

Worshipping in the Fear of God

Lev. 16:1,2 The LORD spoke to Moses after the death of the two sons of Aaron, when they drew near before the LORD and died, ² and the LORD said to Moses, “Tell Aaron your brother not to come at any time into the Holy Place inside the veil, before the mercy seat that is on the ark, so that he may not die. For I will appear in the cloud over the mercy seat.

The first place of worship that the Jewish nation knew was the tabernacle. The people, at that time, were itinerant. The tabernacle was, therefore, of necessity, transportable. A system of curtains defined both its outer boundaries and its inner rooms - of which there were two: The Holy Place and the Holy of Holies. Only Aaron was permitted to enter into the Holy of Holies – and that only once a year. On that day, The Day of Atonement, and in that place, the High Priest would offer a bloody sacrifice for the sins of the entire people.

On the occasion of this recorded incident, death had struck deeply into Israel’s priestly line. Two of the High Priest’s sons were dead and the reason for their demise was well known. They had disrespected both their God and their office by disobeying their instructions from The Lord related to acceptable service. The text also suggests that their disobedience actually carried them into The Holy of Holies. The gravity of that offense was greatly multiplied because, as our text discloses, The Lord was present there (**For I will appear in the cloud over the mercy seat**).

In the balance of our next chapter, you will note that Moses was given the task of instructing Aaron related to his priestly worship so that, by doing it according to God’s instructions, “he may not die”. So it was that Aaron received commands as to how he ought to prepare himself for his meeting with his Creator: He was told to bathe carefully. He was ordered to dress appropriately in garments reflecting both his priesthood and the loftiness of the Person who was the object of his worship. He was told to prepare his soul through the means of the sacrifice of a bull. These arrangements (the balance of our chapter), taken together, also had the effect of focusing and sobering Aaron’s mind.

There is an ancient rabbinic tradition that the High Priests of old, when they would of necessity enter the Holy of Holies on the Day of Atonement, wore a rope around one ankle. This was in recognition of the fact that, should the Lord take offense at any aspect of the High Priest’s preparation for or conduct during his ministry and worship, He might strike them dead! Should that occur and since only the High Priest could enter into that place, the other rope end terminated outside in the Holy Place. Priests, there could, by that means, remove his body.

The death of sons and brothers no doubt reinforced the fear of God among the Aaronic priesthood. It was right that it be so with them. It is also fitting for us as well. That fear in worship is rightly a composite of elements including love, terror, awe, respect, devotion, and full commitment to obey.

The people of God are a chosen race, a royal priesthood... (1 Pet. 2:9). As such, we are commanded to gather on the first day in his name to offer spiritual sacrifices. He has promised

to bless us there with His presence (Matt. 18:20). Let us, then, make ready by searching our hearts in both love and fear seeking the answer to this question: Have we prepared ourselves both inwardly and outwardly as we ought?

With hearts attuned to both the goodness and severity of God, let us then be appropriately sensitive and grateful when we are blessed to feel a warning tug on the rope.

George Moore

Elder Emeritus