

Illegitimate fire or, Is it ever appropriate to be casual in worship?

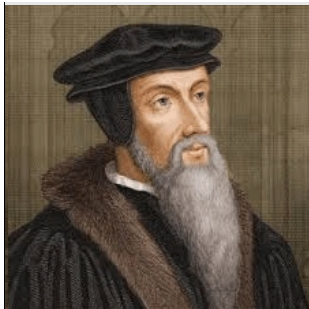
It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.

— HEBREWS 10:31

Analysis

A. (10:1-5) **What was the capital crime of Nadab and Abihu?**

Those charged with the sacred responsibility of sacrifice are cut no slack. Verses 10 and 11 seem to supply the divine rationale for the severity of their sentence



JOHN CALVIN
(1509-1564)

“... if we reflect how holy a thing God’s worship is, the enormity of the punishment will by no means offend us.”

[10:1-3] The expression “before Jehovah” is applied to the presence of God, both in the dwelling (viz., the holy place and the holy of holies, e.g., Leviticus 4:6-7; Leviticus 16:13) and also in the court (e.g., Leviticus 1:5, etc.). It is in the latter sense that it is to be taken here, as is evident from Leviticus 10:4, where the persons slain are said to have lain “before the sanctuary of the dwelling,” i.e., in the court of the tabernacle. The fire of the holy God (Exodus 19:18), which had just sanctified the service of Aaron as well-pleasing to God, brought destruction upon his two eldest sons, because they had not sanctified Jehovah in their hearts, but had taken upon themselves a self-willed service; just as the same gospel is to one a savour of life unto life, and to another a savour of death unto death (2 Corinthians 2:16). [Keil ii 351]

[10:1-3] The severity of the punishment, therefore, would not please those arrogant people, who do not hesitate superciliously to criticise God’s

judgments; but if we reflect how holy a thing God’s worship is, the enormity of the punishment will by no means offend us. Besides, it was necessary that their religion should be sanctioned at its very commencement; for if God had suffered the sons of Aaron to transgress with impunity, they would have afterwards carelessly neglected the whole Law. This, therefore, was the reason of such great severity, that the priests should anxiously watch against all profanation. Their crime is specified, viz., that they offered incense in a different way from that which God had prescribed, and consequently, although they may have erred from ignorance, still they were convicted by God’s commandment of having negligently set about what was worthy of greater attention. The “strange fire” is distinguished from the sacred fire which was always burning upon the altar: not miraculously, as some pretend, but by the constant

watchfulness of the priests. Now, God had forbidden any other fire to be used in the ordinances, in order to exclude all extraneous rites, and to shew His detestation of whatever might be derived from elsewhere. Let us learn, therefore, so to attend to God’s command as not to corrupt His worship by any strange inventions. [Calvin iii 431]

[10:1-7] Kidner [116] comments that the church, like these sons of Aaron, “does not always take kindly to being under the word of God ... their fate underlined the danger of careless handling of what was holy.”

[10:1-3] Their sin, in the form in which it was committed, can never be repeated; but as regards its inner nature and essence, no sin has been in all ages more common. For 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. ... And when one goes into many a church and chapel, and sees the multitude of remarkable devices by which, as is imagined, the worship and adoration of God is furthered, it must be confessed that it certainly seems as if the generation of Nadab and Abihu was not yet extinct; even although a patient God, in the mystery of His long-suffering, flashes not instantly forth His vengeance. [Kellogg 239-240]

“... they were doing their best to obliterate the distinction on the preservation of which religion, morality, and the national existence depended; namely, the distinction between holy and common, clean and unclean.”

— Alexander Maclaren

B. (10:6-11) **Mistaking emotion, excitement for the presence of the Spirit**

[10:8-11] Wenham [154] notices that this is the only time in Leviticus where God speaks directly to Aaron.

[10:9] Ceremonial holiness and self-discipline were therefore to go hand in hand. [Harrison 114]

[10:9] The danger of excitement in religion. The contrast between the spirit of alcohol and the Holy Spirit is found very significantly (Luke 1:15; Eph. 5:13). But excitement takes various forms. It is easy to mistake physical excitement for the work of the Spirit. [Thomas 119]

[10:9-11] If so, then, although their sin may not be repeated in its exact form among us, yet the fact points a very solemn warning, not only regarding the careless use of strong drink, but, more than that, against all religious worship and activity which is inspired by other stimulus than by the Holy Spirit of God. Of this every age of the Church’s history has furnished sad examples. Sometimes we see it illustrated in “revivals,” even in such as may be marked by some evidence of the presence of the Spirit of God; when injudicious speakers seek by various methods to work up what is, after all, merely a physical excitement of a strange, infectious kind, though too often mistaken for the work of the Holy Spirit of God. More subtle and yet more common is the sin of such as in preaching the Word find their chief stimulation in the excitement of a crowded house, or the visible signs of approbation on the part of the hearers; and perhaps sometimes mistake the natural effect of this influence for the quickening power of the Holy Ghost, and go on to offer before the Lord the incense

of their religious service and worship, but with "strange fire." Of this all need to beware; and most of all, ministers of the Word. [Kellogg 241-242]

C. (10:12-20) Tabernacle technicalities immediately violated!

But Aaron's reasoning is accepted by Moses, and apparently by God too. It would appear that here is the first case of the spirit of the Law being upheld, while its letter is broken

Thus, on the very day of their consecration to the priesthood, did the oldest sons of Aaron perish, because they had not sanctified the Lord in their hearts, but had offered Him a worship of their own devising, instead of that holy incense consumed by fire from off the altar, which symbolized prayer, offered up on the ground of accepted sacrifice. And this twofold lesson did the Lord Himself teach in explanation of this judgment (10:3). So far as the priesthood was concerned - "I will sanctify Myself in those who stand near to Me, and" (so far as all the people were concerned) "before all the people I will glorify Myself." In other words, if those who had been consecrated to Him would not sanctify Him in heart and life, He would sanctify Himself in them by judgments (comp. also Ezekiel 38:16), and thus glorify His Name before all, as the Holy One, Who cannot with impunity be provoked to anger. [Edersheim 141]

They were his own sons, but his relation to God was superior to his relation to them, and the only attitude becoming to him was the attitude of submissive silence. [Morgan *Analyzed Bible* 38]

Maclaren summarizes "strange fire"

What was their sin in thus offering it? Plainly, the narrative points to the essence of the crime in calling it 'fire which He had not commanded.' So this was their crime, that they were tampering with the appointed order which but a week before they had been consecrated to conserve and administer; that they were thus thrusting in self-will and personal caprice, as of equal authority with the divine commandment; that they were arrogating the right to cut and carve God's appointments, as the whim or excitement of the moment dictated; and that they were doing their best to obliterate the distinction on the preservation of which religion, morality, and the national existence depended; namely, the distinction between holy and common, clean and unclean. To plough that distinction deep into the national consciousness was no small part of the purpose of the law; and here were two of its appointed witnesses disregarding it, and flying in its face. The flash of holy fire consuming the sacrifices had scarcely faded off their eyeballs when they thus sinned. They have had many successors, not only in Israel, while a ritual demanding punctilious conformity lasted, but in Christendom since. Alas! our censers are often flaming with 'strange fire.' How much so-called Christian worship glows with self-will or with partisan zeal! When we seek to worship God for what we can get, when we rush into His presence with hot, eager desires which we have not subordinated to His will, we are burning

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'strange fire which He has not commanded.' The only fire which should kindle the incense in our censers, and send it up to heaven in fragrant wreaths, is fire caught from the altar of sacrifice. ... The surface of the sin was ceremonial impropriety: the heart of it was flouting Jehovah and His law. It was better that two men should die, and the whole nation perish not, as it would have done if their example had been followed. It is mercy to trample out the first sparks beside a powder-barrel. There is a very striking parallel between verse 2 and the last verse of the preceding chapter. In both the same expression is used, 'There came forth fire from before the Lord, and consumed' (the word rendered devoured in verse 2 is the same in Hebrew as consumed). So, then, the same divine fire, which had graciously signified God's acceptance of the appointed sacrifice, now flashed out with lightning-like power of destruction, and killed the two rebel priests. There is dormant potency of destruction in the God who reveals Himself as gracious. The 'wrath of the Lamb' is as real as His gentleness. The Gospel is 'the savour of life unto life' and 'of death unto death.' Moses' word to the stunned father is of a piece with the severity of the whole incident. No voice of condolence or sympathy comes from him. The brother is swallowed up in the lawgiver. He puts into words the meaning of the terrible stroke, and expects Aaron to acquiesce, though his heart bleeds. What was his interpretation? He saw in it God's purpose to be 'sanctified in them that come nigh Him.' The priests were these. Nadab and Abihu had been consecrated for the purpose of enforcing the truth of God's holiness. They had done the very opposite, by breaking down the distinction between sacred and common. But their nearness to God brought with it not only corresponding obligations, but corresponding criminality and penalty, if these obligations were not discharged. If God is not 'sanctified' by His servants, He will sanctify Himself on them. [Maclaren ii 242-245]

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