

NADAB AND ABIHU

Leviticus 10

It is easy to pass to the story of Nadab and Abihu by reminding the children that while the people were at Sinai the Lord gave Moses, in addition to the commandments, careful directions for the priests and for the people especially in regard to their worship. Review a little about the tabernacle, its three divisions and their furnishings, with special emphasis on the two altars; then tell them the law for the offering of incense which Nadab and Abihu broke.

Doctrinal Points

Worship from selfish motives destroys instead of strengthens our spiritual life.

Notes for Parents

The book of Leviticus contains the Levitical laws, the regulations governing the life of the Levites—the tribe of Levi—and their conduct of the tabernacle worship, as well as many laws for all the people. The tribe of Levi had been set apart by the Lord for the services connected with worship in the tabernacle, and Aaron the brother of Moses had been named high priest. His four sons were to be assistant priests, and Aaron's office was to pass down in succession to his descendants.

The tabernacle was the center of the life of the people. Detailed instructions for its construction and furnishing were given Moses at Sinai. It had three parts: the inmost room or Holy of Holies, the outer room or Holy Place, and the outer court. The only article of furniture in the Holy of Holies was the ark, the chest which contained the two tables of stone on which the commandments had been written by the finger of God. In the Holy Place were the altar of incense, the table of shewbread, and the seven-branched golden

candlestick. In the open outer court were the great altar of sacrifice and the bronze laver for washing.

Our lesson today is concerned with the two altars. Sacrifices were offered at so many times and for so many reasons that there was always fire on the great altar. In fact it was commanded (Leviticus 6:13) that the fire on this altar should never go out. To sacrifice really means “to make sacred,” and the various sacrifices represent the offering of all our thoughts and affections to the Lord, the fire on the altar being genuine love for the Lord and for serving Him. This should be the motive in everything we do, as we learn from the first commandment. Every morning and every evening Aaron’s sons were to take fire from this great altar and carry it in their censers into the tabernacle to the altar of incense and put sweet incense upon it. The burning of incense pictures the lifting up of our thoughts in prayer to the Lord. We should read here Revelation 5:8 and 8:3.

But Nadab and Abihu, Aaron’s two older sons, “offered strange [unholy] fire before the Lord” and were forthwith devoured by fire from the Lord. Strange fire is a love other than love to the Lord, that is, it is the love of self. When we pray selfishly or go to church for any reason except to worship the Lord, we are “offering strange fire.” Then the things we receive, instead of being blessings, are turned by us to selfish uses and our spiritual life is destroyed. It is in this sense that fire from the Lord becomes destructive.

Nadab and Abihu were carried out of the camp, and Aaron and his two younger sons were told not to mourn for them in the usual way because they themselves were serving in the tabernacle. But the people were told to “bewail the burning.” When evil is done, the consequences are inevitable. Punishment is inherent in sin. We naturally bewail the punishment, but if we are serving the Lord truly, it is the sin and not the punishment that grieves us.

Primary

The class should learn the name Aaron, that he was Moses’ brother, and that

he was the high priest. They can understand that he had four sons and that two of them were obedient and two disobedient. Tell them about the censers and what they were for before going into the story proper. These children can be told why Nadab and Abihu had no excuse for what they did. We are to blame if we do what we know is wrong. This is a good lesson from which to teach young children how important it is to do right in the little things as well as in the big.

You remember how the Lord spoke the ten commandments from the top of Mount Sinai and how all the people, in their camp at the foot of the mountain, heard Him say them. Then the Lord called Moses to come up to the top of the mountain and wrote the ten commandments on two tables of stone so that they could always be kept. And then He gave Moses a great many other laws by which the children of Israel were to be governed and especially all the laws for their worship.

They were to make a special tent, called the *tabernacle*, which was to be their church, and the Lord told Moses just what furniture was to be in it.

Do you remember what articles of furniture were kept in the two rooms of the tabernacle?

In the outer court were the great bronze altar of sacrifice and the bronze laver—a bowl to hold water for washing.

Aaron, the brother of Moses, was made high priest.

His four sons—Nadab, Abihu, Eleazar, and Ithamar—were to be assistant priests.

Eleazar and Ithamar were faithful priests, but Nadab and Abihu were not.

What did Nadab and Abihu do that was wrong?

The censer was the bowl or dish to hold the fire on which the incense was burned.

The fire was to be taken from the great altar in the outer court.

There was also another altar: the altar of incense, which was one of the four pieces of furniture inside the tabernacle itself. It was made of wood covered with gold, and it had a crown of pure gold around the top. Every morning and every evening the priests were to burn incense on this altar. The incense was made of spices which had a sweet smell when they were burning. Each priest carried a censer in which to place the coals on which the incense was

sprinkled to make it burn. The priests were to take the coals for their censers from the fire burning on the great altar of sacrifice.

Every act of worship was to be performed just as the Lord commanded it.

Nadab and Abihu knew this, and knew that they were disobeying the Lord.

What did they do that was wrong?

What happened to them?

The Israelites were accustomed, when a relative died, to shave their heads and tear their clothing as a sign of mourning.

What did the Lord tell Aaron and his other two sons about this?

This was because they were serving in the tabernacle as the Lord's priests and must recognize and show the people that Nadab and Abihu deserved their punishment.

Junior

The Juniors can understand why the details of ancient Hebrew worship had to be observed so carefully. They will be interested in the meaning of the fire from the great altar and the "strange" or unholy fire. Have them look up all the Bible references in their notes. Review the names of the five books of Moses, and tell them as much as you can about the book of Leviticus.

At Sinai the Lord also gave Moses a whole code of laws to govern the personal, civil, and religious life of the people. He gave special directions for the making of the tabernacle and its furnishings. The Levites—the tribe of Levi—were set aside to have charge of this tabernacle and the worship there, and Aaron, the brother of Moses, was named as high priest. His sons were to be his assistants. Their names were Nadab, Abihu, Eleazar, and Ithamar. Many of the laws given at Sinai are preserved in the book of Leviticus.

Every detail of worship in the tabernacle had been prescribed. We shall find the law for burning incense in Exodus 30:1, 7, 8 and Leviticus 16:12.

Where was the priest to get the fire on which to burn the incense?

The censer was the bowl made to hold this fire and carry it. In those days there were no matches or even flint and steel. When people went on a journey, they had to carry fire with them from place to place. The fire on the great altar was kept burning all the time, whether they were making sacrifices or not. Read Leviticus

6:13. Fire is a symbol of love and this ever-burning fire on the great altar pictures love for the Lord, which should be our motive in everything we do.

What did Nadab and Abihu do?

This means that they used fire taken from somewhere else than from the great altar. Incense stands for our prayers of gratitude to the Lord. Read Revelation 5:8. Do people ever go to church and take part in worship for other reasons than because they love the Lord and are grateful in Him? Sometimes they may go because they want to be thought well of, or because they want to get in with certain people, or because they think it will be good for their business. These are selfish reasons. Love of self is the opposite of love to the Lord. It is “strange” or unholy fire.

What happened to Nadab and Abihu?

Does this seem too great a punishment? We must remember that the ancient Hebrews liked to perform external acts of worship. It was because *they thought mainly of external things* that the Lord chose them for the writing of the Old Testament. Every detail of their worship had to be kept just as He gave it to them, or the inner meaning—which was for people of later times—would be destroyed. Those who would not preserve this external order could not continue to be useful. So a terrible thing did happen to Nadab and Abihu when they disobeyed. A terrible thing happens to us when we go to church from selfish motives. The love of the Lord is poured out to us as we listen to the reading of the Word and take part in the service, but our selfishness turns it into self-love, and our spiritual life is destroyed. *It may seem to us that what Nadab and Abihu did was not very bad, but they knew that it was disobedience to the Lord. It is the things we do knowing that they are wrong in the Lord’s sight which condemn us.*

The ancient Hebrews were accustomed to shave their heads and tear their clothes as a sign of mourning when any of *their relatives* died. So the Lord told the people that they might mourn for the terrible burning of Nadab and Abihu; but Aaron and his sons were

commanded not to mourn in this way because they were serving as priests and wearing the holy garments, and had been anointed with the holy oil. When we do wrong and are punished, it is natural for us to be unhappy about the punishment; but if we are really serving the Lord, we should not be sorry that we have been punished, but only that we have deserved punishment.

Wrongdoing always brings punishment of some kind even when we do not realize it. The harm it does to us in our hearts and minds is much more serious than any outward effects it may cause. It is not the Lord who punishes—evil brings its own consequences. We should learn from these, and avoid doing wrong the next time.

Intermediate

The meaning of “strange” or unholy fire as illustrated in our own lives and of the particular destruction which follows is the lesson to be stressed. Point out how brief a story this is and yet how deep and important its meaning. Call attention to the nature and value of the book of Leviticus. The sin of Nadab and Abihu comes into the experience of young people especially in the form of thinking they know better than the Lord—or better than their parents—how things should be done. Stress the importance of doing even little things in the right way and of obeying the Lord even if at the time we do not fully understand the reason for His commands.

The story of Nadab and Abihu is one of the stories in the Word to which people sometimes object because they think the punishment too severe for the crime. Even as to the literal story, however, we must remember that the externals of worship were all-important to the ancient Hebrews. For this reason the Lord chose this nation to receive and preserve these externals. To transgress them even in small ways was for them just as serious a crime as an interior sin would be for people today. Evil, in whatever degree, brings its own punishment, and it is right that it should be so. If we are thinking of eternal values, we shall not mourn because punishment follows our wrongdoings. Instead, because that is the only way we can see and check them, we shall mourn the wrongdoing

itself. That is what is meant by verse 6.

The law for the burning of incense was given from Sinai among the many explicit laws and regulations which are recorded in the books of Exodus and Leviticus, laws which it was the special duty of the Levites to observe. Incense was to be burned on the altar of incense which stood in the Holy Place before the veil which covered the entrance to the Holy of Holies. It was to be burned night and morning. The very ingredients of the incense were specified: stacte, onycha, galbanum, and pure frankincense. The fire for the censers was to be taken from the ever-burning fire on the great altar in the outer court of the tabernacle.* This fire pictures love to the Lord, and all worship, to be pure, must be kindled from such a “fire.”

But people sometimes worship from other motives, like the scribes and Pharisees who prayed standing on the street corners that they might be seen of men, and like people today who go to church because it may help their business. The motive in such cases is selfishness. This is the “strange” or unholy fire of our story. When this is the motive in worship, all the good things such people hear in church are turned into selfish channels and, instead of feeding the soul, their very worship helps to destroy their spiritual life. To use holy things for selfish purposes is profanation, which kills all good possibilities. So the fire from the Lord actually does destroy those who come before Him with strange fire in their censers.

Nadab and Abihu were carried “in their coats out of the camp.” The “coat” (more properly the “tunic”) was the inner garment, and the tunic of the priests represented the internal truths of the Word. The camp of Israel, which was always arranged according to the order prescribed on the mount, pictures a heavenly character, or heaven. So to be carried out of the camp is to be cast into hell.

*The sin of Hadab and Abihu is obscure. There is no clear regulation in the Pentateuch that fire to light incense must be taken from the main altar. Swedenborg, in AC 9965, presumes quite understandably—based on the correspondence of the fire from the great altar—that the infraction was that these men took fire from another source. —*Editor*.

Their being carried out in their tunics pictures the fact that in profaning their outward worship they had also profaned its internal.

Sometimes people excuse themselves for staying away from church and for condemning the church organization by saying that after all the organization is not the real church. But the fact is that the organization is the only body the church has in the world, and we are a part of it. In condemning the organization we are really only condemning ourselves, and by staying away from church we cut ourselves off from the spiritual life which is the soul of the external church.

Swedenborg writes in *Apocalypse Explained*, n. 324: “Nadab and Abihu, sons of Aaron, were consumed by fire from heaven because they burnt incense from other fire than the fire of the Altar of burnt offering, which is offering worship from a love other than love to the Lord.”

Basic Correspondences

fire	=	love or hate
the fire on the great altar	=	love to the Lord
strange fire	=	the love of self
incense	=	prayer, especially public worship

Senior

After taking up the meaning of the story, it may be helpful to discuss some of the various ways in which we may spoil our lives by allowing selfish motives to control us. Stress the importance of humility and obedience.

The book of Leviticus contains very few incidents like that of our lesson today. For the most part it is composed of a long series of what often seem petty regulations concerning the conduct of the ancient Hebrews and particularly concerning their worship, with its offerings, sacrifices, and ceremonials. The book takes its name from the Levites, the tribe of Levi, who were set apart from the other tribes to have special charge of the tabernacle and its worship. Aaron, the brother of Moses, was appointed high priest by the Lord, and the office was to pass down through his descend-

ants. His four sons—Nadab, Abihu, Eleazar, and Ithamar—were appointed his assistants. Eleazar was the one who actually succeeded Aaron when he died (Numbers 20:22-29).

We remember that the ancient Hebrew Church was a representative church. These people were “chosen” because they had lost all knowledge of true internal worship and cared only for externals and so could be led through fear of punishment and hope of reward to maintain external forms which by correspondence would keep the connection between man and the Lord until the time was ripe for the Lord Himself to come into the world to restore internal worship. So the all-important thing for the Jews was to observe the laws of their worship in every detail as the Lord had given them to Moses on the mount. A number of times in the Old Testament story, as in our lesson today, we read of sudden and violent death resulting from the breaking of what may seem to us a minor regulation. But we note that the people themselves accepted these punishments as just, because to them the small regulations were all essential—as they actually are for their correspondence.

Some of the deepest lessons in the Word are found within these Levitical laws. Leviticus 16:12-13* tells us that when incense was offered by the priests in the tabernacle, their censers were to be filled with burning coals taken from the great altar of sacrifice which stood in the outer court. The great altar represents our recognition that everything we have comes to us from the Lord and is to be used in His service. The fire on the great altar represents genuine love to the Lord. The offering of incense—which was sprinkled on the coals in the censers—represents our prayers, worship, and thanksgiving. We learn this from John’s vision in Revelation 5:8 of the four beasts and the four and twenty elders who “fell down before the Lamb, having every one of them harps, and

*This records a special instruction to Aaron after the death of his two sons. There is a prohibition in Exodus 30:9 against offering “strange” or unholy *incense*, but no definite *general* instruction about the source of the coals. The sin, however, is clearly one of irreverence. —Ed.

golden vials full of odours, which are the prayers of saints.” The law in regard to the offering of incense means that our prayers and thanksgivings are acceptable only when they are inspired by genuine love to the Lord kindled by our recognition of our own unworthiness and complete dependence upon Him.

The “strange” or unholy fire which Nadab and Abihu brought in their censers represents a selfish motive in worship. If we go to church because we like to be respected, or because it is “good business,” or because it enables us to think of ourselves as good, if we pray for selfish indulgences or for the downfall of those we dislike, we are offering strange fire. And our punishment is just as immediate and dire as that of Nadab and Abihu, although we may not be conscious of it until we come into the other world. For the fire which goes forth from the altar, the Lord’s love always going forth to those who seek Him, is turned in us to selfish ends, and our spiritual life perishes and we are carried “from before the sanctuary out of the camp.” Read Matthew 8:10-12 and compare it with this story. The sin which the Lord condemned in the strongest language was the sin of hypocrisy. Read also Matthew 23:23-33. It is the urgent warning against hypocrisy in worship that is given us in this brief story of Nadab and Abihu. Aaron and his other two sons were commanded not to mourn for Nadab and Abihu, but the people were allowed to mourn. It is natural for us to feel sorry for the wrongdoer when he suffers the penalty of his deeds—especially if the wrongdoer is oneself—but our higher understanding should recognize the justice and necessity of this result of evil. Divine laws are fundamental laws, and if they could be broken with impunity there would be no order in the universe and no possibility of any sure hope for happiness and peace.

Adult

This lesson offers a good opportunity for discussion of our public worship and the spirit in which we should come to it. Another good discussion topic is the proper attitude toward a sinner and his punishment—whether the sinner be oneself or someone else.

In *Our Heavenly Father's Book*, part of the Bible series published for our Sunday School Association many years ago [1884], the Rev. Wm. B. Hayden writes concerning the book of Leviticus: "The Hebrews call this book *Vayyikra* meaning 'And [God] called,' from its first word 'And Jehovah called unto Moses, and spake unto him out of the tabernacle of the congregation, saying, Speak unto the children of Israel, and say unto them, etc.' This is indeed the keynote of the book. It is everywhere the 'call' of the voice of God speaking to the church. This Divine formula is repeated at the head of every distinct section or enactment, thus of nearly every chapter; while the closing sentence of the book contains this averment: 'These are the commandments which Jehovah commanded Moses for the children of Israel in Mount Sinai.' Thus nothing is left in doubt as to the Divine origin of the book.

"Our name *Leviticus* is simply the Latin derived from the Greek *Leuitikon*, meaning *Levitical*, or that which *pertains to the Levites*; in reference to the fact that its contents are so largely occupied with the duties of the Levites, in which body are included all the priests. It consists principally of laws, having historical matter only in chapters viii to x, relating to the dedication of Aaron and his sons to the priesthood, and the death of Nadab and Abihu for offering strange fire before the Lord. These laws relate to the offerings and sacrifices; to purity and impurity; to the priests, with the holy-days and festivals; and the regulations intended to mark the separation between Israel and the heathen nations. To which are added the blessings connected with obedience, and the evil consequences of disobedience, chapter xxvi, with the regulations concerning vows, xxvii." [pp. 62-63]

We recall that when the Lord called Moses at the burning bush, one of Moses' objections to his task was that he was not eloquent but "slow of speech, and of a slow tongue." Moses represents divine law. The law does not immediately appeal to the heart or emotions of men. The Lord told Moses that his brother Aaron should speak for him. He said (Exodus 4:14-16): "Is not Aaron the Levite thy brother? I know that he can speak well. And also,

bhold, he cometh forth to meet thee: and when he seeth thee, he will be glad in his heart. And thou shalt speak unto him, and put words in his mouth; and I will be with thy mouth, and with his mouth, and will teach you what he shall do. And he shall be thy spokesman unto the people; and he shall be, even he shall be to thee instead of a mouth, and thou shalt be to him instead of God.” From that time Moses and Aaron were always together, and when the directions for the tabernacle and its worship were given Moses from Sinai, Aaron was appointed high priest, with his four sons as his assistants, and all the tribe of Levi were set apart for the service of the tabernacle and its worship. The high priesthood was to pass down in the line of Aaron. Nadab and Abihu were his two older sons, Eleazar and Ithamar the two younger. With the death of Nadab and Abihu, Eleazar became next in line and did become high priest upon Aaron’s death.

Aaron, because he was high priest, in the inmost sense represents the Lord as to divine good, but in the spiritual sense he represents “what is outward of the Spiritual Church” while Moses represents “what is inward.” Aaron’s sons represent the doctrines of good and truth from the Word. The function of the priesthood is to lead in worship and to teach according to the pattern showed in the mount and under the direction of divine law. We recall that the ancient Hebrew Church was merely the representative of a church, maintaining—during the interval between the total loss of internal worship by men and the Lord’s coming into the world to restore that worship—the connection between the Lord and man by means of the correspondence of their external worship. It was therefore essential that every detail of their worship be maintained exactly as commanded, and dire punishments were decreed and meted out for neglect of these details. We note in the literal story that Aaron and his two remaining sons accepted without question the justice of the punishment of Nadab and Abihu and the command not to observe mourning for them. This command and the permission to the people to mourn picture the fact that we are permitted in our natural and external states to feel horror and

regret at the terrible consequences of evil, but that our higher spiritual understanding should recognize these as inevitable and right and as necessary to the preservation of the possibility of man's free reception of the Lord's love.

Nadab and Abihu broke the statute which required that when incense was offered in the tabernacle, the coals on which it was burned in the censers should be taken from the fire on the great altar of burnt offering in the outer court.* This altar represents our humble acknowledgment that of ourselves we are evil and ignorant and powerless to do good, that all goodness and truth are the Lord's, and that to Him we owe all our powers. The fire on this altar is genuine love to the Lord arising from this acknowledgment. The offering of incense represents our prayers and praises, especially those offered in public worship. The law means that our worship is acceptable only when it comes from genuine love to the Lord springing from recognition of our unworthiness and need of Him. "Strange" or unholy fire is a selfish motive prompting our worship. If, for example, we go to church "to be seen of men," to increase our self-esteem, to help our business, to establish desirable social contacts, or for any other reason which has self at its center instead of the Lord, we are taking strange fire in our censers. And such worship, by ministering to and increasing our self-love, destroys our spiritual life, just as the fire from the altar consumed Nadab and Abihu.

The camp of Israel, always arranged in the order given from Sinai, represents heaven or a heavenly character. When we offer worship from impure motives, we—like Nadab and Abihu—are carried "out of the camp." And we are carried out in our "coats." The coat—more properly "tunic"—was the inner, not the outer, garment of the priest, and represents the internal sense of the Word, or internal worship. When we profane external worship, all possibility of coming into internal worship is also destroyed.

In the letter the rest of the chapter seems to have no connection

*See notes on Intermediate and Senior pages.

with the story of Nadab and Abihu. But in the internal sense there is a wonderful continuity and order. For example, in verse 9 the command to drink no wine or strong drink when they entered the tabernacle signifies that “worship of the Lord should not be from truths either spiritual or celestial, but entirely from good.” And the rest of the chapter carries further the explanation of what true worship is and of the states which profane and destroy it. Indeed the whole book of Leviticus, which by many today is laid aside as outdated and irrelevant to our modern life and its needs, offers us in its internal sense teaching of the deepest and most essential and practical nature.⁴ We take up so little of it in our Sunday school lessons only because any adequate treatment of it would require many lessons. In the story of Nadab and Abihu, however, we at least touch the heart of the teaching of this book in a form which, like the Lord’s parables, is easily grasped in its letter, and will stay in the mind.

From the Writings of Swedenborg

Arcana Coelestia, n. 9965: “*Lest they bear iniquity, and die* (Exodus 28:43). That this signifies the annihilation of the whole of worship, is evident from the signification of ‘bearing iniquity,’ when said of the priesthood of Aaron and his sons, as being the removal of falsities and evils with those who are in good from the Lord . . . But when they are said ‘to bear iniquity and die,’ it signifies the annihilation of all worship . . . for representative worship died, because nothing of it appeared any longer in the heavens . . . Moreover that they died when they did not act in accordance with the statutes, is plain from Aaron’s sons, Nadab and Abihu, who were consumed by fire from heaven when they burned incense, not from the fire of the altar, but from strange fire . . . The fire of the altar represented love Divine, thus love from the Lord, whereas the strange fire represented love from hell. The annihilation of worship was signified by the burning of incense from this latter fire, which resulted in their death. It is said in many passages in the Word that ‘they would bear iniquity’ when they did not act according to the statutes, and by this was

*A helpful source of information on these deeper lessons is the *New Church Commentary on Leviticus* by Henry Maclagan published by James Speirs, London, 1912. –Ed.

signified damnation, because their sins were not removed; not that they were damned on this account, but that they thereby annihilated the representative worship, and thus represented the damned who remain in their sins. For no one is damned on account of the omission of external rites; but on account of evils of the heart, thus on account of the omission of them from evil of heart.”

Suggested Questions on the Lesson

- J. What was the tabernacle? *portable church*
- P. Who was the high priest? *Aaron*
- P. Who were his assistants? *his four sons*
- J. What two altars are involved in our lesson for today? *great bronze, incense*
- J. In what division of the tabernacle was the great altar? *outer court*
- J. What was it used for? *sacrifices*
- J. In what division of the tabernacle was the altar of incense? *Holy Place*
- J. How often was incense to be burned upon it? *morning and evening*
- P. What were the coals to burn the incense carried in? *a censer*
- P. Where were these coals to be obtained? *great altar*
- J. Who were the two oldest sons of Aaron? *Nadab and Abihu*
- P. What did they do which was wrong? *offered “strange” or unholy fire*
- P. What is meant by the fire’s being “strange”? *not proper*
- P. What happened to Nadab and Abihu? *fire killed them*
- P. Where were their bodies taken? *outside camp*
- J. What command did Moses give to Aaron and his two younger sons?
don’t mourn
- J. What did he tell the people to do? *bewail the burning*
- I. What does incense represent? *prayers*
- S. What does the fire on the great altar represent? *genuine love to the Lord*
- I. Spiritually, what is “strange” or unholy fire? *acting religious for selfish reasons*