

Inauguration Day

A Study of Leviticus 9

Introduction

On April 30, 1789, George Washington stood on the balcony of Federal Hall in New York City and took the oath of office as the first President of the United States. The ceremony had been carefully planned—the Bible on which he swore, the words he repeated, the officials who witnessed. But the moment that electrified the crowd came afterward. Chancellor Robert Livingston turned to the assembled thousands and shouted, "Long live George Washington, President of the United States!" The people erupted. Church bells rang across the city. Cannons fired from the Battery. What had been preparation became reality. The Constitution had provided for a president; now they had one, standing before them in the flesh.

Leviticus 9 records Israel's inauguration day. For seven days Aaron and his sons had been confined to the tabernacle precincts, completing their ordination. The garments had been donned, the oil poured, the blood applied. But all of it was preparation. On the eighth day, Aaron finally approached the altar and offered sacrifice—first for himself, then for the people. When he finished, fire came from the presence of the Lord and consumed the offerings. The people shouted and fell on their faces. The priesthood that had been established in chapter 8 was now functioning. The sacrificial system that had been prescribed in chapters 1–7 was now operational. And God himself had set his seal of approval on the whole arrangement by appearing in glory and accepting the sacrifice with heavenly fire.

Examination

The eighth day: inauguration begins (9:1–4)

Seven days had passed. Aaron and his sons had remained at the entrance of the tent of meeting, completing their consecration, doing everything the Lord commanded through Moses. Now came the eighth day—and everything was about to change.

The number seven in Israel signified completion. God created in six days and rested on the seventh. Purification periods lasted seven days. The ordination ceremony filled seven days. But the eighth day marked something new: a fresh beginning, a transition from preparation

to performance. Aaron had been washed, clothed, anointed, and sprinkled with blood. He had waited. Now he would serve.

Moses summoned Aaron and his sons along with the elders of Israel—the representatives of the people on whose behalf the priests would minister. The instructions came quickly. Aaron was to take a bull calf for a purification offering and a ram for a burnt offering, both without blemish. The congregation was to bring a male goat for their purification offering, a calf and lamb for their burnt offering, an ox and ram for peace offerings, and a grain offering mixed with oil.

Jewish interpreters noticed something poignant: the first sacrifice Aaron would offer for himself was a calf. The last time Aaron had dealt with a calf, he fashioned it into an idol while Moses was on the mountain receiving the law (Exod. 32). Now he would slaughter one on the altar. The priest who had led Israel into sin with a golden calf would begin his ministry by sacrificing a calf to the living God. Redemption often revisits the scene of failure.

The purpose of these sacrifices was stated twice: "For today the LORD will appear to you" (9:4) and "that the glory of the LORD may appear to you" (9:6). Everything pointed toward this moment—the washing, the garments, the anointing, the seven days of waiting. The sacrifices were not merely rituals to be performed; they were preparations for an encounter with the living God.

The congregation assembles (9:5–7)

The people brought what Moses commanded and assembled before the tent of meeting. The entire congregation "drew near and stood before the LORD" (9:5). This was not passive observation; the people approached, positioned themselves, and waited expectantly. They were participants, not spectators.

Moses announced: "This is the thing that the LORD has commanded you to do, so that the glory of the LORD may appear to you" (9:6). The structure links obedience to revelation. Do this, and the glory will appear. The glory was conditional—not on human merit, but on following the prescribed pattern. God had established the means by which he would manifest himself, and the people could not invent their own approach and expect the same result.

Then Moses turned to Aaron with specific instructions: "Come to the altar and sacrifice your purification offering and your burnt offering, and make atonement for yourself and for the people" (9:7). For seven days Moses had officiated, offering sacrifices on Aaron's

behalf. Now the roles shifted. Aaron would approach the altar himself. The transfer of priestly authority was underway.

The sequence was deliberate: first for Aaron, then for the people. The priest could not make atonement for others until atonement had been made for himself. This principle governed Israel's worship for generations. On the Day of Atonement, the high priest always sacrificed for his own sins before addressing the sins of the nation (Lev. 16:6, 11). A contaminated priest could not purify others. The mediator needed mediation.

Aaron's offerings for himself (9:8–14)

Aaron approached the altar and slaughtered the calf—his purification offering. His sons assisted, bringing him the blood. He dipped his finger in it and applied it to the horns of the altar, then poured out the rest at the altar's base. The fat, kidneys, and liver covering were burned on the altar; the flesh and hide were taken outside the camp and burned there.

The procedure followed the instructions of Leviticus 4, with one notable variation. Normally when the high priest offered a purification offering for himself, the blood was brought inside the tent of meeting and applied to the altar of incense (4:5–7). Here the blood was applied only to the outer altar of burnt offering. The reason is logical: Aaron had not yet entered the tent of meeting. The incense altar inside did not yet require purification from Aaron's ministry because that ministry had not yet begun. The outer altar, where all subsequent sacrifices would be offered, needed to be prepared first.

After the purification offering came the burnt offering. Aaron slaughtered the ram, and his sons handed him the blood. He splashed it against the sides of the altar, then received the animal piece by piece—the head, the sections, the washed entrails and legs—and burned everything on the altar. The burnt offering expressed total consecration. Nothing was reserved; the whole animal ascended to God. Having dealt with sin through the purification offering, Aaron now presented himself wholly to the Lord through the burnt offering. The sequence mirrored the logic of salvation: forgiveness precedes dedication.

The people's offerings (9:15–21)

With his own sacrifices complete, Aaron turned to the congregation's offerings. The order followed the same pattern. The purification offering came first—a goat slaughtered and presented as Aaron had done with the calf. Then the burnt offering—a calf and lamb—offered according to established procedure. Then the grain offering, from which Aaron took a handful and burned it on the altar.

Finally came the peace offerings—an ox and a ram, the most elaborate sacrifice of the day. Peace offerings were celebratory. Unlike the purification offering, which addressed sin, and

the burnt offering, which expressed total dedication, the peace offering created fellowship. Part was burned for God, part was given to the priests, and the remainder was eaten by the worshipers themselves in a communal meal. On this inaugural day, peace offerings signaled that the goal of the entire system was not merely atonement but communion. God and his people would share a table.

Aaron's sons brought him the blood, and he splashed it against the altar. The fat portions—the fat tail, the covering over the entrails, the kidneys, the liver covering—were placed on the breasts and burned. Then Aaron elevated the breasts and right thigh before the Lord as a wave offering, a gesture of giving and receiving that acknowledged God as the source of every good gift.

With the exception of the guilt offering—reserved for specific trespasses requiring restitution—every major category of sacrifice was represented. Aaron offered purification offerings, burnt offerings, grain offerings, and peace offerings. The inaugural service demonstrated the full range of Israel's worship. From confession of sin to total dedication to shared fellowship, the priests showed the congregation how to approach their God.

The blessing and the glory (9:22–24)

When the sacrifices were complete, Aaron lifted his hands toward the people and blessed them. The text does not record his words, but Jewish tradition associated this moment with the priestly benediction of Numbers 6:24–26: "The LORD bless you and keep you; the LORD make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you; the LORD lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace." The act itself was distinctly priestly. Aaron stood as mediator, invoking God's favor upon the people he served. The sacrifices had dealt with sin and expressed dedication; now the priest pronounced the result—blessing.

Having blessed the people, Aaron stepped down from the altar. The Hebrew verb suggests descending from an elevated platform, indicating that the altar was raised and accessed by a ramp. Moses and Aaron then entered the tent of meeting together. Perhaps Moses was formally transferring sanctuary responsibilities to Aaron, showing him the interior furnishings. Perhaps they went to pray, interceding that God would fulfill his promise to appear. When they emerged, they blessed the people again—prophet and priest united in pronouncing divine favor.

And then it happened. The glory of the Lord appeared to all the people. Fire came out from before the Lord and consumed the burnt offering and the fat portions still on the altar. God himself completed the sacrifice. The fire was not ordinary flame; it issued from the divine presence, probably from the pillar of cloud and fire that had accompanied Israel since

Egypt. The same glory that had filled the tabernacle at its completion (Exod. 40:34) now erupted in visible, consuming power.

On three other occasions in Scripture, God sent fire to consume a sacrifice: when the angel of the Lord appeared to Manoah (Judg. 13:19–20); when Elijah confronted the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel (1 Kings 18:38); and when Solomon dedicated the temple (2 Chron. 7:1). Each instance marked divine authentication, God publicly endorsing what had been offered. Here the fire declared that the sacrificial system was accepted, the priesthood authorized, and the way of approach now open.

The people's response was immediate and twofold. They shouted—a loud, joyful cry of the sort that accompanied Israel's great moments of deliverance. And they fell on their faces—the posture of utter submission, of creatures overwhelmed by the presence of their Creator. Joy and reverence combined. The fire that brought blessing could bring destruction; the holiness that invited worship demanded humility. Israel had seen the glory of the Lord.

This was the goal of everything that preceded. The seven days of ordination, the careful vesting, the multiple sacrifices, the precise obedience—all of it aimed at this: God appearing among his people. Without his presence, the tabernacle was an empty tent, the priesthood a meaningless office, the sacrifices wasted meat. But when the glory appeared and the fire fell, everything found its purpose. Heaven had touched earth. The holy God had made himself known.

Application

1. The goal of worship is encounter, not performance

The elaborate preparations of Leviticus 8–9 had a single aim: "that the glory of the LORD may appear to you" (9:6). The washing, the garments, the sacrifices, the seven days of waiting—none of it was an end in itself. Everything pointed toward the moment when God would manifest his presence. When the fire fell and the glory appeared, the worship found its purpose. Christians can fill services with singing, praying, preaching, and giving yet still miss the point if we forget what we are actually doing. We gather to meet God, not merely to complete a checklist of religious duties. The danger of familiarity is that we go through the motions without expectation. Israel stood waiting, watching for the glory to appear. We would do well to recover that posture: coming to worship as people who expect to encounter the living God.

2. Those who lead in worship must first be led

Aaron could not make atonement for the people until atonement had been made for himself. The sequence was inviolable: priest first, then congregation. Moses told him plainly, "Make atonement for yourself and for the people" (9:7)—in that order. This principle challenges anyone who serves in spiritual leadership. Teachers, preachers, elders, and ministers cannot give what they have not received. The temptation is to prepare lessons without being shaped by them, to proclaim truths we have not absorbed, to lead others into God's presence while neglecting our own approach. Aaron's calf was slaughtered before the congregation's goat. Leaders who skip the personal work of confession and communion with God will eventually find their public ministry hollow. We must be ministered to before we can minister.

3. Obedience is the pathway to God's presence

Twice Moses emphasized that following God's commands would result in the glory appearing (9:4, 6). The relationship was not arbitrary; it was revelatory. God had established the means by which he would manifest himself, and Israel could not substitute their own preferences and expect the same result. Jesus echoed this principle: "If anyone loves me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him" (John 14:23). God's presence is not conjured by emotional intensity or liturgical innovation; it is granted to those who walk in the way he has prescribed. The fire fell because Moses and Aaron did exactly what God commanded. Obedience is not the enemy of intimacy with God; it is the road that leads there.

4. True worship produces both joy and reverence

When the fire fell, the people responded in two ways: they shouted aloud, and they fell on their faces (9:24). Joy and fear were not opposites to be balanced but partners in a single response. The God who had come near was worthy of celebration; the God who had come near was terrifyingly holy. Modern worship sometimes separates these instincts, producing either exuberant services that lack gravity or solemn gatherings that lack gladness. Israel knew better. The same fire that consumed the sacrifice could consume the careless—as Nadab and Abihu would soon discover (Lev. 10:1–2). Authentic encounter with the living God produces this double response: overwhelming gratitude that he has drawn near, and humbling awareness that we stand before the Holy One.

Conclusion

The eighth day arrived, and Aaron stepped forward. After seven days of preparation—washing, vesting, anointing, waiting—he finally did what he had been ordained to do. He slaughtered the calf, splashed the blood, burned the fat, and blessed the people. Then God responded. Fire from heaven consumed the sacrifice, and the glory of the Lord appeared to all. This was the moment everything had been building toward. The way between a holy God and a sinful people stood open. Israel responded the only way one can respond to such a God: they shouted for joy and fell on their faces. The fire has fallen. The way is open. Come and worship.