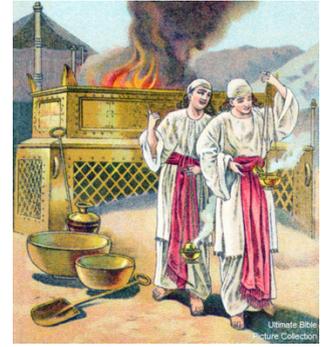


## THE SIN OF NADAB AND ABIHU

### Introduction

1. The Old Testament is of great value to the Christian: Paul says, “For whatsoever things were written aforetime were written for our learning, that we through patience and comfort of the scriptures might have hope” (**Romans 15:4**), and, “Now all these things happened unto them for ensamples: and they are written for our admonition, upon whom the ends of the world are come” (**1 Corinthians 10:11**).
2. The book of Leviticus is considered dry and boring by some, but, as Paul says, “All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness” (**2 Timothy 3:16**).
  - a. Moses wrote Leviticus in the Hebrew language. The Jews called the Book of Leviticus “wayyiqra”. It is composed of two words, “way”, meaning “and” and “yiqra” meaning “he called” – thus together: “And He called”. These are the first words in the book of Leviticus. When the Old Testament was translated into Greek the book was given the new title “Leviticus”, which means “about the Levites”.
  - b. While it is primarily a handbook for priests under the Law of Moses, reading and studying it helps us to better understand the book of Hebrews.
  - c. We can divide the Book of Leviticus into eight sections:
    - 1) Rules regarding sacrifices (**Leviticus 1:1-7:38**).
    - 2) Rules regarding the ordination of priests (**Leviticus 8:1-10:20**).
    - 3) Rules regarding the clean and the unclean (**Leviticus 11:1-15:33**).
    - 4) The Day of Atonement (**Leviticus 16:1-16:34**).
    - 5) Rules about religion (**Leviticus 17:1-22:33**).
    - 6) Holy days, weeks and years (**Leviticus 23:1-25:55**).
    - 7) Blessings and punishments (**Leviticus 26:1-26:46**).
    - 8) Rules about promises and offerings (**Leviticus 27:1-27:34**).
3. Though primarily a book outlining priestly rituals, in the second section of the book an incident is there recorded involving two sons of Aaron: Nadab and Abihu. Their sin and punishment served as a warning and deterrent to other priests, but there are valuable lessons for us, too.



Text: Leviticus 9:22-10:7

Outline:

#### **1. The Glory Of God Appears To The People (9:22-24).**

Having completed offering the sacrifices (mentioned in the previous verses), Aaron blessed the people and then came down. Moses and Aaron then enter the Tent of Meeting, and when they came out they united in blessing the people. It was then that a visible sign of God’s glory appeared to all the people and a fire came out from the Lord and consumed the burnt offering and the fat on the altar. The people responded by shouting and worshipping the Lord.

#### **2. The Death Of Nadab And Abihu (10:1-2).**

This incident likely took place immediately after the glory of God had appeared to the people. Nadab and Abihu sought to burn incense before the Lord, but they “offered strange fire before the Lord”. This may mean that it was fire taken from one of the fires which had been made for boiling the sacrificial flesh instead fire taken from the altar of burnt offering, which they might have feared to approach after the miracle that had occurred.

### 3. Moses' Explanation And Instructions (10:3-7).

The Lord had said, "I will be sanctified in them that come nigh Me, and before all the people I will be glorified"<sup>1</sup> and it was because of the priests' disobedience that they perished. Moses then has the bodies of the dead priests taken out of the camp. Those in office are forbidden to show any signs of mourning or to leave their duties at this time.

#### Observations:

1. It is the business of those in positions of authority and leadership to know how they ought to conduct themselves. Nadab and Abihu certainly knew what was expected of them regarding their duties...

The high priest was the supreme religious leader of the Israelites. The office of the high priest was hereditary and was traced from Aaron, the brother of Moses, of the Levite tribe (**Exodus 28:1; Numbers 18:7**). The high priest had to be "whole" physically (without any physical defects) and holy in his conduct (**Leviticus 21:6-8**).

Because the high priest held the leadership position, one of his roles was overseeing the responsibilities of all the subordinate priests (**2 Chronicles 19:11**). Though the high priest could participate in ordinary priestly ministries, only certain functions were given to him. Only the high priest could wear the Urim and the Thummin (engraved dice-like stones used to determine truth or falsity). For this reason, the Hebrew people would go to the high priest in order to know the will of God (**Numbers 27:21**).

The high priest had to offer a sin offering not only for the sins of the whole congregation, but also for himself (**Leviticus 4:3-21**). When a high priest died, all those confined to the cities of refuge for accidentally causing the death of another person were granted freedom (**Numbers 35:28**).

The most important duty of the high priest was to conduct the service on the Day of Atonement, the tenth day of the seventh month of every year. Only he was allowed to enter the Most Holy Place behind the veil to stand before God. Having made a sacrifice for himself and for the people, he then brought the blood into the Holy of Holies and sprinkled it on the mercy seat, God's "throne" (**Leviticus 16:14-15**). He did this to make atonement for himself and the people for all their sins committed during the year just ended (**Exodus 30:10**).

... and the manner in which they were to approach God.

"And let the priests also, which come near to Yahweh, sanctify themselves, lest the Lord break forth upon them" (**Exodus 19:22**).

"And thou shalt put them upon Aaron thy brother, and his sons with him; and shalt anoint them, and consecrate them, and sanctify them, that they may minister unto Me in the priest's office" (**Exodus 28:41**).

"And this is the thing that thou shalt do unto them to hallow them, to minister unto Me in the priest's office: take one young bullock, and two rams without blemish" (**Exodus 29:1**).

"And I will sanctify the tabernacle of the congregation, and the altar: I will sanctify also both Aaron and his sons, to minister to me in the priest's office" (**Exodus 29:44**).

2. After studying the text and consulting various commentators, it is still not clear to me exactly what is meant by "strange fire". So rather than speculate on what is unclear, let us focus on what is clear: it was something that "He commanded them not". As we have seen, Nadab and Abihu were aware of their responsibilities regarding their duties as priests and the proper manner in approaching God, so why did they transgress the commandment? Whatever the reason, we must love the Lord with all our hearts, and that means walking in obedience to His commandments (**Deuteronomy 6:5; cp. John 14:15, 23**). Here are a few suggestions I found among the commentators as to what led to the priests' disobedience:

a. Pride. They were not instructed by Moses to offer incense but took it upon themselves to do so.

b. Drunkenness. Immediately after their death God says to Aaron, "Do not drink wine nor strong drink, thou, nor thy sons with thee, when ye go into the tabernacle of the congregation, lest ye die" (**Leviticus 10:9**). So some say that the priests had been drinking.

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<sup>1</sup> "The words used by Moses on this occasion are not found elsewhere in the Pentateuch. But the sense is implied in such passages as Exodus 19:22; 28:41; 29:1, 44" (Albert Barnes).

- c. A Bad Attitude. Some say the fire to put in the census was to be taken from a particular place but they got it from another place, thinking, “What difference does it make from where the fire comes as long as we offer the incense?!”
- 3. It was because Nadab and Abihu violated God’s commandment that they perished. Moses then reminded them what God had said: “I will be sanctified in them that come nigh Me, and before all the people I will be glorified” (Leviticus 10:3). Opinions differ over what this means. Some say it denotes the priests’ responsibility to sanctify God, to demean themselves with such care, and reverence, and watchfulness, as became the holiness of the God whom they served, and others say, it denotes God’s purpose to sanctify Himself; to manifest Himself to be a holy and righteous God by His severe and impartial punishment of all transgressors. Another example would be when Uzza touched the ark of God (1 Chronicles 13:5-10). Whatever the case, we can expect to be punished for our transgressions.
- 4. Remember, Nadab and Abihu were the sons of Aaron. Moses had instructed Aaron and his two remaining sons not to grieve for them and abstain from a display of all the conventional signs of mourning. By not grieving, they acknowledged the justice of God’s punishment. Such a control of their emotions would be the proof of their submission to the Divine chastisement (cp. 1 Chronicles 13:10-11).

**Applications:**

- 1. We all have a responsibility to know how we ought to conduct ourselves in God’s presence (in the assembly), but especially those in positions of authority and leadership (1 Timothy 3:1-13, 14-15). So, whether it is presiding over the Lord’s Supper, leading in prayer, reading scripture, or presenting a lesson, let us be sure to do so in the knowledge we are serving a holy God, and in a manner that is pleasing in His sight. This must not be based on what we think or assume, but on what saith the scripture.
- 2. Nadab and Abihu offered strange (KJV, NASB) or unauthorized (ESV, NIV) fire which God had not commanded.

Make sure you know how you ought to conduct yourself in the house of God.

- a. God has always required obedience to His commandments (Deuteronomy 13:4; Luke 6:46), and keeping them is the proof of our love (John 14:15, 21; 1 John 2:5; 5:3). Also, Paul said, “Circumcision is nothing, and uncircumcision is nothing, but the keeping of the commandments of God” (1 Corinthians 7:19). The onus is on each one of us to find out what God commands or to put it another way, “... understand what the will of the Lord is” (Ephesians 5:17).

Keep His commandments  
Do not add or take away from His words  
Do not do what He has not commanded

- b. In keeping the commandments of God, we must be careful not add or take away from them (Deuteronomy 12:32; Proverbs 30:6; Revelation 22:18-19).

- c. It was said that Nadab and Abihu offered strange fire “which He had not commanded them” (Leviticus 10:1). Can we do that which the Lord has not commanded? It is seems obvious that we cannot, and yet many are in the habit of doing just that! So, in regards to worship, what things has the Lord not commanded? The list is endless, but here are a few things:

- 1) The Lord has commanded us to partake of the Lord’s Supper on the first day of the week (Acts 20:7), but some meet on other days to do so.
- 2) The Lord has commanded the whole congregation to sing (Ephesians 5:19; Colossians 3:16), but some have a choir that sing to the congregation.

“And Adam knew Eve his wife; and she conceived, and bare Cain, and said, I have gotten a man from the Lord. And she again bare his brother Abel. And Abel was a keeper of sheep, but Cain was a tiller of the ground. And in process of time it came to pass, that Cain brought of the fruit of the ground an offering unto Yahweh. And Abel, he also brought of the firstlings of his flock and of the fat thereof. And Yahweh had respect unto Abel and to his offering: but unto Cain and to his offering He had not respect. And Cain was very wroth, and his countenance fell. And Yahweh said unto Cain, Why art thou wroth? And why is thy countenance fallen? If thou doest well, shalt thou not be accepted? And if thou doest not well, sin lieth at the door. And unto thee shall be his desire, and thou shalt rule over him” (Genesis 4:1-7).

3) The Lord has commanded us to take up a collection on the first day of the week (**1 Corinthians 16:2**), but some congregations take up a collection on other days besides.

In all these things they are doing that which the Lord has not commanded. Paul said, “And whatsoever ye do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God and the Father by him” (**Colossians 3:17**). The point is this: one cannot justify a practice by saying, “Well, God doesn’t say we can’t do it!” We must search the scriptures to find out what God has said to do and do it, not to find out what He hasn’t said to do and do it. Silence is not permissive, it is prohibitive.

3. It is possible to be doing all the right things – attending service, partaking of the Lord’s Supper, giving generously, praying, singing, preaching and teaching, and yet still our worship be detestable to the Lord! This is the case when we are living sinful lifestyles (**Isaiah 1:10-13; Jeremiah 6:20; Amos 5:21-24**). It is essential, then to ensure that our minds and conduct are pure and that we are walking in righteousness in order for our worship to be acceptable to God.

“I hate, I despise your feast days, and I will not smell in your solemn assemblies. Though ye offer Me burnt offerings and your meat offerings, I will not accept them: neither will I regard the peace offerings of your fat beasts. Take thou away from Me the noise of thy songs; for I will not hear the melody of thy viols. But let judgment run down as waters, and righteousness as a mighty stream” (**Amos 5:21-24**).

4. Moses instructed Aaron and his sons not to grieve, but to continue in their duties (**Leviticus 10:6-7; cp. Ezekiel 24:16-17**). Does this seem like a harsh and unreasonable command? After all, we cannot bring such strong emotions under control, can we? This is how we as human beings may see things, but God is the one that created us (**Genesis 1:26-27**); He created our inmost being and knit us together in our mother's womb (**Psalms 139:13**), and He knows that we are dust (**Psalms 103:4**) and flesh (**Psalms 78:39**). “This teaches us that even natural human emotions are under our own control, and God requires us to recognize the times that He would have us weep and rejoice (**Romans 12:15; 1 Corinthians 13:6; Philippians 1:18; 2:17-18; 1 Thessalonians 4:13**), and respond to them according to His commands, not according to our own wishes” (Evan and Marie Blckmore, Truth Commentaries, Leviticus).

When Uzza was killed for touching the ark of God, how did David react (**1 Chronicles 13:9-12**)? How did the apostles react to the deaths of Ananias and Sapphira (**Acts 5:1-12**)?

a. If we are able to control such strong emotions at the death of loved ones, then we are surely able to control other emotions, such as worry (**Philippians 4:6-7**), fear (**Joshua 1:9; Matthew 10:28**), and anger (**Ephesians 4:26-27**).

“But seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you” (**Matthew 6:33**).

b. We note that Aaron and his sons, despite their loss, were to continue in their duties. This reminds us that our service to God takes priority (**Matthew 10:34-37; Luke 9:59-62; 14:25-33**). So let us be sure that we do not let anything come between us and our service and faithfulness to God.