

“Meeting God at the Altar” series (A study from Leviticus)

Week 3: Obedience and the gift of repentance

November 16, 2025

Leviticus 10:1 Aaron's sons Nadab and Abihu took their censers, put fire in them and added incense; and they offered unauthorized fire before the LORD, contrary to his command. 2 So fire came out from the presence of the LORD and consumed them, and they died before the LORD. 3 Moses then said to Aaron, "This is what the LORD spoke of when he said: " 'Among those who approach me I will be proved holy; in the sight of all the people I will be honored.' " Aaron remained silent. 4 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." 5 So they came and carried them, still in their tunics, outside the camp, as Moses ordered. 6 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 Israelites, may mourn for those the LORD has destroyed by fire. 7 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.

Introduction

- We are exploring the bible book of Leviticus. It is the third book in our bibles, and it is almost entirely about the early Israelite religious system and laws.
- The reason we are studying this book is because it demonstrates the lengths that a holy, powerful, creating God will go to be in relationship with people he loves.
- Leviticus demonstrates how sinful people can have a deep and abiding relationship with a holy God and the book of Leviticus is a picture of what Jesus did 1500 years later, making a way for us, as sinful people, to have a deep relationship with our holy creator.
- The altar played a central role in this system of laws for the Israelite nation in how they were to know God and follow him.
- We have subtitled this series, **meeting God at the altar**. It was at the altar that the Israelites were invited to meet God and let him change their lives. And while we don't physically offer sacrifices the way that Israel was supposed to, God still invites us to meet God at the altar.
- Regardless of your experience with the altar, for this series, when we talk about the altar, it is simply **where we have an opportunity to surrender to God so that we might know him and be changed**. It is the act of coming to God to acknowledge who he is, who we are, and the implications for how we live today.
- But today, we are going to examine one of the few narrative stories in Leviticus, and one that is a bit perplexing. Hopefully, we will bring some clarity to it.
- How many of you have heard of the “Bloody Code?” It was a series of laws in the 18th and early 19th century in Britain which imposed the death penalty for over 200 offences.
- While some made sense, like being executed for murder, many others were included like pickpocketing, stealing more than \$40 by today's money, cutting down certain trees, stealing from a shipwreck and more. It seems completely ludicrous to have those kind of draconian responses to seemingly small infractions.
- In some parts of the world today, it can be a capital crime to convert from one religion to another. Stealing can result in a hand or foot chopped off. Adultery can result in a death sentence.
- Most of you have seen or heard stories of parents whose punishments of their children's disobedience was far in excess of what the child actually did.
- In the United States, the eighth amendment actually prohibits excessive or cruel punishment.

- As we read through Leviticus, we get to chapter 10 and it's like the entire account takes a very dark turn (remind people who Aaron was).

Leviticus 10:1 Aaron's sons Nadab and Abihu took their censers, put fire in them and added incense; and they offered unauthorized fire before the LORD, contrary to his command. 2 So fire came out from the presence of the LORD and consumed them, and they died before the LORD. 3 Moses then said to Aaron, "This is what the LORD spoke of when he said: " 'Among those who approach me I will be proved holy; in the sight of all the people I will be honored.' "

- Every time I read this when I was younger, I thought the penalty was excessive. It almost seems like God was throwing a temper tantrum.
- Yet this very deliberate act of God was demonstrating something that should be both sobering and freeing. That **my obedience matters to God.**

Main Sermon Text

- To understand this story better, let's take a step back and look at the broader picture.
- Nadab and Abihu were two of Aaron's four sons. Aaron was Moses' older brother and was his spokesperson in front of Pharaoh and a key person in Israel's deliverance from Egypt.
- When they left Egypt and met God at the mountain in the desert⁶, he and his sons were part of a select few who got to experience something none of us ever have.

Exodus 24:1 Then the LORD said to Moses, "Come up to the LORD, you and Aaron, Nadab and Abihu, and seventy of the elders of Israel. . . 9 Moses and Aaron, Nadab and Abihu, and the seventy elders of Israel went up 10 and saw the God of Israel. Under his feet was something like a pavement made of lapis lazuli, as bright blue as the sky. 11 But God did not raise his hand against these leaders of the Israelites; they saw God, and they ate and drank.

- Aaron and his sons SAW GOD! An experience that would have rocked them. Maybe Nadab and Elihu simply got to be included because Aaron was their dad, but they got to experience this nonetheless.
- As God then gave Israel the law and appointed people to act as the priests, the go-between, the mediators, between God and the nation, Aaron became the first high priest and his sons were called to this holy vocation of priesthood.

Exodus 28:1 "Have Aaron your brother brought to you from among the Israelites, along with his sons Nadab and Abihu, Eleazar and Ithamar, so they may serve me as priests.

- When we read Exodus 28, the entire chapter is dedicated to how to make the clothes that they were supposed to wear when they came to do their priestly duties.

Exodus 28:43 Aaron and his sons must wear them whenever they enter the tent of meeting or approach the altar to minister in the Holy Place, so that they will not incur guilt and die. "This is to be a lasting ordinance for Aaron and his descendants.

- God selected them as the first priests. Their duties were laid out. They were given instructions on what they were going to do, including how to present offerings to God (remember, they were representing a sinful people to a holy God and representing a holy God to a sinful people).

Exodus 30:7 "Aaron must burn fragrant incense on the altar every morning when he tends the lamps. 8 He must burn incense again when he lights the lamps at twilight so incense will burn regularly before the LORD for the generations to come. 9 Do not offer on this altar any other incense or any burnt offering or grain offering, and do not pour a drink offering on it.

- In Leviticus chapter 8&9 the actual ordination ceremony and installation of Aaron and his sons is recorded. This is where they were ordained by God to begin their priestly ministry.

Leviticus 8:30 Then Moses took some of the anointing oil and some of the blood from the altar and sprinkled them on Aaron and his garments and on his sons and their garments. So he consecrated Aaron and his garments and his sons and their garments.

- Aaron and his sons, who had seen God were now selected by God for a holy and special assignment. The event to consecrate them was significant.

Leviticus 9:1 On the eighth day Moses summoned Aaron and his sons and the elders of Israel. 2 He said to Aaron, "Take a bull calf for your sin offering and a ram for your burnt offering, both without defect, and present them before the LORD.

- To show the seriousness of this, God told them that if they did all God showed them to consecrate them for ministry, they would see God's glory.

6 Then Moses said, "This is what the LORD has commanded you to do, so that the glory of the LORD may appear to you."

- Throughout chapter nine, we see Nadab and Abihu and their brothers intimately involved in the ceremony that drove home the significance and seriousness of their appointment by God.
- You see over and over how as Aaron was consecrated as the high priest the sons were a part of this entire process.
- What happened at the conclusion of the ceremony was spectacular.

Leviticus 9:22 Then Aaron lifted his hands toward the people and blessed them. And having sacrificed the sin offering, the burnt offering and the fellowship offering, he stepped down. 23 Moses and Aaron then went into the tent of meeting. When they came out, they blessed the people; and the glory of the LORD appeared to all the people. 24 Fire came out from the presence of the LORD and consumed the burnt offering and the fat portions on the altar. And when all the people saw it, they shouted for joy and fell facedown.

- This would have been amazing to see and experience. It was so overwhelming it knocked the people off their feet. They couldn't stay silent.
- They encountered God's presence. They saw his holiness and his power.
- God had made himself known to the people. He was among them. They could know him. And Nadab and Abihu are in the middle of all of it.
- And then, Nadab and Abihu, who had seen eaten in the actual presence of God, who had been appointed to a very high position, who had heard all the instructions, who had been consecrated to serve as priests and who had participated in the entire process of purification only days before . . .

Leviticus 10:1 Aaron's sons Nadab and Abihu took their censers, put fire in them and added incense; and they offered unauthorized fire before the LORD, contrary to his command. 2 So fire came out from the presence of the LORD and consumed them, and they died before the LORD.

- Unauthorized fire was anything offered to God that was outside His instruction, unholy in motive, or defiled in nature. We're not told specifically what was done, but they did not honor God or obey his directions.
- The tabernacle uniquely demonstrated God's holy presence with Israel, and sin and disobedience had no place there because sin cannot exist in the presence of God
- This is not a random event. God is not being capricious. He was impressing something upon the entire Israelite nation that is still true today.

I. Obedience matters to God.

- Obedience to what? God's ways. The law he gave Israel was his instructions on how to live God's way.
- Have you ever considered why God put so many laws in place that the Israelites had to follow? It can seem like God was rule happy, trying to kill their fun, to make it difficult to follow him.

- Many people view following God today the same way. All those things we are supposed to do or not supposed to do are so onerous. They make life difficult. Not as fun. I can't keep all of them and I really don't want to.
 - There are two big reasons God put all these rules in place (like the ones that Nadab and Abihu broke) that are still true today.
 - The first goes back to what we talked about through the first two weeks.
- A. God ways demonstrate the need for God. God is holy. He is perfect. He is powerful and far above us, pure and perfect. We are not. He wants to demonstrate what is required for a sinful people to be in relationship with a Holy God.
- But as Jesus talked about, and as Paul wrote about, our sinful nature makes it impossible to be holy enough to be in relationship with God. It's why we need the sacrifices and why we need Jesus.
 - When God struck Nadab and Abihu down, he was showing the entire nation that coming to God is not a casual thing. He is holy. We are not. He wanted them to understand the holiness of God and the seriousness of their sin and disobedience and vast gulf between them.
- B. God knows his ways bring life. God is our creator. The one who knows the way something should work best is the one who made it. He knows what it looks like. What makes us the most fulfilled, most joyful and most secure.
- We think we know what will make us the most happy, fulfilled and secure. A quick look around should show how bad we are at this. Nadab and Abihu decided God's ways were just "suggestions" and that their privileged position allowed them to not follow.
 - When we think this way, we begin to believe that God is just old fashioned and out to be a cosmic killjoy.
 - We sometimes act like God had a long list of do's and don'ts and then created people to follow them.
 - God created humanity. He designed us. Then, when we sinned and demonstrated we were incapable of living a holy life, in communion with God, he gave the laws and rules and guidelines on how to live the kind of life he designed.
 - And just because YOU think you have the best life figured out does not make you right.

The requirement for perfect obedience was fulfilled in Jesus.

- As we are seeing throughout this series, the requirement for perfect obedience was fulfilled in Jesus.

John 14:31 . . . I love the Father and do exactly what my Father has commanded me.

Philippians 2:8 And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death – even death on a cross!

Romans 5:19 For just as through the disobedience of the one man the many were made sinners, so also through the obedience of the one man the many will be made righteous.

- Jesus was the perfectly obedient one.
- Your obedience matters. Not because we can earn anything – we can never earn salvation, but because our holy God, our Savior who died for us, calls us to a higher life.
- God never winks at our disobedience.
- Disobedience dishonors God.
- Disobedience puts us in opposition to God.
- Disobedience puts me in the place of God by putting me first.
- Disobedience destroys relationship.
- Disobedience leads to bondage and curses.

- Disobedience is SIN!
- Disobedience is destructive. Your and my past and current disobedience caused the death of the only perfect person who loves us. Paul when writing about this said:

Galatians 5:17 For the flesh desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the flesh.

- Sin is what we do that is contrary to God's ways. And according to Jesus, God's way is to love God with our heart, mind, soul and strength and our neighbor as ourselves.
- And when we live opposite this, we live in disobedience and sin. Here's why this is so serious.

John 8:34 Jesus answered them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who practices sin is a slave to sin."

- Every time we choose to sin, we choose to live in slavery to it. Don't kid yourself – you are a slave to something. And if isn't to God, it is to sin.
- What often happens to followers of Jesus is that they have been forgiven, invited Jesus to come into their lives, but then hold back parts of their life and continue to be disobedient those areas.
- Nadab and Abihu were struck dead for their irreverent disobedience. For us it is way too easy to lean into the grace of God in Jesus to excuse our disobedience. Jesus loves me. He forgives me. And after all, God has a good chunk of our obedience.
- But every decision we make is either moving us in the direction of rebellion and disobedience or is an act of surrender and obedience. It always takes us further.
- We are not static. Because sin and disobedience that is undealt with will enslave you.
- God told the Israelites to be holy even though he knew they would not be able to be completely holy. He gave them sacrifices to come to God, to repent, to pay restitution and atonement. To follow him and make them right again.
- Today, Jesus tells us to be perfect as our heavenly Father is perfect. Except for us he has already provided the perfect sacrifice to pay what we need to pay, the obedient son dying for our disobedience, to allow us to follow God and be right with him.
- He made a way for us to change direction. How? Confession and repentance.

II. Repentance is God's gift to us.

- Because confession and repentance are God's path to freedom and relationship.
- Right after Jesus told those following him that practicing sin makes us slaves to sin, he says this:

John 8:36 So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.

- We often picture confession and repentance negatively. Unenjoyable. It makes us feel bad. We don't want to give up what is fun for us. We think it will destroy our reputation and make people make fun of us. It will be inconvenient.
- If you think any of these things, may I challenge you to see it differently? When God's Spirit shows us what we are doing in disobedience and sin, it is an invitation to confess, repent and find freedom. To find joy. To shake off what oftentimes we don't even know is binding us up. It is his gift to lead us to a better life.
- We said last week that this entire series can be encapsulated in one word – surrender.
- My level of obedience demonstrates my level of surrender.

Conclusion

- **My obedience matters to God** and when we mess this up, he has given us the gift of repentance.
- Where disobedience dishonors God, obedience honors God.
- Where disobedience puts us contrary to the will of God, obedience lines us up with the will of God.
- Obedience puts God first.
- While disobedience ultimately destroys relationship, obedience fosters relationship.
- Where disobedience leads to bondage and curses, obedience leads to freedom and blessings.
- Obedience is LIFE.
- God's challenge to you today is the same as his challenge to me.
- Where are you living in disobedience? What are you holding onto? What is he asking for you to surrender? Where does he desire to bring more freedom to you today?
- I am asking you today to come to the altar to find freedom. To confess and repent. To surrender.
- Everyone has these things, regardless of what they look like. And yes you could probably do it in your seat. But there is something real about coming to the altar to receive forgiveness and freedom.

Hebrews 3:7 Therefore, as the Holy Spirit says, "Today, if you hear his voice, 8 do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion, on the day of testing in the wilderness."

- Let's not be like Nadab and Abihu, who dismissed and minimized the love and holiness of God by continuing to live in willing disobedience. Instead, let's embrace the gift that brings freedom.