

The Old Hickory Bulletin

Old Hickory Church of Christ

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Nadab and Abihu

And Nadab and Abihu, the sons of Aaron, took either of them his censer, and put fire therein, and put incense thereon, and offered strange fire before the Lord, which he commanded them not. And there went out fire from the Lord, and devoured them, and they died before the Lord (Lev. 10:1-2).

The Historical Context of Nadab and Abihu's Death

After the children of Israel left Egypt by a miraculous deliverance, they journeyed to Mt. Sinai where they stayed for one and one-half years. During this time, they were given the Law of Moses which included detailed instructions for the erection of the Tabernacle and the installation of the priesthood. After the items for the Tabernacle were constructed, soon it was assembled. The clothing for the priests was prepared and finally the day to consecrate the priests arrived.

Leviticus 8 details the consecration of the priests -- Aaron and his four sons (Nadab, Abihu, Eleazar, and Ithamar). The congregation was gathered, the priests were washed and clothed with their ceremonial clothing. Then they were anointed to serve. Sacrifices were offered for Aaron and his sons. Aaron and his sons were instructed to abide at the door of the Tabernacle for seven days.

On the eighth day, Aaron and his sons officially entered the office as priests (Lev. 9). The congregation assembled and the sacrifices commanded by God were offered. Aaron offered a sin offering for himself and a burnt offering was presented. He made atonement for himself and for the people. After Aaron and his sons completed the offering, the text records:

And Moses and Aaron went into the tabernacle of the congregation, and came out, and blessed the people: and the glory of the Lord appeared unto all the people. And there came a fire out from before the Lord, and consumed upon the altar the burnt offering and

the fat: which when all the people saw, they shouted, and fell on their faces (Lev. 9:23-24).

Witnessing the glory of the Lord and the miraculous fire, Nadab and Abihu took their censers and put fire therein, and offered strange fire before the Lord, which he did not command. As a judgment from God, fire came out and destroyed them before the Lord.

Of What Did the Sin Consist?

There is some discussion with regard to the nature of Nadab and Abihu's offense. Here are several ideas which have been expressed:

The sin consisted in bringing fire from some source other than the burnt offering altar. The Law specified that fire for the incense was to be taken from the burnt offering altar. Leviticus 16:12 commanded that fire from the burnt offering be used for incense on the Day of Atonement. When Moses stayed the plague that broke out at the rebellion of Korah, Dathan and Abiram, he used fire from the burnt offering altar to burn incense (Num. 16:46). The fire from the burnt offering altar was miraculously kindled (Lev. 9:24) and was to be kept burning (Cyclopedia of Biblical, Theological and Ecclesiastical Literature VI:821). Nadab and Abihu sinned in offering incense with unauthorized fire.

Another idea is that the sin consisted in offering the incense at the wrong time of the day -- between the morning and evening offerings (Keil and Delitzsch). Later texts do not affirm that the sin consisted in offering incense at the wrong time of day.

Another idea is that the sin consisted in intruding into the Holy of Holies. The text mentions that they offered "strange fire before the Lord." The High Priest alone was allowed to enter the Holy of Holies and that only on the Day of Atonement. However, the phrase "before the Lord" can be used of the Tabernacle generally or entering into the Holy of Holies. Based solely on this phrase, there is insufficient evidence to conclude that Nadab and Abihu entered the Holy of Holies. Later texts do not charge them with this sin.

Some have suggested that Nadab and Abihu were drunk. The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia says that this is an erroneous conclusion (IV:2108; cf. also Keil and Delitzsch 354). J.A. Selbie wrote in Dictionary of the Bible (James Hastings, ed.), "There is not the slightest warrant for the idea. . . that the prohibition (v. 8f) against the use of wine or strong drink by priests on duty [Leviticus 10:8-11] implies that Nadab and Abihu were intoxicated when they committed their fatal offence" (III:471). Later texts emphasize that Nadab and Abihu sinned in offering "strange fire," and not once is there any evidence that they were guilty of drunkenness (cf. Num. 3:2-4; 26:60-61). The effort to find Nadab

and Abihu guilty of drunkenness in connection with their worship stems from an unwillingness to believe that God would punish Nadab and Abihu with death for the relatively small offense of taking fire from an unauthorized source!

The first explanation of the sin given above properly emphasizes that the sin was in offering "strange fire." The phrase "strange fire" (esh zarah) has been defined as follows:

- "strange to the law" as also appears in the phrase "strange incense" in Exod. 30:9 (Brown, Driver, and Briggs, Lexicon 266).
- "opp. to true, right, lawful, strange, unlawful. . .strange fire i.e. unlawful, profane, opp. to the sacred fire, Lev. 10:" (Gesenius, Lexicon 276).
- "strange to the requirements of the law" (Dictionary of the Bible III:471).
- "unauthorized by the Law" (ISBE IV:2108).

What Nadab and Abihu offered was unauthorized worship, an unlawful act.

On that important occasion of the entrance of Aaron and his sons into the service of the priesthood, the glory of the Lord appeared to the people and a fire came out from before the Lord that consumed the burnt offering. In their exuberance, Nadab and Abihu presumptuously offered incense to the Lord, using strange fire which the Lord had not commanded. Here are some descriptions of their sin:

They chose their own method of returning thanks and giving praise to God, a method unsanctioned by God's command, unauthorized by their official superiors (F. Meyrick, The Pulpit Commentary 2:150).

Their crime was not in doing what was forbidden, but in doing what was not enjoined. Will-worship is offensive to God. No body of uninspired men has any business to "decree rites and ceremonies" (J.A. McDonald, The Pulpit Commentary 2:157).

The essence of their sin was this, that it was will-worship; worship in which they consulted not the revealed will of God regarding the way in which He would be served, but their own fancies and inclinations. The directions for worship had been, as we have seen, exceedingly full and observed, "Doubtless it seemed to Nadab and Abihu a matter of no consequence at all that they should take fire from one altar rather than from another. To us it may seem a comparatively small thing, when viewed in connection with the terrible

doom that immediately ensued. Obviously, however, it was a great thing in the sight of God" (The Pulpit Commentary 158).

God wishes to be worshipped as He wills, not as we will.

The modern concept about worship, that God will accept anything in worship so long as the person is sincere who offers it, is false. God will not accept any and every kind of worship (if he would, idolatry would be just as acceptable as any other worship). We can only know the kind of worship which pleases God by the revelation of his mind to us in the Bible. When men invent their own worship, they are guilty of the sin of Nadab and Abihu.

There are many things which have been introduced into Christian worship which stand on the same footing as the "strange fire" offered by Nadab and Abihu -- they are things which God has not commanded. That is true with: mechanical instruments of music in worship, choirs, solos, and quartets, contributions taken at times other than the first day of the week, burning incense and candles, holy days such as Christmas and Easter, a separate priesthood, observing the Lord's supper on some day other than the first day of the week and with some frequency other than weekly, etc. We must be careful not to allow ourselves to think of these sinful perversions of worship as small and insignificant. Otherwise the lessons drawn from the death of Nadab and Abihu will have been of no benefit to us.

The Punishment

God's punishment of Nadab and Abihu was immediate. He destroyed them with fire. Why did this occur? God did not immediately strike dead every other violator of his will for worship. The deaths of Nadab and Abihu correspond very closely with the deaths of Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5), who were smitten because they lied to God. Not every liar has been punished with the same fate. Both cases occurred very soon after the establishment of God's worship (the tabernacle and the church). In both cases, a public display was made to teach men not to depart from God's word. By so graphically demonstrating the seriousness of departing from the Lord's commandment, the Lord emphasized the necessity of respect for His law and saved from eternal damnation many men who might not otherwise have abided within the commandments.

Conclusion

The lessons drawn from the sin of Nadab and Abihu should be taught to our children and our children's children. Otherwise, the generations which follow will stray into unrevealed, unauthorized, counterfeit worship.

- Mike Willis, via Guardian of Truth, 02/04/1993, [Edited for space]

Americans, God, and Truth

National & International Religion Report (11/28/94 and 3/18/96) gave the findings of some Barna Research Group surveys dealing with Americans' religious beliefs. The studies reported that some 96% of American adults believe in God. (Before you get too excited about that, you should know that 30% of those people "embrace an unorthodox definition of God, such as a state of higher consciousness.") But what caught my attention was another finding: while the majority of Americans claim to believe in God, 71% say there is no such thing as absolute truth – including about half of those who identify themselves as Christians.

That's right: Almost everyone in our country professes a belief in God, but barely a fourth believe in a personal God who holds men accountable to a definite standard of right and wrong. And this view is shared by a lot of folks claiming to be disciples of Jesus – the one who said, "I am the way, the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father except through me" (John 14:6).

With that sort of thought prevailing, it's no wonder our friends and neighbors are adrift in moral uncertainty. They need the anchor of steadfast hope in Jesus Christ (Hebrews 6:19). Brothers and sisters, we have our work cut out for us. Let's get to it.

- Jeff Himmel

- > "God doesn't call the qualified, He qualifies the called!"

- > "A lot of kneeling will keep you in good standing!"

- > "He who is good at making excuses, is seldom good for anything else!"

- > "Don't put a question mark where God put a period!"

> "Having truth decay? Brush up on your Bible!"

THIS WEEK'S LESSONS: Sunday morning: "*Not a God of Confusion!*" (Text: 1 Cor. 14:33); Sunday evening: "*The Most Universal Desire!*" (John 15:11).