THE FIRE OF BLESSING AND JUDGMENT

Leviticus 9:1-10:19

Key Verse: 9:23-24

"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.”

In the last lesson, we could think of the ordination of the priests. The garments of the priest - the tunic, the blue robe, the ephod made of gold and of blue, purple and scarlet yawn, and of finely twisted linen – were very impressive. And on the ephod were put the breast piece with precious stones on which were engraved the names of twelve tribes of Israel, and the Urim and Thummim which were related to making decisions. And on Aaron’s head was the turban with the gold plate, the sacred diadem on which was inscribed the words “Holy to the LORD.” All these clothes reveal who the LORD God is, truly glorious and beautiful, and he desired the priest to reveal God’s glory and beauty, having the dignity and honour as the priest of God. We could understand better the meaning of the words, “Clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ” (Ro 13:14). And Aaron and his sons were washed with water and consecrated with the anointing oil and the blood (30). The ordination lasted seven days. The LORD is the holy God and so delicate and considerate in deep thoughts and hope of leading the sinners to himself through the forgiveness of their sins.

In today’s passage, the ministry of the priests began. One was successful when Aaron followed God’s command given through Moses and the glory of the LORD appeared to all the people, but the other was unsuccessful and tragic when Aaron’s two sons, Nadab and Abihu, ignored God’s command and did the priestly duty in their own way, which brought their own deaths.

9:1-4 says, “On the eighth day Moses summoned Aaron and his sons and the elders of Israel. 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. Then say to Israelites: “Take a male goat for a sin offering, a calf and a lamb—both a year old and without defect—for a burnt offering, and an ox and a ram for a fellowship offering together with a grain offering mixed with oil. For today the LORD will appear to you.”’” “On the eighth day” was right after the seven days of the ordination of the priests. Why was there not even one day of rest after the ordination? We see God’s eagerness to appear to the people to fellowship with them. He could not wait for even one day. The message from God is, “Today the LORD will appear to you.” God would be so happy with his appearing to them. It was like an angel of the Lord appearing to the shepherds in the field, saying, “Today in the town of David a Saviour has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord” (Lk 2:11). While Jesus was hanging on the cross, a criminal on his own cross said, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom. Then Jesus responded, “Today, you will be with me in paradise” (Lk 23:42-43).

Then it says in verses 5-6, “They took the things Moses commanded to the front of the Tent of Meeting, and the entire assembly came near and stood before the LORD. Then Moses said, ‘This is what the LORD has commanded you to do, so that the glory of the LORD may appear to you.” The glory of the LORD is everything to sinners on the earth.

Then in verse 7, Moses said to Aaron, “Come to the altar and sacrifice your sin offering and your burnt offering and make atonement for yourself and the people.” On just the previous day, Aaron offered the sin offering for himself at the time of the ordination. The next day, he had to offer the sin offering again. It shows the vulnerability of sinners for any possible temptation. They can commit sin, even unwittingly at any moment. The priest, Aaron, was not an exception, even after the seven days of the ordination which was like a big conference. One part of the Lord’s prayer is, “lead us not into temptation.” (Mt 6:13; Lk 11:4)

Also, it is notable that the sin offering and the burnt offering of the priest, Aaron, was not only for the atonement for himself but also for the people. This was because the sin of the priest might bring guilt on the people as the LORD said in 4:3. A leader’s life of faith matters to God for his people, and so does a father’s for his family. And Moses continues to say to Aaron, “sacrifice the offering that is for the people and make atonement for them, as the LORD has commanded.”

How did Aaron respond? In verses 8-11, “So Aaron came to the altar and slaughtered the calf as a sin offering for himself. His sons brought the blood to him, and he dipped his finger into the blood and put it on the horns of the altar; the rest of the blood he poured out at the base of the altar. On the altar, he burned the fat, the kidneys and the covering of the liver from the sin offering, as the LORD commanded Moses; the flesh and the hide he burned up outside the camp.” For the offerings for the ordination Moses did all the work for the offering. Now Aaron carried out his priestly duty of making offerings for the first time. The importance of this detailed description is that Aaron offered this sin offering as the LORD commanded Moses. He also did so with the burnt offering in verses 12-14, “Then he slaughtered the burnt offering. His sons handed him the blood, and he sprinkled it against the altar on all sides. They handed him the burnt offering piece by piece, including the head, and he burned them on the altar. He washed the inner parts and the legs and burned them on top of the burnt offering on the altar.”

After making the offerings for himself, now Aaron does so for the people. In verses 15-17 it says, “Aaron then brought the offering that was for the people. He took the goat for the people’s sin offering and slaughtered it and offered it for a sin offering as he did with the first one. He brought the burnt offering and offered it in the prescribed way. He also brought the grain offering, took a handful of it and burned it on the altar in addition to the morning’s burnt offering.” Again, Aaron made the offerings in the prescribed way, which is so crucial before God.

And in verses 18-21 it says, “He slaughtered the ox and the ram as the fellowship offering for the people. His sons handed him the blood, and he sprinkled it against the altar on all sides. But the fat portions of the ox and the ram—the fat tail, the layer of fat, the kidneys and the covering of the liver—these they laid on the breasts, and then Aaron burned the fat on the altar. Aaron waved the breasts and the right thigh before the LORD as a wave offering, as Moses had commanded.” Again, it is one more time stressed that Aaron did as Moses commanded.

In verses 7-21 we see clearly these expressions, “7...as the LORD has commanded”, “10…as the LORD commanded Moses”, “16…in the prescribed way” and “21…as Moses commanded.” Moses obeyed God, and he helped Aaron to obey God and so Aaron performed his duty according to God’s command. This was a beautiful flow of obedience. We see the chain of obedience. Hebrews 5:8, 9 says, “Although he was a son, he learned obedience from what he suffered and once, made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him.” We are to know that obedience is the channel of God’s blessing.

Then blessings come to the people. After finishing these offerings 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. In this way, Aaron completed his duty at the beginning of the ministry of the priesthood. It was like their first worship done in God’s way which pleased God.

Then verse 23 says, “Moses and Aaron went into the Tent of Meeting.” This was a historical moment. In Exodus 40, Moses could not enter the Tent of Meeting, because the cloud settled on it and the glory of the LORD filled the place. Now after the offerings were given to the LORD, Moses and Aaron could enter into the Tent of Meeting, the presence of God.

When they came out, they blessed the people; and the glory of the LORD appeared to all the people.” In Exodus 32, when Aaron compromised with the people and made a golden calf, which became an idol to the people, God’s anger burned and Aaron brought God’s curse and tragedy to the people. Now, when he obeyed God, Aaron brought God’s blessing and glory upon them. The glory of the LORD appeared to all the people as he promised. It was according to God’s promise in verses 4 and 6, “Today the LORD will appear to you” and “The glory of the LORD may appear to you.” Also, in Exodus 3, when God was going to send Moses to Pharaoh, God said, “I will be with you. And this will be the sign to you that it is I who have sent you: When you have brought the people out of Egypt, you will worship God on this mountain” (Ex 3:11). Worship on Mount Sinai was God’s first intended worship . The glory of God was shown to the very eyes of his people.

What does it mean that “the glory of the LORD appeared”? “Glory” has the meaning of revealing. First of all, God revealed himself to the community of God. Unless God reveals himself, we cannot know Him. Jesus said in Matthew 11:26, “I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to little children” and he continued in verse 27, “No one know the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal him” (Lk 10:21-22). And according to Jesus’ words in John 17:3, knowing the Father, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom he sent, is eternal life. As for us, when we humble ourselves and study the word of God with the attitude of obedience, God reveals his words to us and we can come to know him and grow in knowing him.

Here, in this passage the glory of God was revealed in a visible form. Verse 24 says, “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.” The LORD God is the living God, and responsive. When the Israelites were lingering between the LORD and Baal, Elijah challenged the people, saying, “How long will you waver between two opinions? If the LORD is God, follow him; but if Baal is God, follow him” (1 King 18:21). Elijah proposed that the true God is the one who responds to the altar by fire. When the Baal priests prepared the sacrifices and called to their god Baal, there was no response at all. But when Elijah called to the LORD making all the preparations for the burnt offering, fire came down and burned everything there (1 Kings 18:38). In this way, the true God was revealed. Here what a visual demonstration of the living glorious God, too! The fire from the presence of the LORD consumed the human fire burning on the altar. All the people saw this and shouted for joy in reverent fear trembling. All these happened when they followed God’s way in obedience to his command.

Jesus said in John 4:24, “God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in spirit and in truth.” God is seeking true worshippers and eager to reveal himself to them. Suwaida has been seeking the true God, standing against her Muslim family’s background. When she studied Genesis 1, “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of God, and the Spirit of God was hovering the waters. And God said, ‘Let there be light,’ and there was light” (Ge 1:1-3), the light of God began to shine in her dark heart through his words. May God continually bless her seeking heart and completely dispel the power of darkness out of her heart through his words and the Holy Spirit. I also thank God that a young man like Choro is really seeking the true God. May God guide his life journey for the truth until he can clearly know the true God through God’s revelation! Thank God for revealing the words of Leviticus to Jemmie. May God bless her study of Leviticus to the end! We pray that each of our Sunday worship be the Spirit-filled worship in the truth of God’s word so that the glory of God be displayed all the more, though not visibly like fire, but the Spirit’s work in our heart.

In chapter 10, there is really a terrible incident. It is a contrast to chapter 9. In verses 1 and 2, we read, “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. So fire came out from the presence of the LORD and consumed them, and they died before the LORD.” This was truly an unwanted tragic event. The same fire from the presence of the LORD consumed the people, the priests, not the altar. Why? According to what is written here is because Nadab and Abihu offered unauthorized fire before the LORD, in other translations, strange fire or another fire. Leviticus 16:20 says, “He (Aaron) is to take a censer full of burning coals from the altar before the LORD…” The fire had to be taken from the altar of the LORD, but Nadab and Abihu took the fire from another place, probably they thought it would be better. They neglected God’s command and followed their own way, their own seemingly better idea to them.

Who were Nadab and Abihu before this event? In Exodus 24:1, the LORD said to Moses, “Come up to the LORD, you and Aaron, Nadab and Abihu, and seventy of the elders of Israel.” These two sons of Aaron, Nadab and Abihu, were privileged to be called to be among the seventy four chosen ones to come up the LORD. And in 24:9-11, “Moses and Aaron, Nadab and Abihu, and the seventy elders of Israel went up and saw the God of Israel. Under his feet was something like a pavement made of sapphire, clear as the sky itself. But God did not raise his hand against these leaders of the Israelites; they saw God, and they ate and drank.” What an extraordinary experience to see God and eat and drink before him! But they could not bear this special grace. Most probably out of their pride they became presumptuous to offer the unauthorized fire and make the sacrifice in their own sensational way.

In verse 3, Moses then said to Aaron, “This is what the LORD spoke of when he said: ‘Among those who approach me I will show myself holy; in the sight of all the people I will be honoured.’” God must be regarded holy and be honoured and glorified. According to these words of the LORD which Moses recalled, Nadab and Abihu did neither honour nor glorify God despite God’s rich blessings upon them. Most likely they tried to seek their own honour and glory, drawing people’s attention to them, not to the LORD.

In view of this terrible example, we learn the importance of following God’s way in personal obedience to his word as we live our Christian life. Jesus said, “If anyone comes after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me” (Lk 9:23). Each one of us should keep this word of Jesus in our hearts to the end of our lives. The cross is the symbol of Christianity and there have been many beautiful church buildings with the cross on the top of each building. However, recently we often see the church buildings with the cross cut off. It looks like a strange building. More seriously, the message without the cross of Jesus is not a Christian message. In the early Christian era, Paul faced some people who tried to pervert the gospel of Christ. He said clearly in his letter to Galatians, “If anyone is preaching to you a gospel other than what you accepted/we preached, let him be eternally condemned!” (Gal 1:9). There is no other gospel than the gospel of the cross, the gospel of Jesus’ death and resurrection. We must watch out for this in our time. We should not try to do the work of God in human ways, even with fiery zeal, but in the fire of God’s word and prayer and so in the fire of the Holy Spirit (1 Thess. 5:19), though we should our best to understand new gens, generation MZ/2030.

We also clearly see in this passage that the fire of blessing was evident and so was the fire of God’s judgment. Paul said in Romans 1:18, “The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men wo supress the truth by their wickedness.” The wrath of God was present in that Roman time, and it is so in our time. Perverse sexual orientation and all kinds of drug addiction and all kinds of other addition and the cannabis stores are a demonstration of God’s word, as God’s abandonment to let them do as they want. When they do not think it worthwhile to retain the knowledge of God, God gave them over to a depraved mind, to do what ought not to be done (1:28). Even we see that young babies are so absorbed in watching cell phones in restaurants and other public places. We know that it is so difficult to raise our children and grandchildren. We need to have the fear of God and ask for God’s mercy that our children and young people be exposed to the glory of God, not to the wrath of God.

In this passage, after losing two sons, Aaron’s grief and pain must have been so hard to bear. But Aaron remained silent, recognizing God’s righteous way of dealing with people. At this time of human sorrow and grief, Moses stood as a servant of the LORD finished this event, summoning Mishael and Elzaphan, sons of Aaron’s uncle Uzziel, to carry the dead relatives outside the camp, away from the front of the sanctuary. Moses also told Aaron and his two remaining sons Eleazar and Ithamar not to let their hair become unkept or tear their clothes, or leave the entrance of the Tent of Meeting out of their human sorrow. They should not make any room for the people to doubt God’s way of working, although it brought a great human sorrow. They had to carry out their duty because of who they are, as those on whom the LORD’s anointing is. Moses stood on the side of God to the end in obedience to him.

Now in Leviticus, the LORD said to Aaron for the first time in verses 8-11, “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. You must distinguish between the holy and the common, between the unclean and the clean, and you must teach the Israelites all the decrees the LORD has given them through Moses.” The priests should not do anything that takes away their discernment and sound judgment. Nowadays the concept of right and wrong seemed to be gone. But the priests should have this concept based on the truth of God’s word. Also, one of their important priestly duties is to teach the words of God to his people.

In verses 12-15, Moses told Aaron and his sons, Eleazar and Ithamar about their portion of food to eat from the offering. Then in verses 16-19, Moses was angry when they did not eat what they were supposed to eat. It seemed that such a thing happened unwittingly as Aaron tried to please God in their own sorrow. Then Moses understood it and it did not become an issue.

May we learn to live life according to the words of God not developing our own human ideas! May we know that the fire of blessing and the fire of judgment are real and all the more desire for the glory of God to appear to his people as we worship and serve him in the fire of God’s word and prayer and in the Holy Spirit.