

Accountability, Consequences, and God's Holiness  
A Brief Study on the Lives of Moses and the Sons of Aaron  
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## **Introduction**

Accountability is something I grew up hearing about in the Church. With mentors and prayer groups, it comes up, and sometimes specifically with an accountability partner. Consequences do not come up as much because we want to be encouraging, but it is still there as the natural balance to accountability. It has to be because God is holy. We should try to hold ourselves accountable because if we don't God will. Because He is holy and he can not deny himself.

He can be both just and merciful to us because we can have the righteousness of Jesus instead of our own. God can be merciful and gracious and we can be in the presence of God because Jesus has removed the fact of our sin. But it was not always like this. There was a time when the fact of sin in God's presence caused the immediate death of two priests of God's temple. And the consequences of disobedience caused Moses to be kept out of the land he had spent his life taking his people to live.

These two stores, of relatively unknown priests and one of the most well-known figures of the Bible, will show us how seriously God takes accountability as well as the holiness of God. Our key verse is Luke 12: 41-48

“From everyone who has been given much, much will be required, and from the one who has been entrusted with much, even more, will be asked.”

## **Nadab and Abihu**

We will start out by looking at what some versions call, “strange or unholy fire” in Leviticus chapter ten verses one through three.

1 Then Aaron's sons, Nadab and Abihu, each took his fire pan and put fire in it, set incense on it, and presented strange fire before the Lord, which he had not commanded them to do. 2 So fire went out from the presence of the Lord and consumed them so that they died before the Lord. 3 Moses then said to Aaron, “This is what the Lord spoke: ‘Among the ones close to me I will show myself holy, and in the presence of all the people I will be honored.’” ...

This a strange term in a seemingly confusing story but let's look at the meaning and context of this term and story. And why what the two priests did was important enough for God to kill them, the two eldest sons of Aaron the High Priest, the very first time they were offering sacrifices to God.

The textual notes of the New English Translation help us understand what is happening here. The Hebrew word that has been translated as ‘strange fire’ isn’t very precise. Other translations use ‘profane fire’, ‘unauthorized fire’, ‘unholy fire’, and ‘a different kind of fire’.

There were many things God’s priests had to do that they could have done wrong causing this fire they presented to be ‘unholy’. They have to light a specific kind of incense (Ex 30:9), using specific kinds of coals to light the fire (Lev 16:12), at a specific time of day (Ex 30 7-9). There were many more specifics they might not have followed.

If they had been drinking, they would have been subject to God's capital punishment. They could have been wearing the wrong robes, or facing the wrong way. If they had been ceremonially unclean for any number of reasons, the result would have been the same. But the most important thing to look at and remember here is God’s Holiness.

### **God is Holy**

God is holy, really holy! First Samuel tells us just how holy, “*There is none as holy as the Lord*” (2:2). Unger’s Bible Dictionary spells it out a bit more clearly. It defines the holiness of God to be “absolute moral perfection”. It goes on to say:

By the holiness of God, it is not implied that He is subject to some law or standard of moral excellence external to Himself, but that all moral law and perfection have the eternal and unchangeable basis in His own nature. He is the One in whom these external sanctities reside, who is Himself the root and ground of them all. (494)

God is the measure of holiness. He is so holy, nothing unholy can be in His presence for a moment. So when Nadab and Abihu presented God with unholy fire their punishment was final the instant they did something outside the laws God gave them.

Were these bad guys? Were they just in the wrong place at the wrong time? Couldn’t they have made another sacrifice to make up for it? There were, in fact, in the process of performing the ritual to remove the sins of Israel. The answer is no, and the questions themselves are ignoring the fact of what happened. As God’s priests, they had a responsibility to exemplify His holiness and His glory (Walvoord, Zuck 189).

So, God is holy and worthy of obedience. However, that is not all He wants. He wants more than just external obedience. He also wants internal faithfulness as he says through His

prophet Hosea, *“For I delight in faithfulness, not simply in sacrifice; I delight in acknowledging God, not simply in whole burnt offerings.”* (6:6).

Jesus said it when he was calling Matthew to be His disciple when talking to the Pharisees, in the book of Matthew he is asked why he is hanging out with unholy people. And Jesus says to them, *“Go and learn what this saying means: ‘I want mercy and not sacrifice.’ For I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners.”* (9:13).

These verses say God wants obedience and faithfulness. So, we have to do the right things, the whole burnt offering part, which is obedience. And do them for the right reasons when we acknowledge God, which is faithfulness. In the case of Nadab and Abihu, they were faithful but not obedient.

But that does not mean we will always want to or have the ability to obey, just as the Israelites. It is at this point that it can look like legalism. When we are doing something just to do it, for the wrong reasons. When we are doing something because someone is watching, or we want to impress someone, even ourselves.

It can be easy to look at others' obedience as legalism. What we must remember is to look inward first. Are we feeling convicted? Is the Holy Spirit trying to tell us something? And if He is, do we have the obedience to listen and do what He wants, even if we don't want to? At this point, obedience with the absence of conviction is discipline. We may not understand why we should obey, but we trust that we should.

Our actions should follow our motives and why we are doing something. But sometimes we must act, do what we know is right, and then ask God to help us with our motives. God can place someone or something in our lives to help us keep going and to continue to follow His will.

But we still have to be open to doing what we know He wants us to do, and that gets into being open to His leading. Which is what Moses had to do every day. He was leading the people of Israel, but he was also following God.

## **Moses**

Moses was an Egyptian prince born a Hebrew slave. He was the savior of his people and was accused by them of trying to kill them by bringing them into the desert. He was a prophet of God and performed miracles. The life of Moses is very unique, even among the ancient figures of Biblical history; few can claim to have known God face to face.

However, I think you would get a much different picture of Moses if we asked him. A man who was humble to a fault. He might tell us of his flight from Egypt after killing an Egyptian guard. The shame he felt. His helpless journey across the desert and the fear he felt hearing God from a burning bush. Or maybe he would tell us about his simple years as a shepherd living with his wife Zipporah and what it was like to become a father.

Any way you follow his life you will also follow the story of the people of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel. Moses was their leader, for better or worse; God had chosen him to lead His people out of Egypt. To Moses' reluctance at first and to Israelites reluctance and often grumbling.

Throughout everything, Moses "did as the LORD commanded". If I were to try and write down every time the Bible says that, it would take up most of this page. When Aaron and Miriam, tried to take over his leadership of the Israelites, in Numbers' chapter twelve, Moses took it to God.

Whenever something or someone threatened Moses, he took it to God. Over and over, he asked for God's guidance and was obedient. Everything God told him to do, he did. If he felt uncertain, or scared, he took it to God. Except for the time he didn't.

One time is all it took, one act of disobedience, or rebellion and unbelief, and now at the end of the journey Moses reacts in anger with the same disobedience as his people. The Israelites were getting thirsty and running out of water fast. So they start doing what, by now, they do really well, grumbling and complaining. And so Moses does what he is well known for, taking it to God.

Numbers 20:6-12 So Moses and Aaron went from the presence of the assembly to the entrance to the tent of meeting. They then threw themselves down with their faces to the ground, and the glory of the Lord appeared to them. Then the Lord spoke to Moses: 8 "Take the staff and assemble the community, you and Aaron your brother, and then speak to the rock before their eyes. It will pour forth its water, and you will bring water out of the rock for them, and so you will give the community and their beasts water to drink." 9 So Moses took the staff from before the Lord, just as He commanded him. 10 Then Moses and Aaron gathered the community together in front of the rock, and he said to them, "Listen, you rebels, must we bring water out of this rock for you?" 11 Then Moses raised his hand, and struck the rock twice with his staff. And water came out abundantly. So the community drank, and their beasts drank too. 12 Then the Lord spoke to Moses and Aaron, "Because you did not trust me enough to show me as holy before the Israelites, therefore you will not bring this community into the land I have given them."

I say he reacted in anger because of what he said in verse ten “you rebels”. Maybe when he went out and saw the same people standing before him, with those same disbelieving, disgruntled, and dissatisfied faces, something beneath the surface broke. He may have been tired. I would have been. He lost his patience. God did not punish His people for Moses’ sin, but Moses would still feel the consequences.

If Moses was angry he should have taken his concern to God. It would not have been the first time. Moses went to God when they were starting to complain and start to threaten revolt in Numbers sixteen. And many other times when he had troubles with his people, or when they were having other troubles.

Moses Obeyed God all his life, and then at the end, he reacted in anger and is punished by not being able to enter the land that God has promised his people. Here we see an example of how important to finish well, not just start out well.

Had the Israelites thought about their situation for a second, before they started grumbling, they might have considered a few things. First, if God wanted them to live, He would need to keep them alive. Second, if He wanted them to continue to offer sacrifices, He would also need to keep their animals alive. The Israelites did not trust God in His promise.

Moses did not trust God that speaking would be enough for his people. He lost faith and didn’t “*show God as holy*” when he had the chance that God set up for him. God wanted His people to see he was Holy. He set Moses up to be His instrument in front of everyone, and Moses failed after following the Lord for so many years.

### **Finish Well**

Moses led his people out of slavery from Egypt. Jesus led his people out of slavery from sin, Moses and Jesus were intercessors between their people and God the Father. But Jesus was obedient to His Father’s will, in all things and He never lacked faith. Nadab and Abihu were killed instantly for one act of disobedience in the presence of God. Moses was not allowed into the land that God had promised for His people, for one act of disobedience (Numbers 20:12).

In Paul’s second letter to Timothy he said, “*I have competed well; I have finished the race; I have kept the faith!*” (4:7). The author of Hebrews says we should “...*run with endurance the race set out for us...*” (12:1). How we finish the race is more important than how we started it. If

in the end, if we do not glorify God, “to show Him as holy”, then we failed our moment just like Moses.

The most important example of finishing well for the cause of Christ is Christ Himself. If, after living a perfect life without sin, never giving into temptation but then at the garden of Gethsemane broke under the pressure. If He did not do the will of His Father and give up his life on the cross for us His perfect life would have been for nothing.

### **Consequences**

We have looked at these two stories in-depth, and what the scripture says happened. Now I would like to explore why the consequences were so high and yet, still just. In addition, why God was so harsh in His punishment and so seemingly unmerciful. The reason for both is the same, and I will also share with you how I try and live my life by this reason. How we can learn the same lessons that Aaron learned through his sons and what I would say was the biggest lesson that affected Moses’ life. And why we need to live our lives by what we learn.

Luke gives us the reason for the harsh punishments of God's Prophet and Gods Priests; *“From everyone who has been given much, much will be required, and from the one who has been entrusted with much, even more will be asked.”*(12:48b) The more God gives us, the more we are responsible for. The more gifts we have, as talked about in first Corinthians chapter twelve, the more responsible we are to use our gifts.

If I have leadership, evangelism, and pastoral gifts, and do not use them than I am like the slave in Luke chapter twelve verse forty-seven that was entrusted with much and received a harsher punishment than the one that was entrusted with less. Just as it says in James chapter three verse one, teachers will be judged more strictly.

That is why Nadab and Abihu paid with their lives and Moses was not allowed in the land God promised his people. They were given much, and so much was required, they were entrusted with much, and what they had was taken away. And so I must use the gifts God has given me, in the right way, for the right reasons. Using my gifts to glorify God, and to finish the race well, because I have been given much, and so much will be required from me. \

Deuteronomy 34:10-12 No prophet ever again arose in Israel like Moses, who knew the Lord face to face. He did all the signs and wonders the Lord had sent him to do in the land of Egypt, to Pharaoh, all his servants, and the whole land, and he displayed great power and awesome might in view of all Israel.

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All biblical quotations were taken from [www.bible.org](http://www.bible.org) and are New English Translation.