

Leviticus 10

I am terrified of imaginary friends. I know that many people during their childhood had imaginary friends, but I did not. I don't know why I didn't. As an adult, the thought of imaginary friends scares me. I envision walking into the kitchen and seeing a bag of Halloween candy torn apart, its contents spread out all over the floor, and a message written in melted chocolate, "red rum." I walk down the hall to confront my four-year-old about the mess, who is playing legos in the playroom. After I share my outrage, he looks up at me, tilts his head ever so slightly to the left, and says, "Dad, my friend Lucie...fer made that mess." That's a nightmare!

Now, I am sure your imaginary friends weren't that mischievous and creepy. Your imaginary friends were most likely helpful and supportive. They played with you and probably helped you cope with the difficulties of being a child. You created something that supported you in a fragile time. Having an imaginary friend is normal for a child and many see it as helpful.

I am afraid that we are strongly tempted to treat God like an imaginary friend. In seeking guidance, direction, identity, support, and protection, we fashion a god who meets those needs according to our preferences. God becomes a sort of "build-a-bear" that comforts us and is there to play with us. The God of the Bible provides guidance, direction, identity, support, and protection, but he is not created by us. He created us. It is extremely insulting to attempt to fashion God into our image. As we start our new series on Worship, we want to start by talking about how we think about God and how we approach God. God is the one who reveals his character to us and shows us how to approach him. He sets the rules for the relationship.

Big Idea: God is not an imaginary friend. We must acknowledge that in relation to God, we are the creatures and he is the creator. Our role is to respect him and follow his rules. God finds it extremely irreverent when his creatures attempt to redefine him or disregard the way he wants to be worshiped. We will see today from our passage in Leviticus 10 that God takes worship very seriously and he wants us to do the same as well. Worship is delightful to both God and us, but it is also dangerous when done incorrectly.

Leviticus 10:1-11, "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. ² And fire came out from before the Lord and consumed them, and they died before the Lord. ³ 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. ⁴ 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.”⁵ So they came near and carried them in their coats out of the camp, as Moses had said. ⁶ 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. ⁷ 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. ⁸ And the Lord spoke to Aaron, saying, ⁹ 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. ¹⁰ You are to distinguish between the holy and the common, and between the unclean and the clean, ¹¹ and you are to teach the people of Israel all the statutes that the Lord has spoken to them by Moses.”

The death of Aaron’s two sons was tragic. This tragedy happens right after the happy moment of God sending forth fire to consume Aaron’s offering in Leviticus 9. The people were delighted to see God accept their high priest’s sacrifice for the atonement of their sins. The contrasting experiences of the fire of God in chapters 9 and 10 show the complex picture of the fire of God in the Old Testament. Fire from heaven occurs twelve times in the Old Testament, six are beneficial, and six are judgmental. In Leviticus 10, God disciplined Nadab and Abihu for worshipping him incorrectly. At first glance, this appears to be an overreaction from a temperamental God.

To understand God’s reaction, we need to explore the meaning of the phrase “unauthorized fire.” It is difficult to understand in great detail the specific sin these two priests committed, but we can get a general picture of their egregious and irreverent actions. We get several clues in our immediate passage and when we consider other references to this account in the book of Leviticus that help us understand the sin of Aaron’s two sons.

In our immediate passage this “unauthorized fire” is described as not being “commanded” by God, and jeopardizing God being sanctified. God had given very specific instructions on how the people of Israel were to worship him. These two priests couldn’t make the case that God hadn’t given them guidelines for worshipping him, so they had to take matters into their own hands and find ways to honor him. At this point in Leviticus, God had given clear instructions on burnt offerings, grain offerings, peace offerings, sin offerings, and guilt offerings. We know that they were to stay within the commands of God to worship him properly. To go outside of God’s commands would compromise God being sanctified. “Sanctified” means being made holy. This word is associated with three other words in verse 10: common, clean, and unclean. Holy and common are contrasting ideas. Holy means set apart and unique while

common means standard, normal, or everyday. Something common could be clean or unclean. The priests were supposed to be able to distinguish between all of these things. The practices of the priest in worship were meant to show that God was infinitely unique and set apart from everything else. He was not “common.” When Aaron's sons offered unauthorized fire they were insulting the holiness of God and making him appear common. This may mean that the incense offering they gave was a practice they mimicked from the idol worship around them at the time or from Egypt. We can not be certain if they were copying the practices of other pagan priests, but we know that what they offered was outside of God's borders and portrayed him as “common.”

Verses 8 through 11 may explain why these two priests made such a costly error. These verses record God's instructions to Aaron about priests being prohibited from drinking alcohol while performing their ministerial duties. Alcohol could have impaired their discernment and caused them to misjudge what was holy and common. This is exactly what Nadab and Abihu did. I don't believe it is a coincidence that these instructions on drunkenness are given right after their sin, especially when their sin is connected to the holiness of God. I believe it is important to note that in Exodus 19, the priests were warned that if they approached God incorrectly they could experience a fatal response from God. They knew the risk of irreverence.

We learn later in Leviticus 16 that the high priest was supposed to give an offering of incense on the day of atonement when he would enter the holy of holies. At the beginning of this chapter, the deaths of Nadab and Abihu are mentioned, which may indicate that they tried to enter the holy of holies with the wrong offering.

Aaron's silence may also indicate the severity of their sin. When Aaron heard that his sons had made up their own offering practices and therefore treated God as common, he did not protest the consequence of their immediate deaths. He may have “held his peace” because he too had committed a similar sin in his past and was disciplined for it. Aaron created a golden calf for the people of Israel while they waited for Moses to return from the top of Mount Sinai. Aaron made this calf so that the people could have a god they could put on a leash and direct where to go. They wanted a god that would follow them and not a god they had to follow. Aaron knew the seriousness of treating God as a “common” idol. He had once created an imaginary god that could be manipulated. His sons' rogue and rebellious actions may have appeared religious, but they were actually an attempt to remake God into something he was not.

After being struck down, their bodies needed to be attended to. Mishael and Elzaphan were cousins who could move the bodies without being ceremonially unclean because they were not priests. Moses told Aaron and his other two living sons not to mourn the deaths of their

brothers when he instructed them not to let their hair grow or tear their clothes. The rest of the family could mourn, but they needed to continue to perform their priestly duties. God's holiness is clearly on display in this passage, but this doesn't mean that he is heartless. The next eight verses show that God was sympathetic to Aaron's loss.

Leviticus 10:12-20, "12 Moses spoke to Aaron and to Eleazar and Ithamar, his surviving sons: Take the grain offering that is left of the Lord's food offerings, and eat it unleavened beside the altar, for it is most holy. 13 You shall eat it in a holy place, because it is your due and your sons' due, from the Lord's food offerings, for so I am commanded. 14 But the breast that is waved and the thigh that is contributed you shall eat in a clean place, you and your sons and your daughters with you, for they are given as your due and your sons' due from the sacrifices of the peace offerings of the people of Israel. 15 The thigh that is contributed and the breast that is waved they shall bring with the food offerings of the fat pieces to wave for a wave offering before the Lord, and it shall be yours and your sons' with you as a due forever, as the Lord has commanded." 16 Now Moses diligently inquired about the goat of the sin offering, and behold, it was burned up! And he was angry with Eleazar and Ithamar, the surviving sons of Aaron, saying, 17 Why have you not eaten the sin offering in the place of the sanctuary, since it is a thing most holy and has been given to you that you may bear the iniquity of the congregation, to make atonement for them before the Lord? 18 Behold, its blood was not brought into the inner part of the sanctuary. You certainly ought to have eaten it in the sanctuary, as I commanded." 19 And Aaron said to Moses, Behold, today they have offered their sin offering and their burnt offering before the Lord, and yet such things as these have happened to me! If I had eaten the sin offering today, would the Lord have approved?" 20 And when Moses heard that, he approved."

One's first reaction when reading this is "Oh no, not again." Aaron's other two sons violated the guidelines for a burnt offering that were stated in Chapter 6. The priests were guilty of burning meat that they should have eaten. The reader is left wondering if Aaron is going to be an "empty nester" in one day. Thankfully, Aaron explained his behavior and that of his two sons which was acceptable to Moses. Aaron mentions the "things" that have "happened to me," which refers to the earlier loss of his two sons. He was making the case before Moses that it would have been inappropriate for him and his sons to eat their portion of the offering since they were in a state of mourning. I believe this shows us two things: God is sympathetic and the sin of Nadab and Abihu was really serious. Aaron proved himself to be able to distinguish between holy, common, clean, and unclean, which was his job according to verse 10. It appears from the interaction Moses and Aaron had that the priests had some freedom to interpret the regulations

and how they applied to certain situations, as long as they didn't offend the holiness of God. This section of our passage balances the first half. This section shows us that God is not a nit-picking tyrant, who obliterates anyone who makes a tiny mistake. Nadab and Abihu were not guilty of bending the law or applying the heart of the law in a way that technically violated the law. They had belittled God by treating him as a common idol. They had disregarded his rules and fashioned their "own way" to God. They had arrogantly paved their path to relating to God. They placed themselves as the creator and authority in the relationship when they were meant to play the role of creature and follower.

God is not an imaginary friend. We do not create him. We do not imagine him. We do not mold him. We do not create the rules for him. We do not pave the way to him. As a follower of Christ, this ancient story may feel so distant from your everyday experience. I want to encourage you to see that the temptation Nadab and Abihu fell victim to still exists today. Let me ask you a very revealing question. Ask yourself, "As I have grown in my faith, is Jesus looking more like me or am I looking more like Jesus?" Has Jesus picked up your political principles and your social causes? Is Jesus annoyed with the same things you are annoyed with? Is Jesus disappointed and disgusted with the same things you are? I believe that much of the disunity we have seen in the American church over these last 5 years is due to the fact that our personal imaginary Jesuses look so different from each other. "My Jesus likes guns." "My Jesus hates guns." "My Jesus would wear a mask." "My Jesus would never wear a mask." "My Jesus would vote this way." "My Jesus wouldn't homeschool." "My Jesus would not trust the public schools." Our conception of Jesus may reveal more about who we are, than who he is. Jesus is holy, set apart, infinitely unique in the universe, and beyond creation. I invite you to read the gospels and pause before Jesus reacts to a situation and ask yourself the question, "What would I do?" I think you will be surprised how much distance there is between your response and the one Jesus had, at least if you are honest.

Maybe you are here and you are still exploring Christianity. Maybe you came last week and filled out our "honest questions" card. One of the questions on that card was "Is it good to create my own truth?" We will answer that question and many more in a much fuller sense in June, but I believe you can see how this passage speaks to that question. God is not a being that bends to our wills. The fundamental question we must ask is not "What is my truth?", but "What is his truth?" Thankfully, his truth is the key to human flourishing. Making God in our own image is disastrous for us. Our creator knows us and knows what is best for us. His truth is the only way for us to be saved from our brokenness. I invite you to investigate his truth, which is revealed in scripture.

Life-Level Application

Head: Read Acts 5:1-11. How is this passage similar to Leviticus 10? What was the reaction of the church to the deaths of Ananias and Sapphira? Was this reaction healthy?

Heart: Read Isaiah 57:14-21. How is God's holiness connected to prosperity and punishment in this passage? What are the areas of your life that God needs to "heal" with his holy hands?

Hand: Read Psalm 32. When you reflect on the holiness of God, how do you see yourself falling short of God's standard? What is God's reaction to the one that confesses and does not cover up their iniquities? What emotions do you feel when you meditate on the forgiveness of God?

Habit: Read Luke 23:32-33. Ask yourself, "What would I do in this situation?" Read verse 34. How different is your response from that of Jesus? What does this reveal about your heart?