

# The Dangerous Presence of God

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[ 0 : 00 ] As I say, we've been going through the book of Leviticus the last few weeks, and for this term we are journeying through this book, which is for many people quite an inaccessible book. And a lot of people don't like Leviticus, to be honest, when they first start reading it, even Christians.

You know, you start reading Leviticus and you see all these rules about priesthood and tabernacle, and it seems so irrelevant to us, but also just all these rules.

We don't like rules by nature, right? None of us actually like rules by nature, the list of rules and instructions that curtail our freedom, you know?

We don't like coming to hear things we have to do. It goes against our sense of wanting to live genuinely and freely. But what's really interesting is that our relationship to rules changes when we're dealing with something dangerous.

Suddenly, rules are important when you're dealing with a chainsaw. You actually read the instruction manual, or flying a helicopter. Then rules are good. Then we like rules.

[ 1 : 09 ] I mean, think about the pilot of the plane that you're sitting in, who's going to fly to Joburg. You want him to follow the rules, right? You want him to go through his pre-flight checklist and make sure that he's done all the things he needs to do.

Or the engineer in charge of the Kurg nuclear power station up the road, you want him to follow the rules. You see, suddenly rules are really important to us when it comes to something dangerous.

We like rules when there is danger. Well, if we realized how dangerous God actually is, I think we would start to appreciate his rules a lot more than we do.

And it's for that reason I think we have Leviticus chapter 10 in our Bibles. Here, in and amongst all the rules that we're reading in Leviticus for these ancient Israelites, we have this chapter, this story that shows us why the rules are so important.

These two priests, Nadab and Abihu, thought that they could approach God without caring too much about the rules. He gave them, and they paid for that with their lives.

[ 2 : 25 ] And in a culture that we live in that thinks that rules are not that important, or religion is not that important, or coming to church is not that important.

You know when you feel like it, fine, but it's not really something I need. People who think that I can have my own relationship with God my way, the way that works for me.

In that culture that we live in, this chapter is a warning to us that that attitude is just not true.

Humans can't approach God any way we want.

And in fact, the only way to approach God safely is by paying very careful attention to his instructions. Because the first and major lesson we learn in Leviticus 10 that we need to understand this morning, that we need to ingest, that we really need to get, is that God is more dangerous than you ever thought.

God is more dangerous than you think. So, in Leviticus so far, right, if you've been with us so far the last few weeks, everything has been going fairly well.

[ 3 : 33 ] Right, we've learned about the different sacrifices, which we learned is God's love language. Remember? God's love language is sacrifice. It's the basis of our relationship with God.

And then we learned about, in those sacrifices as well, we learned about the party that God wants us to experience in real relationship with Him, to enjoy good things. We learned about the priests, those people who manage the tabernacle, the place of God, where people meet with God.

And all of this has been set up so far in Leviticus chapter 1 to chapter 9. And it all culminates in this wonderful party, this celebration where something amazing happens at the end of chapter 9, just before the chapter we're looking at this morning.

I want to read to you the last few verses of chapter 9. And remember, everything is now set up. The priests are set up. The tabernacle is set up. The sacrifices are set up.

And they're awaiting. Now we get to experience God. We get to come close to God. It's very exciting. From verse 22 of chapter 9, And then Aaron lifted his hands towards the people and blessed them.

[ 4 : 42 ] And having sacrificed the sin offering, the burnt offering, and the fellowship offering, he stepped down. 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. 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 face down. Just imagine yourself in that moment.

Right? Imagine. You're there. And the God of the universe is revealing His presence in this physical form of holy fire that comes out miraculously, spontaneously out of the tabernacle and consumes the offerings.

And everybody, of course, I mean, you can understand their reaction. They shouted. They fell face down. Because they know in a very tangible way now, God is here.

[ 5 : 54 ] God, the God of the universe, that powerful God is right here. God, the God of the universe, that powerful God of the universe, that powerful God of the universe, and the glory of the Lord settled on Mount Sinai for the time. They've actually seen this once before, this physical manifestation of God's presence in holy fire back in Exodus.

When they were at Mount Sinai, you might remember. Let me read it for you again. Exodus 24 from verse 15. You don't have to turn there. But just listen. When Moses went up on the mountain, the cloud covered it.

And the glory of the Lord settled on Mount Sinai for six days. The cloud covered the mountain. And on the seventh day, the Lord called to Moses from within the cloud.

To the Israelites, the glory of the Lord looked like a consuming fire on top of the mountain. Okay, so they had experienced this before.

They had seen something similar on Mount Sinai. They were all at the bottom. Only Moses could go up. All the Israelites were at the bottom of the mountain. But they looked up and they saw this cloud settle on. And then they saw the cloud started to glow.

[ 7 : 00 ] And they saw this fire, this holy fire come from God that lit up the top of the mountain. But now, so they'd seen it before. But now in Leviticus 9, that same fire has come down into their camp with them.

You can totally understand their reaction. God is now here. And they shout out in joy and fall face down. But then we read on in the next few verses, the beginning of Leviticus 10.

And in the middle of all these celebrations, in the middle of this epic moment, disaster. From verse 1.

Aaron's sons, Nadab and Abihu took their senses, put fire in them and added incense. And they offered unauthorized fire before the Lord, contrary to his command.

So fire came out from the presence of the Lord. And consumed them. And they died before the Lord. So you see, the same fire that they were celebrating moments before.

[ 8 : 13 ] God's presence that has now come to dwell with them. The presence that brings life and blessings to humanity. It turns out, can also just as easily bring disaster to them.

That's why I think fire, as an illustration, is such a good description of God's presence. Because fire, if you think about it, is something that can give life, but also destroy, take life.

So, you know, it can warm us on cold days. It can cook food. It can be the source of life. Just like the sun, the burning, you know, star, fire is giving us life every day.

But that same sun, the same fire that can warm and give life, can also burn down houses, cities. It can bring disaster and destruction if things go wrong.

And that's what happened here. Things go wrong with the holy fire of God's presence. And so what went wrong? What went wrong here?

[ 9 : 18 ] Well, again, verse 1, we read, The reason that this happened, And they offered unauthorized fire before the Lord, contrary to His command.

Okay, now, it's been a few thousand years since these priests were around. So we don't exactly know the exact nature of the unauthorized fire. But what we do know is that the priests had to burn certain fires and incense in the holy place, in the tabernacle.

And they did something in there that was contrary to God's instructions. Now, this, you've got to understand, in the tabernacle, there was two parts to it.

There was the holy place, and then there was the holy of holies, where the ark was kept. And that was the epicenter of God's presence. Right? And when they were close to there, they had to follow the rules.

But they, at this moment, didn't think they needed to. They thought, well, you know, close is good enough. I think He wants us to do something. It doesn't really matter. Let's just do it. They took it lightly. What God had said, they took lightly.

[10:25] And that was the last mistake they ever made. Because coming near to God was far more dangerous than they thought. Even though God wants us to come near to Him.

In fact, that is the only way we can ever have true life, eternal life, and true blessings that God has ever made us for, in close relationship with Him. And, if you like, the whole story of the Bible, you can understand as God wanting and making a way for humans to come close to Him.

God's desire for us to come back into the relationship with our Creator that we lost at the fall. The whole Bible is the story of God wanting us to come close to Him, even though we are sinners.

And He wants that. And you see it right from Genesis and Exodus. He is making a way to come closer and closer and closer to His people. From the mountain, now into their camp.

But, even though God wants that and it is good for us, at the same time, God knows that His presence is dangerous to sinners.

[11:37] And that is why God gives us all these rules. It's not because He wants to spoil our fun. It's because He wants to protect us. These Leviticus and the priests and why they had to so carefully follow the rules were safety regulations for our good.

And that is why God reminds Aaron, after this happens, these are His sons. Aaron's sons who are destroyed. Because they took the rules lightly.

Because they didn't realize that they were safety regulations. And God then talks to Aaron. It's the only time God talks directly to Aaron. As He's mourning His sons. And He says these words.

The Lord said to Aaron, from verse 8. 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.

So that you can distinguish between the holy and the common. Between the unclean and the clean. So the first thing He says is, Okay, Aaron, when your sons do the work in the temple.

[12:49] He's still got two sons left, by the way. When they do the work in the temple, they mustn't be drinking. They mustn't drink alcohol. Now, why do you think that is?

Well, the reason is, it's the same as not drinking and driving. Right? Why do we, why does the government say we cannot drink and drive? Even just one or two beers or a glass of wine.

But, you know, we can stay at home and have those things fine. But if we're driving, we can't. Why? Because it's dangerous. Because we're operating something that could hurt others or ourselves. It's the same reason God gives that command now to the priests.

Because they're dealing with something very dangerous when they come close to God's presence. You know, or again, you know, we wouldn't want the engineer in charge of the Kubrick nuclear power station to be drinking while he manages it.

You know, to be having a few beers and a glass of whiskey while he's watching the radiation levels of the power plant that's just outside our city.

[13:51] We wouldn't want that. You know, he's got to be focused. He's got to pay careful attention to the reactor temperatures and the radiation. And we don't want him to be drinking on the job.

In fact, I looked it up and the requirements, the safety requirements, especially for drinking on the job or anything that can distract you from your work, are so much higher in the nuclear power industry, of course.

You know, they've got so many tests to make sure, even if you've been drinking the night before, you're not allowed to come to work in many cases if you work at a nuclear power station.

Because they're dealing with something that is very powerful, very dangerous. Same reason that God gives these instructions here. But then also, he says why in verse 10. Just as the nuclear

power engineer is watching and managing the radiation levels, and that's why he's got to be completely focused.

So the priests, verse 10, why they can't drink on the job? So that you can distinguish between the holy and the common, between the unclean and the clean.

[14:55] Now, if we want to understand Leviticus, we need to understand what these words mean. Because they come up a lot.

Holy, clean, unclean. And these are categories, actually, that once we get a grasp of, they make a whole lot more in Leviticus, make so much more sense.

So I'm going to help you by giving a diagram of the three main categories that we'll come across over and over again in Leviticus. First, there's unclean. And something is unclean when it is tainted with sin or death.

Right? So sin or anything associated or in contact with death causes something to be unclean. Now, that can be changed. Something can be changed from unclean to clean through the process of cleansing.

And that is what the priests did. And they used the sacrifices for. You could move someone from the category of unclean to clean through the sacrifices and the priesthods. And that was called cleansing.

[16:02] But then, once they're clean, they can be further moved to the category of holy. And that is made fit for the presence of God through the process of sanctification.

That's what it was called. To make something holy. Now, if you just understand these three categories and the idea of cleansing and sanctifying and that those are actually two different things. When we come across those words, cleansing from sin or sanctifying, we think they're the same thing.

But they're actually not. Leviticus helps us to understand the categories and how they move us into different categories. If we understand just this concept, a whole lot of Leviticus starts to make much more sense.

But what's important for us this morning is just to notice that there are three categories. And there's a reason for it. And that the middle category of being clean but not holy is a kind of a buffer between the unclean and the holy.

And you need that buffer because if the unclean ever comes into contact with the holy, it is disaster. The unclean can never come into contact with the holy.

[17:07] And that's why you have this buffer in between. Now, I was thinking of a way to illustrate this. We have a number of chemists in our congregation.

And I asked one of them this week, and I won't mention his name because that would embarrass Michiel. I asked him an illustration of if you put two things together, what causes a big reaction. And apparently sodium and water. So if you take sodium and it has contact with water, there's this big exothermic reaction, big explosion. Okay. And that's why apparently sodium is stored in paraffin. So it can never come into contact with water and have that reaction. And that is a way of thinking about holiness and sin. If holiness and sin ever come into contact, there is this massive exothermic reaction.

There is destruction. There is bad stuff that happens. And so the priesthood and the sacrifices and all the things we're reading about in Leviticus are actually the paraffin that keeps the two separate.

[18:09] That makes sure that the sinfulness and the uncleanness never comes into contact with the holy and causes that destruction. Because this right here is a truth that is knitted into reality and it will always be this way.

Okay. Holiness and sin can never come into contact because that is destruction. That is bad. This is how things are. This is like a law, like the law of gravity.

You can ignore the law of gravity, but you do so to your peril because it will always be true. It's the same with this. This law, this concept is always going to be true.

And Leviticus is here to teach people, to teach God's people these truths about God's holiness and human sin. And these facts are not just for Leviticus.

They are no different today. This reality hasn't changed. It will always be this way. And that is why we can't just come however we want to God, like Nadab and Abihu thought they could.

[19:12] But we need to be careful, very careful, to follow the only way God has made if we're going to approach God safely.

And the way He's made for us to approach God safely is His Son, Jesus Christ. That is why Jesus came. Because of this reality that we cannot approach a holy God without destruction. The way God has made is His Son, Jesus, and all the laws and the instructions and the designs for the tabernacle and the priesthood and their dress and everything they wear. All of them are here to point to Jesus, to tell us something about what Jesus does for us in the heavenly realm. All of these things that the Israelites had to set up and do that we're reading about are actually just symbolizing heavenly realities that we can't see. And that's why God wanted them to build these things so we could see them and understand what's going on and why we need Jesus so much. Let me read to you from Hebrews 9, from verse 11. [ 20 : 26 ] It says, When Christ came as high priest of the good things that are now already here, He went through the greater and more perfect tabernacle that is not made with human hands, that is to say, is not a part of creation.

He did not enter by means of the blood of goats and calves, but He entered the most holy place once for all by His own blood, thus obtaining eternal redemption. So you see what that's saying? It's saying that the tabernacle that we're reading about in Leviticus represented the actual heavenly reality, the space between heaven and earth. And why heaven and earth are separate? Because sin and uncleanness cannot come into contact with the holy.

But there's this thing that God has done so that the two can come together and it's fulfilled in His Son, Jesus. So Leviticus is here. The tabernacle and all the priests and all of the stuff that we read and we think is boring until we understand it.

[ 21 : 42 ] It's here so we can understand just what Jesus achieved in the heavenly realms. And that is why He says in John 14, verse 6, You know, He's not trying to limit our options.

He's trying to help us to see that there is only one way to approach God safely and it's Him. And the reason is because of His atoning death that all the sacrifices in Leviticus pointed to.

And because of His resurrection and ascension, equally important, because that made Him the perfect high priest who represents us and enters into God's presence for us. So that we can come close to God, even though we are sinners. One of the things that we haven't covered yet about the priests, so we started looking at the priesthood last week, but there's a lot of details about the priests in the tabernacle and what they wore, especially.

God instructed them to wear particular things, but one of the things they wore was a thing called an ephod. And this was a breastplate that they would have to put on, and it had 12 stones in it.

[ 22 : 59 ] Different precious, semi-precious stones. And each one of these stones, different colors, were there to represent one of the tribes of Israel. And actually they engraved, they had an engraver engraved the names in Hebrew letters of each of the tribes on these stones.

And the point was, as the priest entered into the holy place in the tabernacle, once the sacrifices were made and he was cleansed and sanctified and he could enter into the holy place, the people outside, they were not allowed to enter into the holy place.

But the priest did. And as he enters and he takes this ephod with him, with the stones of the tribes, he is essentially taking God's people with him into God's presence.

And all of this was to show us what Jesus does for us. When Jesus enters into, through his death and resurrection and ascension, the heavenly realm, the presence of God, he takes with him all who have trusted in him.

In him. That's what it means to be in Christ. We can safely enter into the presence of God because of what he's done, because he's the perfect high priest. Which we wouldn't ever have been able to do as sinners.

[ 24 : 26 ] But because of Jesus, we can now, that priest, that high priest, who fulfills everything, we can safely enter into the otherwise dangerous presence of God and have a real relationship with him.

If you think about it, something as simple as praying is only possible because Jesus is the high priest who can bring us into the presence of God. And the knowing and seeing and experiencing God in eternity to come is only possible because Jesus brings us safely into the presence of God. And that is why if you haven't paid any real attention to Jesus in your life, you know, maybe you've come to church and you hear about this stuff and you like worship and you like Christian things and you like the Bible, but really your life is still, you know, is lived for yourself your way and Jesus is on

the side as a kind of a heavenly counselor when you need some help.

If that is all Jesus is to you, you need to reconsider how much you need him. If you haven't paid any real attention to Jesus, you need to start because he is the only one who can bring you into God's presence without it destroying you.

But maybe, maybe you're listening to this and maybe you're not much into Christian things and into Jesus and it's not for you.

[ 25 : 50 ] You know, Jesus is not for you. Christian stuff is not for you. I'm fine without Jesus. I don't need God's presence in my life. I get along just fine. I don't need to be in God's presence. Well, you know what?

You won't have a choice one day. One way or another, everybody will eventually face the God who made them. And when you do, the question, the only question that matters is, will the holy fire of God's presence that you will experience one way or another, will it give you life and eternal blessing or will it destroy you?

Well, that all depends on whether you've come to God now through the only way that he is made to do that safely through his son Jesus and whether you are carefully following Jesus through the instructions that he has given, not just doing it your own way.

But daily and weekly, opening this and pouring through this and getting closer to God and Jesus and clinging more to Jesus through the instructions that he's given and doing what it says and distinguishing in your life between what is clean and unclean, what is holy and unholy.

Because holy fire is coming. It is coming. When Jesus returns, it's not going to be like the first time he was here.

[ 27 : 31 ] He is going to bring God's holy fire to bear on this planet. And it is going to fill this whole world, God's holy presence, and it will bring limitless life and blessing to this world, but nothing unclean will survive it.

Listen to what Peter says about this day in 2 Peter 3. He says, But the day of the Lord will come like a thief.

The heavens will disappear with a roar. The elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything done in it will be laid bare. Since everything will be destroyed in this way, what kind of people ought you to be?

You ought to live holy and godly lives. As you look forward to the day of God, and speed, it's coming. That day will bring about the destruction of the heavens by fire, and the elements will melt in the heat.

But in keeping with his promise, we are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth where righteousness dwells. And so will you be amongst the holy people who come to God in Christ Jesus, who will be able to live in God's presence and not be destroyed on that day?

[ 28 : 57 ] Will you? Well, the only way you can know is whether you are in Christ now, and really following him, and really seeking to live a holy and godly life now by carefully obeying his word.

Well, next week, come back, because we're going to learn more about what it means to distinguish between the unclean and the holy in our own lives.

But for now, I want to close by reading the end of Hebrews 12. Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us be thankful, and so worship God acceptably with reverence and awe, for our God is a consuming fire.

Let's pray. Lord, we approach you in awe and reverence and realize afresh that we can only even do this because Jesus has gone before us as our high priest, a perfect high priest.

Lord, give us a healthy fear of you. Help us to realize that you are more dangerous than we think, and that our sin could never dwell in your presence.

[ 30 : 25 ] and help us, therefore, to cling to Christ all the more and to take seriously following him every day in our lives so that we can enjoy the life and blessing that comes through being near to you.

Amen.