

*Meaning*

A major theme of this chapter is the awesome responsibility of the priesthood, which manifests itself in two related ways. First, the priests are to follow the Lord's commands exactly and so honour him as their King. While this was true for all Israelites, it was especially true for the priests, who were the Lord's royal attendants, serving in his palace. It is bad enough for a subject to show disregard for a king by breaking his laws; it is an outright act of treason for his closest attendants to do so. This is why Nadab and Abihu suffered such a fate. Treason must be met with swift justice, so it is plain to all that the king is to be revered. Such reverence is modelled by Aaron, who understood the Lord's greatness and responded by obeying him exactly. Leaders who wish to follow Aaron's example must be sure to keep the Lord's greatness clearly before their eyes (cf. 2 Cor. 7:1).

Second, the priests are responsible for leading the Israelites spiritually, guiding them in maintaining proper covenant relationship with their covenant King by following his covenant laws (10:10–11). If the priests were to err here – either by example (see at vv. 1–2, 6–7) or by failing in their duties (see at vv. 8–11) – then all Israel would be at risk of falling away from her King. This was another reason why the punishment of Nadab and Abihu was swift and severe. Captains bear more responsibility than passengers for the ship's safety, and face stricter punishments when they fail in their duties. This is not for the sake of being hard on the captains; it is for the sake of protecting the passengers. For this reason, the New Testament affirms that those who teach God's people are held to higher account (Jas 3:1). This story serves as a strong exhortation to pastors and preachers in particular to be diligent in their duties and faithful in their lives (1 Tim. 4:12–16), crying out for help and strength to Jesus, our great High Priest, 'who has been tempted in every way, just as we are – yet he did not sin' (Heb. 4:15).