presence with understanding and with full knowledge of His will. This concept forever bans the notion of emotional excess as a necessary component of worship. Modern worshippers who contend that worshippers must lose themselves in worship, becoming insensible of what they are doing, speak foolishly. Such arguments lack wisdom, displaying a woeful lack of comprehension of the revealed will of God.

Recall the Apostle’s cautionary words that were delivered to the Corinthian Christians. “I will pray with the spirit, and I will also pray with my understanding. I will sing with the spirit, and I will also sing with my understanding”<sup>4</sup> [1 CORINTHIANS 14:15]. Paul also stated, “In the church I would rather speak five words with my understanding, in order to teach others also, than 10,000 words in another language”<sup>5</sup> [1 CORINTHIANS 14:19]. Understanding is essential!

Verse ten indicates that *the two brothers failed to exercise discernment*. God warned Aaron retroactively, “You are to distinguish between the holy and the common, and between the unclean and the clean” [LEVITICUS 10:10]. Distinguishing between the holy and the common, recognising the holy from the unholy, was a vital responsibility of the priests of God. Ezekiel charged that the priests of his day failed to honour God in this regard. He charged, [Israel’s] “priests have done violence to my law and have profaned my holy things. They have made no distinction between the holy and the common, neither have they taught the difference between the unclean and the clean” [EZEKIEL 22:26]. Maintaining a distinction between the holy and the common is a serious matter for those who would honour God.

We need to be reminded from time-to-time of what we are doing when we worship. Whenever we observe the Lord’s Table, I take time to remind each one of what we are doing. Reducing the holy observance to a mere ritual invites divine judgement. This is the purpose for the warning appended, “Whoever ... eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty concerning the body and blood of the Lord. Let a person examine himself, then, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgement on himself” [1 CORINTHIANS 11:27-29].

As members of a “holy priesthood” [see 2 PETER 1:5], Christians are to glorify Him by Whose Name we are called. When Peter, writing by inspiration of the Holy Spirit warns readers, “You shall be holy, for I am holy” [1 PETER 1:16], he is simply restating a central theme of Leviticus. The command to be holy is iterated through the book [LEVITICUS 11:44, 45; 19:2; 20:7]. God is holy and those who will please Him must discern His holy character, adapting their lives to honour His holiness.

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<sup>4</sup> **The Holy Bible: Holman Christian Standard Version** (Holman Bible Publishers, Nashville, TN 2009)

<sup>5</sup> HCSV

Why should a Christian choose to be righteous? Why should a believer obey the commands of God? If our righteousness exists only because we fear punishment, is it not true that we nevertheless benefit from the choice to be righteous? Nevertheless, we lose a blessing if our motives arise from fear and not from love. However, if we know God as the Holy One and we choose to be holy because we love Him and we long to please Him by revealing His gracious work in our lives, we honour Him and demonstrate a measure of understanding something of His character. In this latter instance then, we are demonstrating that we know and understand God's most intimate self-revelation of love and grace. This is the teaching of the Word, as John writes, "There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear. For fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not been perfected in love" [1 JOHN 4:18].

Another explanation accounting for the severity of God's judgement of these two men is that *these brothers required instruction when they should have been instructors*. The priests had received a solemn charge to teach. God commanded, "You are to teach the people of Israel all the statutes that the LORD has spoken to them by Moses" [LEVITICUS 10:11]. Therein lies the reason behind the admonition that James provides would-be teachers. You recall that James has warned, "Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness" [JAMES 3:1]. Therein lies the reason for the demand that overseers are to be "able to teach" [1 TIMOTHY 3:2]. It is also the reason why Paul says that elders "must hold firm to the trustworthy word as taught, so that he may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also to rebuke those who contradict it" [TITUS 1:9]. Divinely appointed leaders must teach if they would please God.

It is appropriate to take note of the devastating charge the writer of the Letter to Hebrew Christians brings against those to whom he wrote. His words confront Christians who have grown casual; how much worse is the censure when applied to those who purport to be teachers. "Though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the basic principles of the oracles of God. You need milk, not solid food, for everyone who lives on milk is unskilled in the word of righteousness, since he is a child. But solid food is for the mature, for those who have their powers of discernment trained by constant practice to distinguish good from evil" [HEBREWS 5:11b, 12].

The Reformation was sparked in some measure by priests in Rome who mocked the people as they ridiculed the Lord's Table. They would elevate the bread and speaking in Latin they would say aloud, "Bread you are and bread you shall remain." It was repudiation of the deeply held Catholic concept of transubstantiation. Luther was in Rome because his superior at the monastery, Staupitz, sent him away after confession, saying, "Go out and commit some real sins and then come back when you have something actually to confess." When we evangelicals tack on the Lord's Table at the end of a service, hurrying through the observance as though it was a mere rite, do we not show the same dishonour to Him Whom we profess to worship?

The grave concerns noted constitute serious charges to be brought against anyone who would seek to worship the Lord; they are especially serious if that one against whom the charges are preferred occupies a place of leadership among the people of God. Nadab and Abihu approached the LORD with minds clouded rather than minds that were clear and focused on what they were doing—they were guilty of distracted worship! Consequently, these brothers failed to exercise discernment—they had grown casual in the conduct of their service. Their failure to recognise the LORD dishonoured Him. Perhaps worst of all, they required instruction when they should have been instructors.

**LESSONS FOR THE PEOPLE OF GOD** — Let's review the events leading up to and resulting in the death of these two brothers. Let's also look at the divine explanation provided, making a careful examination of why Nadab and Abihu sinned as they did. I make this woeful observation of mankind—in the presence of God we are at first awestruck; then we grow familiar; and at last we are casual. Admittedly, the progression presented is a generalisation; nevertheless, that which once excited us and stimulated our imaginations becomes routine and common. That which first gripped our hearts and stirred our emotions ceases to be a vital component of our life. We slip into a new dimension which God never intended that we should occupy—the *status quo*.

Recall what it was like when you first became a Christian. Do you remember the excitement arising from new faith that first marked your life? God was near! He was very real! In those halcyon days of first faith you rejoiced at the opportunity to read His Word—you wanted to discover all you could about Him Who loved you and Who gave Himself for you. No one had to urge you to pray in those days of new faith. How bold were your prayers; you eagerly called on His Name knowing that He would answer your requests! What happened to change our lives? God did not change! We changed! I say this to our shame.

Religious zeal began to be crowded out by the press of daily life. The cares of this present world—and some of them are admittedly great—dimmed our vision of the unseen God. The flames of ardour were quenched; the embers glowed more dully with each passing day. Worship became icily regular, punctually precise, exhaustingly routine. Worship which once energized became a form of spiritual narcotic. Reading the Word became a burden and there was never time for prevailing prayer. Whereas we once could not find sufficient time to read as much of the Word as we wanted, we now find insufficient time to read the Word. Our prayers have been reduced to a precise formula, a mere chant. We have grown familiar with God.

God will be glorified in man, Moses, speaking the mind of God, reminded Aaron of God's position. "Among those who are near Me I will be sanctified, and before all the people I will be glorified" [LEVITICUS 10:3]. The end of the verse is significant, since it demonstrates that Aaron knew what was said was correct: "And Aaron held his peace." And we also hold our peace when we pause to think of how we act in the presence of God. It is not so much that we have deliberately chosen to be casual with Holy God—we grew familiar.

Moses' words to Aaron might well have been paraphrased, "The nearer one draws to God, the greater the attention that one must pay to God." The worshipper must recognise God's holiness; she must do nothing to diminish God's glory. The sons of the high priests ought to have known better! God is holy and His servants must recognize His holiness.

Are we offended by such knowledge? Do we perhaps question why it was necessary that these two sons of Aaron should be punished so severely? Do we sometimes wonder why Ananais and Sapphira were struck dead? Do we sometimes question why God should speak so pointedly through the Apostle when He issues a warning against approaching the Lord's Table in a presumptuous manner? If we but realised the greatness of God's holiness we would not be offended by the enormity of the punishment for treating God casually.

Nadab and Abihu *rationalised that they had a right to divine access*. Underscore in your mind that none of us deserve mercy; none of us deserve access to God. We are invited into the presence of God not on merit but by grace. These two sons of Aaron presumed against God. Recall that the high priest alone was permitted to approach God, and that but once each year [HEBREWS 9:7]. Past blessings do not exempt us from present obedience. Because God has blessed us in the past does not promote us above our fellow saints. We have no right to come into the presence of God except by the living way provided in Christ [see HEBREWS 10:20].



These two sons of Aaron *exalted the act over the attitude*. They seem to have assumed that God would be pleased that they presented a sacrifice, thought they failed to concern themselves with either the condition of their heart or their approach. In their estimate the act of presenting a sacrifice assumed greater significance than their attitude toward God. God is less concerned that we attend a service than that our heart is right toward Him. God searches the heart to discover whether it is right. A little recognised prophet spoke pointedly to an equally little known king of Judah, saying, “The eyes of the LORD run to and fro throughout the whole earth, to give strong support to those whose heart is blameless toward Him” [2 CHRONICLES 16:9].

God knows the heart of all mankind, and God knows my heart. This knowledge at once comforts and condemns each individual. The knowledge that God knows my heart condemns me when I exalt the act over the attitude, for I know that I am exposed as fraudulent before Him. The knowledge that God knows my heart comforts me, however, when I know that I seek His glory and that I am seeking to know Him. Though I struggle against my flesh and against the world and though my struggle is not always as successful as I could wish, God knows when I desire to honour Him above all things. I cannot forget that a wise pastor told me years ago, “Pursue God and He will give you a soapbox.” God honours those who seek Him.

The Apostle Paul writing in his second letter to the Corinthians reminded his readers that “The weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh but have divine power to destroy strongholds. We destroy arguments and every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God, and take every thought captive to obey Christ” [2 CORINTHIANS 10:4, 5]. The battle for the heart is fought in the mind, the Word exposing even “thoughts and attitudes” [HEBREWS 4:12 NIV].

The final evil revealed through examination of the judgement of Nadab and Abihu is that *they sought to manipulate instead of magnify God*. The brothers seem actually to have thought of God as a commodity to be bartered, or a genie to be employed to their own good. Nadab and Abihu seem to have thought that God was impotent if they but entered into the presence of His throne. Perhaps they thought they would be blessed for having appeared before the Mercy Seat. I shudder when I hear some who purport to be preachers of the Faith in this day issuing commands to the Living God. Who dares speak insolently to the Living God? I marvel, not at the mercy of God as He ignores them, but at their audacious demeanor before the Lord. God is not ignorant of our proclivity to sin; and He will not rush to fulfil our puerile demands.

It is vital that we see that the grace of God is not meted out at man's insistence; neither is God some sort of cosmic bellhop assigned to ensure our pleasure. Our God is the sovereign Lord of Glory; we do His will rather than commanding Him to do our will. It is nothing less than a form of modern Gnosticism to imagine that we can compel God to do our will or to accept us on our terms. We are called to know God and to serve Him; however it would appear that many have misunderstood the Word—they actually believe that God is called to serve them. It is but a demonstration of His great mercy that He does not immediately call our audacity into judgement.

When I distil the message into concepts that are able to be readily held in our memory, I note that the great truth above all other truths is that we must remember that *God is holy*. This truth is deceptively simple. What I mean is that because this truth is so familiar, we tend to acknowledge it without permitting the knowledge to saturate our lives. We fail to permit the knowledge of God's holy nature to inform our lives. This is what Peter meant when he warned, “As he who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct, since it is written, ‘You shall be holy, for I am holy’” [1 PETER 1:15, 16]. Consequently, we are unmoved by repeated appeals found in Scripture to live lives that reflect His holiness. We grow casual in His presence and begin to treat Holy God with a dreadful and ultimately a dangerous display of familiarity.

To treat His Word as optional, to regard prayer as a talisman, to consider the manner in which we live our lives as a matter of concern only to ourselves, demonstrates a distressing casualness that defies God and challenges Him to discipline us. To treat the holy Bride of Christ as a convenience that is there for us to use in time of need, though usually ignored, is to demean the sacrifice of the Master. Have we never read, “Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful. And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near” [HEBREWS 10:23-25]?

I remind each listener of another truth seriously neglected among modern church goers—***God's grace has meaning only when viewed against the backdrop of His judgement.*** A god unwilling or incapable of judging sin is a god incapable of loving His creature. Common sense tells you that a mother who cannot discipline her child is a woman who does not love that child. God's grace impels Him to reach out to fallen man, but His holiness demands judgement. Judgement, in and of itself, is frightful, especially when it issues from the God of all the universe. However, that judgement assumes awesome proportions when it is revealed in the death of the righteous Son of God because of man's sin. Viewed against the death of the righteous for the unrighteous, God's grace stands in sharp relief against the black backdrop of our sin.

***Grace or judgement is extended, depending upon our approach to Him.*** This third truth must likewise be applied to each heart. God indeed dwells above the Mercy Seat to provide relief and grace to those who seek it; but to all who treat Him presumptuously there remains but swift judgement of our thoughts and attitudes. Either we now receive mercy from Christ, accepting Him as the sacrifice for our sin, or we now stand condemned because we have deceived ourselves into thinking that we are sufficient in ourselves to please holy God. This truth stands true for each individual.

For those who know God, those who have received grace and mercy and who are called by His Name, I remind you that the principle still applies in our lives. We also receive either grace or judgement, depending upon our approach to the Father. Do we rush presumptuously into His presence where we demand that He do our bidding? Do we treat Him, His Word, His church and His commands with disdain? Do we consider time alone in His presence as a burden to be at best endured? If I have received no grace and if I am not the recipient of fresh mercies, is it because I am even now being judged?

My plea to each one who hears this message is that you first come to His Seat of Mercy where you will find life and liberty in the presence of our God and Lord, Christ Jesus the Saviour. My plea to you who call yourselves by the Name of the Risen Son of God is that you will renew your desire to labour for Him and that you will renew your willingness to be refreshed by a new movement of His Spirit. My plea is that each of us will say in our hearts that for too long we have treated our God with disdain or with familiarity unworthy of His Name. Today, let us resolve to invest our lives in His presence. Reading His Word, calling His Name, walking in His light let us move toward renewed love and life until Christ should come. Amen.