

Strange Fire

by Ray C. Stedman

In this vivid picture book of the Old Testament, Leviticus, we are learning the great truth which time and again in the course of history seems to be lost and then recovered again – this marvelous truth of the priesthood of every believer in Jesus Christ. At times down through the centuries, unfortunately, the idea of priesthood has become very distorted in the Christian church. Various groups have set aside bodies of men ordained as priests and treated as different from other people, as “super saints” who have a special “in” with God. But the New Testament teaches nothing like that. It instructs us that every believer in Jesus Christ is a priest and has a ministry, and that our whole purpose for existence as believers is to fulfill our priesthood.

When this truth is recovered it always has the fantastic power to change a whole civilization. Whenever this has been taken seriously by the church in any nation it has always resulted in a tremendous awakening, a fantastic change of pace, and a vast improvement in the quality of life. Institutions and organizations which have been committed to injustice and have been causing the deterioration of society have been challenged, and much of what, in the best sense, we call “civilization” has been recovered through the impact of this truth. When Martin Luther and the reformers discovered and spread this truth, and people began to appropriate it, the Reformation swept through Europe like wildfire and completely altered the course of European history. I am grateful that once again God in these days is calling the church, a sleeping, slumbering evangelical church, which has largely forgotten this truth – it has slipped through our fingers and we have lost its impact – God is calling us back to take this truth seriously once again.

That is what this book of Leviticus centers upon. It is teaching us what it means to be a priest,

to be a member of the royal priesthood {cf, 1 Pet 2:9} with which God has endowed this world and by which he intends to reach it. In our last study together, in Chapter 9, you remember that we saw the results of priesthood. When everything was done “as the LORD commanded” the result was a manifestation of the presence of God, a remarkable shining forth of the glory of the Lord. When Aaron, picturing Jesus Christ as the great high priest, and the sons of Aaron, joining with him in the priesthood, picturing us in our relationship with Christ, had done all that God had said and had fulfilled their priesthood as he had directed, then “the glory of the LORD” broke out in their midst. This is always the case. The “glory of the LORD” is the character of Jesus, the manifestation of his kind of humanity, present in our daily lives. Chapter 9, as we saw, concluded with a great scene of triumph. The Shekinah glory, a radiant cloud of light, suddenly appeared in the midst of the people of Israel and consumed the rest of the sacrifice in a flash of flame. The people, awed and amazed, shouted and fell on their faces, crying out in triumph.

But the amazing thing is that we now move immediately from that scene of triumph into a scene of tragedy. On the very day that this tremendous breakthrough occurred in the camp of Israel, tragedy strikes and a sudden and shocking manifestation of judgment occurs.

We have it recorded for us in the opening verses of Chapter 10:

Now Nadab and Abihu, the sons of Aaron, each took his censer, and put fire in it, and laid incense on it, and offered unholy fire before the LORD, such as he had not commanded them. And fire came forth

from the presence of the LORD and devoured them, and they died before the LORD. {Lev 10:1-2 RSV}

The very same Shekinah which had consumed the sacrifice now flashes out again to destroy these two priests as they minister. What a shock this must have been to Aaron, to his remaining two sons, and to the whole camp of Israel.

You can imagine Aaron, watching with pride as these two boys of his carry out their duties as priests. They fill their censers with glowing coals, put incense upon them and go before the presence of the LORD as God had commanded. But then to Aaron's sore amazement a jet of fire reaches out from the cloud of glory and in a flash the boys are gone. He sees their singed, burned, charred bodies lying there on the floor. What do you think your reaction would have been if you had been part of this scene? The people were stunned, sobered by this manifestation.

As nearly as we can determine, what these boys did was to substitute a kind of incense different from that which God had commanded. It doesn't seem like very much of an offense, but it evoked immediate judgment from God and their lives were forfeit. I don't know why they did it. Maybe they didn't like the smell of the frankincense which God had specified and so they substituted some other kind of perfume – *Chanel No. 5*, or perhaps *My Sin*. But, for offering this, their lives were immediately taken.

Now, what is your reaction to that? I wish we could take a survey and ask you to reveal what you feel emotionally when you read this account. I would warrant that probably more than half of you have a sense of uneasiness about this episode and, if you were to probe deeply enough, a sense of resentment – even anger – against God for this kind of treatment. You feel that God is unfair. Why should he take the lives of these two men for such a trivial thing? I am sure that this was the reaction that Aaron and his sons felt, too, as they saw their brothers killed in this way. This is indicated in Verse 3, as we will see.

There are other stories in the Old Testament of the judgment of God in similar cases.

- For instance, Miriam, the sister of Aaron, indulged in a little seemingly rather trivial criticism and yet immediately God judged her with leprosy and she became white all over.

- A little later on is the story of Uzzah {2 Sam 6:3-8}, who, you remember, reached out to steady the ark of the covenant as David was returning it to Jerusalem. But as he touched it he dropped dead – just like that.
- There is also that story in the New Testament of Ananias and Sapphira {Acts 5:9-11} who, merely because they were pretending to a bit more dedication than they really possessed, died before the Lord!

Now why?

What do you think about these incidents?

Many of us, reading the Bible, tend to feel something – but then we pass on and never analyze it any further. This is why many people have come up with the idea that God, especially “the God of the Old Testament,” is a God of vengeful judgment, that he is a fierce and harsh tyrant, and that the slightest misstep is treated with severe judgment. We tend to think of God in that way despite the hundreds of passages in the Old Testament that reveal the tenderness of his heart and the abundance of his love and compassion. But this is because we read our Bibles so superficially. God is acting here just as much as a God of love as he is in any other part of the Bible. His nature is love. And he never deviates from what he has revealed himself to be. So this action must be in line with his nature and character of love. And, if we don't react to it as such, then there is something wrong with us. We need to stop and do some research to find out what is behind these acts which will help us to understand them as being actions of love and not harshness nor of fierceness.

There are several features in this passage which will help us:

The first that ought to be clearly noted is that this sin on the part of these two priests was not a sin of ignorance but one of **presumption**. They knew better. It wasn't that they were simply doing something at which they had no idea God would be offended. They had been told emphatically that he would be offended. If you look back at Exodus 30, you find in that chapter instructions for the construction of the altar of incense, where the incense was to be burned. In Verse 7 we are told,

“And Aaron shall burn fragrant incense on it; every morning when he dresses the lamps he shall burn it, and when Aaron sets up the lamps in the evening, he shall burn it, a perpetual incense before the LORD throughout your generations.” {Exod 30:7-8 RSV}

And then in Verse 9,

“You shall offer no unholy incense thereon,” {Exod 30:9a RSV}

That is clear, isn't it? God had precisely said, “Be careful; do not offer the wrong kind of incense.” So when these priests did so it was a violation of the direct command of God. They were doing something against which God himself had forewarned them. God never visits with judgment anybody who is struggling in ignorance to try to find him, even though they do it the wrong way.

The New Testament, in speaking about the Lord Jesus, quotes from Isaiah 42 a beautiful verse which says, “A bruised reed he will not break, and a dimly burning wick he will not quench,” {Isa 42:3 RSV}. That is, God understands the heart of someone who is trying to find him, who is trying to do what is right, but doesn't know much about it. And he never, never, in any way, discourages him. He encourages him. He is patient, longsuffering, tender, compassionate, and understanding.

But the sin of these priests, obviously, is one of willful presumption. They took it for granted that God wouldn't care about it, even though he had said that he would. They gave no weight to his words, but insisted on their own way.

The second thing we need to note is that this sin was dealt with very severely because **it distorted God's revelation of himself**. In all these priestly sacrifices and rituals God is explaining something about himself so that we might learn what kind of God he is. But by their disobedience these priests were teaching wrong concepts about the being of God. That is why God judged them.

You remember that this is what Moses did. When he was leading them through the wilderness on the way to the land of Canaan the people of Israel needed water. And in obedience to God's word he smote the rock and water flowed forth. Later on the need arose a second time. This time God said not to smite the rock but to speak to it. But Moses,

in his anger against the people, smote it. And though in grace and mercy God allowed the water to come forth to the thirsting people of Israel, he said to Moses, “You have not sanctified me in the eyes of this people. You have not taught the truth about me. Therefore you will not enter the land,” {cf, Num 20:12}. God kept his word. Even though Moses was a mighty leader, and God used him greatly after that, still Moses had lost his right to enter the land.

Here we have the same sort of situation. These priests were supposed to be operating as the instruments, the functionaries, of God. And if they performed improperly they were misleading the people about God. That is the import of Verse 3. Evidently Aaron had begun to protest. Perhaps in his upset and anger at the loss of his two beloved sons he had started to cry out against God. But Moses stopped him with these words:

“This is what the LORD has said, ‘I will show myself holy among those who are near me, and before all the people I will be glorified.’” And Aaron held his peace. {Lev 10:3 RSV}

Aaron began to understand. You see, God had said that the incense to be offered was a peculiar kind – frankincense. Frankincense never yields its fragrance until it is burned. This is a very instructive lesson for us.

Incense, in the Scriptures, is always a picture of prayer. It is a beautiful picture. As the clouds of incense arose before the sanctuary in the evening air, they were a picture to all the people of how the prayers and thanksgiving of our hearts ascend before the God of glory. Incense is intended to be a picture of the prayer and commitment arising out of obedient and thankful hearts. And frankincense pictures, not merely thankfulness for the ordinary blessings of life, but, primarily, thankfulness for the hardships and the difficulties which burn us, the “fiery trials” we must pass through which Peter mentions in his first letter {1 Pet 4:12}, the ordeals of our lives. That is what God is trying to teach us – that it is a sweet, fragrant odor, a delight to him, to see a heart that is filled with praise and thanksgiving because of the trials we have passed through, a heart which has learned to rejoice in the fact that God has provided opportunity in these difficult times for us to manifest his character, and

has taught us great (though oftentimes painful) lessons about ourselves through them. This is what delights the heart of God. And this is what God is trying to teach by the prescribed ritual of offering frankincense each evening and morning.

But that lesson is marred and altered and we are taught a false idea about God by the offering of some other kind of perfume. If perfume is a picture of our happiness and our thankfulness then mere perfume of some other sort would teach that God exists only to make us feel good, that he is there only to produce a modicum of human happiness. The implication of that notion is that whatever makes us temporarily happy is from God. That is the philosophy which today, as you know, is destroying thousands, millions – the philosophy of hedonism, i.e., that anything which makes you happy is the reason for life, anything which produces any sort of temporary, passing pleasure must be right, because that is what God exists for and that is why we are here. That approach to life is what is destroying so many today! It encompasses the idea of getting a temporary thrill from a shot in the arm with a needle, or of losing a sense of the ugliness of life in an alcoholic haze, or of retreating to some round of transitory pleasure which helps you to forget reality, which makes you happy for awhile. And it rests, ultimately, upon the misconception that all these things must be right because God exists to provide them.

But that is a lie, a lie about God! That isn't what makes us happy. Happiness does not come from some momentary pleasure. It comes from a relationship of freedom, of giving oneself to the God who made us and thus being able to experience our true humanity for the very first time, really, as we learn to yield to God, to give up, to lose our lives and thus to find them again, as Jesus has said.

I don't think there is any more graphic picture in the whole Bible of what it means to offer strange fire before the Lord than that prayer which Jesus recorded for us in the New Testament – the prayer of the proud Pharisee. Remember how he stood and prayed: "Lord, I thank you that I'm not like other people, like all these unwashed publicans. I tithe every day, and I fast twice a week..." {cf, Luke 18:9-14}. His prayer is a recital of all that he has done for God and suggests how lucky God ought to feel to have him on his side.

That is what is meant by offering strange fire before the Lord – anything which reckons upon our own self-righteousness and forgets that life is given to us as a gift. Perhaps the most basic form of sin is ingratitude, this prevalent seizing of life as though we have an inalienable right to it, instead of receiving it as a gift from a Father's hand and giving thanks for it with that realization. What a tremendous text this is for Thanksgiving week! From it we can learn how to give thanks in such a way as will delight the heart of God. We can learn to rejoice in the fact that he has put us through trials and thus has given us an opportunity to manifest his life.

How are you ever going to show that God is the kind who returns good for evil unless somebody does evil to you? How will you ever get a chance to return good for evil unless somebody hurts you? How can you ever demonstrate the truth of the Scripture: "Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake" {Matt 5:10a RSV}, unless somebody persecutes you? You see, the moment that happens you have a chance to manifest the life of Jesus, the character which delights the heart of God. How are you ever going to learn the disciplines of life which break down your self confidence and your trust in human resources, and which teach you to rely wholly upon a God who releases from within the strength you need, unless you are put into trials where human resources are not any longer adequate, unless you are pushed out beyond your depth? How are you ever going to learn this unless that happens? This is the great lesson that God is seeking to impart to us.

How many verses of the New Testament say the same thing to us? "Count it all joy when you fall into various trials," James tells us {cf, Jas 1:2}, because that is an opportunity to delight the heart of God by the reaction you show. And that is our priesthood. But if it is distorted, if we act as though we can give thanks to God only when things go right, if we can find it in our hearts to be grateful only when things are breaking our way, well, this is what anybody ought to do. Even non-Christians, pagans, can react that way. But God is looking for those hearts which have genuinely learned to rejoice in the trials that he has sent, and the pain we have gone through, the difficulties and disappointments, and the circumstances of hardship. Have you heard the little poem that goes:

God has not promised skies always blue,
flower-strewn pathways all our lives through.
God has not promised sun without rain,
joy without sorrow, peace without pain,
But God has promised strength for the day,
rest for the laden, light for the way,
Grace for the trials, help from above,
unfailing sympathy, undying love.

When you bow your head over your Thanksgiving table, are you going to give thanks just for the adequate supply of food and clothing, the roof over your head, the job you have, and the family around you – just for the blessings of life? Or can you also thank God from a genuinely rejoicing heart that he has taught you some deep truths through painful circumstances, for the fact that you have had to go through some hardships and some crushing disappointments but that out of them you have seen yourself in a new way, you have learned how to rest and to draw upon the resources of an abundant Savior in your life? Well, that is when God's heart begins to swell with pride and gladness – when the frankincense goes up before him as a sweet savor in which he delights. But this is what was being twisted and distorted by the whole performance of these two careless and thoughtless priests.

The third thing we need to notice about this episode is that **this judgment is exemplary**, i.e. that God has made an example of them this once and that he never does this again. This is not something which happened every time a priest violated any regulation. It only happened once – at the beginning of the priesthood. Similarly, though the sin of Ananias and Sapphira was common among Christians in the early church, and has been common ever since, still God has never visited sudden physical death like that again. God is teaching a lesson by this action, and so he does it only once.

You can read that later on in the priesthood of Israel the priests did many very terrible things before the altar, but God never killed them for it. In the days of the Maccabees there was a time when they actually even offered swine's blood on the altar, the blood of an unclean animal, which was a horrendous thing to do. And yet there is no record of God's sudden judgment in that case.

But it is important that it happened at least this one time. For this is an example and therefore it is a manifestation of God's love and concern. He is

trying to stop this kind of thing from happening again, and he is giving fair warning of the eventual consequences to anyone presumptuous enough to sin deliberately in this way.

In reading an account of the terrible atrocities which occurred at My Lai, I was struck by a remark attributed to one veteran soldier regarding the passive attitudes of many senior officers toward cruelty to prisoners, and killing of civilians, and other atrocities committed by the armed forces. He said this:

This stuff would stop if we'd hang a couple of senior commanders. If it's no longer condoned then it will cease. If you don't tell a soldier what's right, then he thinks whatever is tacitly condoned is what you want – and that's what he does.

That is the way we human beings work. Unless an issue is vividly, dramatically, openly, symbolically made clear to us, we'll go right on and do the wrong thing. So God is stopping that, arresting it with his judgment at this point. But he really wants us to learn to refrain for the sake of his glory, not out of fear for our lives, so he only judges in this way once.

One final thing we need to remember will help us to understand this whole affair in a different light. There is **no implication here of eternal condemnation for Nadab and Abihu**. This occurrence doesn't mean they are lost. I have no doubt in my mind that these two young priests were with the Lord in glory immediately. God took them home – not because he was going to condemn them to hell, but only because they had violated their ministry. He called them home as an example to others in order that they in turn should not violate their ministries in the same way – especially in the reality of which what these priests were doing is merely the symbol.

What is the corresponding way in which you and I violate our ministries? How do we offer strange fire before God in our priesthood? We do it whenever we depart from the word of the Lord as it pertains to the advice we give others as we exercise our priesthood. These two priests did what the LORD commanded them not to do. And that is what we too often do:

For example, if somebody comes to us and asks for help and advice because they have been

mistreated and personally insulted, and if you or I say, as we are so tempted to say, “Well, if I were you I’d punch him in the nose!” – that would be offering strange fire before the LORD, wouldn’t it? That isn’t what God has said. He says, “Return good for evil.” Now, I don’t mean that there is never a time when it may be appropriate for us to be angry and even to exercise physical violence on behalf of someone else, but never on our own behalf. This is what God calls us to refrain from doing. What God is teaching us here is that the service we offer as a priest must be only that which is commanded of the Lord, and nothing else.

The next section of the passage reveals a very human reaction on the part of Aaron and his two remaining sons. We read,

And Moses called Mishael and Elzaphan, the sons of Uzziel, the uncle of Aaron, and said to them, “Draw near, carry your brethren from before the sanctuary out of the camp.” So they drew 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 rend your clothes, lest you die, and lest wrath come upon all the congregation; but your brethren, the whole house of Israel, may bewail the burning which the LORD has kindled. And do not go out from the door 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. {Lev 10:4-7 RSV}

You can well imagine that they would! It must have been a tremendous struggle for them to stand by and watch their relatives summoned to go in and pick up these charred bodies and carry them out for burial. Naturally their hearts were torn. Their loss was sudden and shocking. These were their brothers, Aaron’s sons, and they loved them. Their natural reaction would have been to take the rest of the day off, at least, and to mourn them and weep for them. But Moses said, “No, don’t do that. You can’t do that. God won’t let you. If you do that you will die. God wants you to stick right with your priesthood despite the feelings of your own hearts.” For God knew what we usually do not recognize immediately in circumstances like this –

that out of the shock, out of the pain, out of the anguish of heart would come a new power, a new efficiency, and a new sense of purpose for the priesthood. So he would not let them off. Instead he led Moses to say, “Let the rest of Israel bewail them, but you stay right on the job. And don’t you quit!”

Have you ever felt like quitting? I have, lots of times. If I had been in these two remaining boys’ shoes I would have thought to myself, “How do you get out of this outfit? I never counted on anything like this. If you’re not careful to do what God says, this can happen. I’m quitting!” But God sent Moses to warn them, “You can’t quit!” Many times I have come to the place where I’ve felt like that. “I don’t want to help others anymore, Lord. It’s too great a responsibility. I want out. Just leave me alone and let me live by myself.” But God says, “No.” He knows that my priesthood, and your priesthood, will be all the richer because of his discipline. That is why we read in Hebrews 12, “Despise not the chastening of the Lord, nor faint when you are rebuked of him,” {cf, Heb 12:5 KJV}. Don’t shrink from it or feel that it is too much for you to be expected to bear. For out of the pain of our heart will come a clearer understanding, a deeper compassion, and a stronger, more realistic word of help to someone else. God knows that, and so he won’t let us off.

God is an utter realist. He deals with life the way it is. It is we who are victims of illusions, delusions, and fantasies. We sometimes think that these matters are unimportant or trivial, that we can just toss off a word of advice according to our feelings of the moment. But God labors continually to impress upon us that the only wisdom we can count on as being realistic and genuinely helpful must be that which arises out of the principles taught in the Word of God.

I hope you take these words seriously, because God means them seriously. He is not joking when he says to us today that each believer in Jesus Christ is called to a priesthood. For some reason we have a tendency to blind our eyes and shut our ears to this idea and to say “Well, that belongs to somebody else.” No! It doesn’t! It belongs to you! You have a priesthood and God has called you to it. There are no exceptions. I am no more a priest than you are. If I am in the ministry, so are you in the ministry. If I have a responsibility to help my brother, my sister, whomever I meet along the way,

so have you. Your priesthood is to be exercised right where you are – in your office, in your shop, at school, at home, with your children, with your neighbors and your friends.

When God looks at you in your busy business office he isn't noting what you often are noting. He isn't concerned, primarily, about what you are likely to be concerned about. You are concerned about getting the work done, and doing it acceptably enough that they'll keep handing you a check at the end of the month. God doesn't worry about that, particularly. He wants your work done well. That's part of your ministry. But the main thing that God cares about, and what he is really watching for, is how you react to the people you work with. What are you doing for them? How are you responding to the way they treat you? That is what God is watching for. And that is your opportunity for priesthood, for ministry.

One of these days God will call us all to account for our priesthood, and he'll ask us, "What did you do in this situation, and that? How did you respond? Here was an opportunity for you to be a priest and what did you do?" What are you going to say? What am I going to say? God takes this very seriously. He lays this responsibility upon us, and he won't let us off, no matter if our heart is breaking and we are going through pressures and trials and problems. He says, "You can't quit. I've put you there to deepen your impact, to increase your opportunity, to broaden your ministry, and I won't let you off." Out of this discipline will have to come a deeper, richer commitment, and a better understanding of the word of the Lord, and of what we can say to people that will help them, so that we will no longer be content just to pass along some piece of advice off the top of our head which merely reflects the philosophy of the world. That is the priesthood to which God is calling us.

We are going to reserve the rest of the chapter for our next study. In it there are some very interesting and helpful suggestions on how to carry out

our priesthood, and what to avoid. And the chapter ends with a marvelous manifestation of the tenderness and the grace of God. I hope that you won't carry away from this study any sense that God is a vengeful, strange, fearsome Being. He is to be respected. We can't trifle with him in these spiritual matters, just as we can't ignore the laws of nature and do whatever we feel like doing. God, of course, is sovereign in both. But, on the other hand, his every action, even this kind of action, is an action of love. It is an attempt to arrest further destruction and to stop it before it begins, and thus to keep us from hurting ourselves and harming others in the process.

Prayer:

Our Father, as we wait before you we, too, feel a sense of awe, a twinge of fear perhaps, a touch of apprehension in our hearts when we consider that you are this kind of God – an utter realist. You always deal realistically with everything. So Lord, we pray that this will help us to understand that we are not playing games in life, that being a Christian is not a game either, and that the priesthood is a very serious matter to which we are called. It involves us deeply, and there is no way out. Our responsibility then is to be what you want us to be, Lord. Help us to do so. Help us to understand that you are loving and understanding, and that you are willing to help us at any time. If in our foolishness and ignorance we blindly walk off into dead-end streets you are willing to help us back, Lord. But you will not put up with deliberate refusal to take your word seriously. By that we always cause ourselves difficulty. Help us to understand all this with proper perspective and balance. We ask in Jesus' name, Amen.