

ELEVENTH MESSAGE:  
THE SIN OF NADAB AND ABIHU PUNISHED WITH DEATH  
Leviticus 10:1-7

Introduction

Right in the midst of the joyous and moving experience that came when the priests officiated over their first fire-offerings, tragedy struck. The tragedy came because two of the priests, seemingly overenthusiastic over their new authority, misused that authority and offered an unauthorized offering. The two priests were Nadab and Abihu, the two oldest sons of Aaron. Their unauthorized offering could not be ignored, especially at the institution of the system of worship they were to supervise. Nadab and Abihu were struck dead for their offense. The punishment did not come without warning, because Moses on orders from Jehovah had told Aaron and his sons, "You must remain at the entrance to The Tent of Meeting day and night [for] seven days, and you shall watch the watch of Jehovah; and you will not die because thus I have been commanded" (Lev. 8:34). Aaron and his sons should have drawn two conclusions from those words: (1) The command did not originate with Moses, but came from God. (2) Any departure from God's commands would result in death. Obviously, Nadab and Abihu were not listening carefully and proceeded to act according to their own ideas instead of God's. In the very beginning of the service of the priests, the principle needed to be established that such actions could not be tolerated. Otherwise, all of the carefully constructed rituals of Israel that Jehovah had designed to teach divine truths would be corrupted and their meaning destroyed. Therefore, Jehovah's response was sudden and drastic. Nadab and Abihu died.

The death of the two oldest sons in the priestly family severely tested their father and brothers. They passed that test, in that they did not rebel against God's punishment, as severe as it was. They remained loyal to their responsibilities, even in the midst of their sorrow. Thus the false priests were eliminated, and the true priests were tested and strengthened at the very outset of their priestly careers.

It might be questioned as to whether this passage should be called a message from God. The answer is found in that the central thought in the passage is the lesson Jehovah taught by the death of Nadab and Abihu. By fire from The Tabernacle, Jehovah spoke as surely and plainly as He ever spoke by words. The point of the whole experience was to teach that the offerings of Jehovah had to be kept inviolate and that those who would not keep them in their purity would suffer the stark consequences.

This message may be outlined as follows:

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Interpretation

## CHAPTER 10

## a. The sin of Nadab and Abihu (10:1)

**Verse 1. Then Nadab and Abihu, sons of Aaron, each took his censer and put in it fire and laid on it incense and offered strange fire before Jehovah, which He had not commanded them.**

Then Nadab and Abihu, sons of Aaron, each took his censer and put in it fire and laid on it incense. Nadab and Abihu were the two older sons of Aaron (Ex. 6:23). They had been mentioned by name three other times previously (Ex. 24:1,9; 28:1). They had surely been fully informed of all of Jehovah's instructions concerning the fire-offerings, and they had heard the repeated emphasis that the offerings were to be performed exactly as Jehovah had commanded. They had also heard the stern warning that departing from Jehovah's instructions would result in death (see comments on Lev. 8:35 in MESSAGE 10; see also Ex. 19:22). Yet, none of those instructions seem to have impressed them. Somehow, they still did not understand the seriousness of their responsibilities. While the people were still on their faces in awe over the appearance of The Glory fire (see comments on Lev. 9:24 in MESSAGE 10), Nadab and Abihu rushed to use the holy articles that had been delivered to their charge like they were play things. The very fact that they were busy with anything at that holy moment shows that they missed the spiritual significance of the occasion. It seems that they were more impressed with themselves and their new authority than they were with Jehovah's majesty. They may have rationalized in their minds that they were expressing their joy and gratitude to God by designing their own offering. However, if they truly wanted to express joy over God's gift to them, they would have been careful to offer an offering that Jehovah had authorized.

Nadab and Abihu took their censers and put fire and incense on them. The censers of the priests had been mentioned previously only in listings of vessels to be used in The Tabernacle (Ex. 25:38; 37:23; 27:3; 38:3). The only authorization for burning incense on a censer is found in Leviticus

16:12-13, and that instruction was not given until later for a very different purpose (see comments on those verses in MESSAGE 20). What Nadab and Abihu did was entirely their own invention.

and offered strange fire before Jehovah, which He had not commanded them. "Offered strange fire before Jehovah," means that they stood before The Tabernacle with the burning incense in their censers, because standing before The Tabernacle was understood to be standing before Jehovah (Lev. 1:3,5,11; 3:1,7,12; 4:4,6,15,17,24). Probably they waved their censers to obtain Jehovah's attention. They got His attention, but not as they intended. The word translated "strange" is an active participle. When used alone, it is equivalent to a noun and means "one who is an outsider." It was used to refer to people outside the family or outside of an authorized group. With regard to the Israelites, it referred to a foreigner (Ex. 29:33; 30:33; Lev. 22:10,13; Num. 1:31; 3:10,38; 16:40; 18:4,7; Deut. 25:5). When the word was used in connection with a noun, as it is here, it described an item that was "outside" the authorized norm. "Strange fire" then means burning an offering that had not been authorized by Jehovah. In this case, the offering was incense smoldering in their censers. This conclusion is further confirmed by the words "which He had not commanded them."

Four suggestions have been offered as to why this action was displeasing to Jehovah: (1) The incense was not prepared according to the authorized formula (Ex. 30:34-38; compare Ex. 30:9). (2) The fire did not come from the altar (Lev. 16:12). (3) The incense was burned at the wrong time of day (Ex. 30:7-8). (4) The incense was burned in the wrong place (Ex. 30:1,7). The real reason their action was so displeasing to Jehovah is that Jehovah had given no provision for a ceremony in which a priest stood before The Tabernacle waving a censer that contained smoldering incense. This action was extremely serious, because if the priests were to feel free to innovate offerings as they saw fit, the pure and spiritual meanings that Jehovah had poured into His offerings would soon be lost.

- b. The consequences of their sin  
(10:2-5)

Verse 2. **And fire came forth from the face of Jehovah and devoured them, and they died at the face of Jehovah.**

Suddenly fire burst forth from Jehovah, that is, out of The Tabernacle. For the second time in a few minutes fire burst forth from The Tabernacle. The first time, it showed Jehovah's acceptance of the offerings He had commanded. This time it showed His wrath on an offering He had not commanded. God's fire could either approve or disapprove. It could either empower or destroy. The use of Jehovah's power depended on the relationship the worshiper had to Him. The fire did not completely consume the bodies of the priests (vs. 4), as it did the offerings (9:24), but it killed the disobedient priests. The force that is known to us that most nearly resembles this fire is lightning, which can kindle a consuming flame as in Leviticus 9:24 or can kill without a flame as in this verse.

Verse 3. **Then Moses said to Aaron, This is the word of Jehovah, saying, Through the one near me, I will be hallowed, and before the face of all the people I will be glorified, so Aaron kept quiet.**

Then Moses said to Aaron, This is the word of Jehovah, saying, Through the one near me, I will be hallowed, and before the face of all the people I will be glorified. Moses immediately interpreted these events by a quotation from Jehovah. The words are not found elsewhere in the Record. Evidently they were words that Jehovah had spoken to him in the mountain but that he had not recorded in Exodus (see comments on Lev. 9:1 and on Lev. 9:10 in MESSAGE 10). The words he quoted mean that one way or another Jehovah would be "hallowed" and glorified through His priests, who were chosen to be near Him. He would be honored either by their obedience or by their punishment for disobedience.

Only one previous reference referred to Jehovah's being "hallowed" (Ex. 15:11). It means that He was to be "set apart" from all other persons and objects (see comments on Lev. 1:3 in

MESSAGE 1 under the heading [It is] a holiness of holinesses). Jehovah was not to be treated as a man, because He was completely set apart from men in power and moral character. His priests would either honor Him for His great "otherness," or they would suffer the consequences. Either way, the people would see the greatness, power, and glory of Jehovah.

so Aaron kept quiet. As painful as was the death of his two sons, Aaron understood that their punishment was sent to glorify God; so he did not object. He remained silent.

Verse 4. **And Moses called Mishael and Elzaphan, sons of Uzziel, an uncle of Aaron, and he said to them, Come near! Carry your brothers from the face of The Holy [Place] toward the outside of the camp.**

Moses then called on Mishael and Elzaphan to carry out the bodies of Nadab and Abihu. They were cousins to the slain men (Ex. 6:18,22), and thus they were members of the tribe of Levi. This sad duty was a foreshadowing of responsibilities that were later to be assigned to the Levites (Num. 3:5-13). They were commanded to carry the dead bodies, not just outside of The Tabernacle but also outside of the camp. This command showed that Nadab and Abihu's sin not only made them unworthy of serving as priests but also of belonging to the people of God. They were not truly God's people because their sin amounted to rejecting Jehovah's covenant and open rebellion against God. This incident was the first evidence that, even after the renewal of the covenant that followed the rebellion of the Golden Calf (Ex. 34:10-27), not all the Israelites truly committed themselves to God. It was a sad commentary on how many in Israel only gave lip-service to the covenant, when two out of the first five priests were rebellious and still not truly believing.

In this verse, The Tabernacle is called "The Holy [Place]," one of the nineteen names used for The Tabernacle (see comments on Lev. 1:1 in MESSAGE 1 under the heading out of The Tent of Meeting and on Lev. 4:6 in MESSAGE 2 under the heading of The Holy [Place]). The Tabernacle was holy because it was set apart to God's service.

Verse 5. **So they came near and carried them in their coats toward the outside of the camp, according to the word of Moses.**

Nadab and Abihu were carried out of the camp while still dressed in their priestly garments. The priestly garments were to be worn only inside The Tabernacle (Ex. 28:43); however, these garments had been defiled by being worn in unauthorized ceremonies. They had to be discarded, even as the priests had to be cast out.

- c. The loyalty of the other priests in the face of the tragedy (10:6-7)

Verse 6. **And Moses said to Aaron and to Eleazar and to Ithamar, his sons, You must not loosen [the hair of] your heads, and you must not tear your clothes; then you will not die, and He will not be angry toward all the congregation. And your brothers, all the house of Israel, will mourn the incineration that Jehovah kindled.**

And Moses said to Aaron and to Eleazar and to Ithamar, his sons, “You must not loosen [the hair of] your heads, and you must not tear your clothes; then you will not die. Moses urged Aaron and his two remaining sons not to leave their duties in The Tabernacle to participate in the ceremonies of mourning and of the funeral for Nadab and Abihu. They were not to go out of The Tabernacle, or to tear their garments for sorrow, or even to dishevel their hair. Moses gave this command, not because it would have been wrong to mourn for men who had rebelled or because expressing sorrow would have shown dissatisfaction with God’s judgment, as Keil suggested. It was because they were in the midst of completing the offerings that God had commanded (see comments on Lev. 10:12-20 in MESSAGE 13), a task too important to leave for any purpose. Service to God at the altar took precedence over everything else, even over mourning for loved ones (see comments on Lev. 21:1-4,10-12) in MESSAGE 25). A priest had to put Jehovah first above everything else, or he was not worthy of his holy calling. It was especially important for the new priests to demonstrate that kind of loyalty at a time when two priests had already rebelled. Therefore, Moses told them to

remain at the job or die (see Introduction to Chapter 20 and comments on Lev. 20:2 in MESSAGE 24),

and He will not be angry toward all the congregation. Moses also told them that failure to remain loyal to their holy duties would bring wrath on the whole congregation. This statement did not mean that the people would be punished for the sins of the priests but that, if the remaining priests rebelled, the people could not remain loyal. They too would desert and be destroyed by God’s wrath.

And your brothers, all the house of Israel, will mourn the incineration that Jehovah kindled. Moses told Aaron and his sons to let the people do the mourning for them. The mourning of the people was approved, not because they were less dedicated to God and, therefore, could mourn for sinful men without being punished, as Keil suggested. It was because they could do so without deserting a duty to God.

All the Israelites were called “brothers” to Aaron and his sons. This family spirit was most comforting to them in their sorrow. It was a deep satisfaction for them to know that their loved ones were being honorably mourned by their brothers, even in spite of what the sons had done. This knowledge helped them pass the test of loyalty and complete the holy task that was theirs.

The word translated “incineration” is a noun related to the verb used in Leviticus 4:12, which refers to fire that either strengthens or destroys but does not totally consume (see comments on Lev. 4:12 in MESSAGE 2 under the heading And he shall incinerate it). Jehovah’s fire had killed Nadab and Abihu, but it had not consumed them.

Verse 7. **And do not go out from the entrance of the Tent of Meeting, lest you die; for the oil of the anointing of Jehovah [is] on you. And they did according to the word of Moses.**

And do not go out from the entrance of the Tent of Meeting, lest you die; for the oil of the anointing of Jehovah [is] on you. Moses warned them not to depart from The Tabernacle because the anointing oil was on them, which set them apart to God’s service, and that responsibility had to come

ahead of everything else. They were in the midst of ceremonies that were their first responsibility, and it was urgent that they not desert that responsibility. If they left the holy ceremonies, they would show that their service to God was not first in their lives; and they would die.

And they did according to the word of Moses. Moses, Ithamar, and Abiathar did as Moses commanded them and proved that loyalty to God was first in their lives, even above their family.

### Application

Absolute loyalty to God is a necessity for Christian ministers. They must put God above all other interests and responsibilities. To put Him first, they must obey His commands completely. They must not allow the privilege of handling holy objects to lead them to believe they can handle those holy articles according to their own ideas. They have no more right to tamper with baptism or the Lord's Supper than Aaron's sons had the right to tamper with the fire-offerings. They must take care to see that familiarity with holy responsibilities does not breed in them contempt for those holy duties. They must take care to avoid getting so accustomed to their holy obligations so that they begin to take a light and frivolous attitude toward them. Leadership in worship must not become a mere habit or a commonplace task. They must always consider holy service to God to be an awesome and thrilling challenge. They must keep their service to God fresh and exciting, by being sure that every responsibility to God is bathed in a continually renewing experience with God Himself.

Family responsibilities, and especially death in the family, will at some time or other severely test the loyalty of every minister; but he will serve his family best if he will put God first at all times. If he fails to do so, he may not lose his life as Nadab and Abihu did; but he will surely lose his power, his influence, and perhaps his position in the ministry. If he succeeds in putting God first in all things, God will comfort him in sorrow and strengthen him in service. In recent years, a high sounding but mistaken piece of advice has often been given to ministers. In overzealous desire to encourage ministers not to neglect their families, ministers have been told, "Put your family first. Too many ministers have neglected their families and lost their children. To honor your family and save your children, your family must come ahead of your ministry." The truth is that a minister's family is a part of his ministry. He must lead and serve his family not because they are first but because that responsibility is part of His service to God. They will not be first, but neither will God let him neglect them. When I proposed to my wife and she accepted, we talked for a time about our hope for our life together. Among many other statements, I said to her, "I feel guilty is asking you to marry me, because you will never be first in my life." She said, "If you put God first, I know you will treat me better than any other man in the world who would put me first." To date, that approach has produced 59 wonderful years of togetherness in ministry. I believe it is Scriptural, and I heartily commend it.