

## “Playing With Fire”

Worship is a serious affair; much more serious than many treat it today. It is a privilege to be allowed to stand before God and offer Him worship. It is not something to be taken lightly or treated carelessly. A brief review of the Old Testament shows us how God looks at those who do not respect His law and who merely saunter into the presence of the Lord and worship Him however they please. In fact, in **Leviticus 10**, we read a tragic story of two of the most notable people in Israel at that time; priests of God, and sons of the great high priest, Aaron. They were the nephews of Moses, and next in line to succeed Aaron as high priest. But, they made a serious and fatal mistake that is forever embalmed in the Holy Scriptures to remind people of all ages that God is to be revered, respected and obeyed.

**Leviticus 10:1-3 “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. Then Moses said unto Aaron, This is it that the Lord spake, saying, I will be sanctified in them that come nigh me, and before all the people I will be glorified. And Aaron held his peace.”**

What was the offense of these two men? What was so serious that it caused the wrath of God to come down on them and consume them? Well, the Bible identifies their sin, saying that they offered “*strange fire*” to the Lord. What does that mean? And is it possible to commit the sin of Nadab and Abihu today? It is, and this passage sounds a warning to all of us today: Don’t play with fire.

There is nothing more serious and more important than worship. People will never gather together and do anything of more consequence than when they come together to worship the Lord. Worship is serious business, and the crimson cord that runs throughout history shows us how holy worship is meant to be. Remember Jesus’ conversation with the woman at the well.

**John 4:23-24 “But the hour cometh, and now is, when the true worshippers shall worship the Father in spirit and in truth: for the Father seeketh such to worship him. God is a Spirit: and they that worship him must worship him in spirit and in truth.”**

**Romans 15:4 “For whatsoever things were written aforetime were written for our learning, that we through patience and comfort of the scriptures might have hope.”**

“*Things (that) were written aforetime*” is a reference to all of the stories and arrangements that we read about in the Old Testament. So, the Holy Spirit had Moses tell this story of Nadab and Abihu, and write it down in **Leviticus 10**, for all of us down through the ages to learn and lesson. That lesson is this: Don’t play with fire.

God had given a very careful plan as to how He was to be worshipped. In fact, that’s the basic theme of the book of Leviticus: God is Holy, and there is a prescribed way to approach Him. Ultimately, it is a picture of the access that we gain to God only through the Lord Jesus Christ and His sacrifice. That’s the overarching point of the whole priesthood system and sacrificial system. It was *typical*, it was a shadow

of the Christ and redemption and salvation through Him that was to come. Christ was not only the ultimate offering for sin Himself, that propitiated or satisfied the demand of God, but He is our high priest, like Aaron, who went inside the veil and, ultimately made that offering that opened the way to God in heaven for us today (**Hebrews 8-10**).

Way back then, Moses appointed Aaron, his brother, to be the high priest, a symbol of the Christ, who would one day come, and Moses very carefully prescribed the way that the worship of God was to be carried out. In fact, if you back up to **Leviticus 8**, you will find a recurring phrase:

**Leviticus 8:13 “And Moses brought Aaron's sons, and put coats upon them, and girded them with girdles, and put bonnets upon them; as the LORD commanded Moses.”**

**Leviticus 8:17 “But the bullock, and his hide, his flesh, and his dung, he burnt with fire without the camp; as the Lord commanded Moses.”**

**Leviticus 8:21 “And he washed the inwards and the legs in water; and Moses burnt the whole ram upon the altar: it was a burnt sacrifice for a sweet savour, and an offering made by fire unto the Lord; as the Lord commanded Moses.”**

**Leviticus 8:29 “And Moses took the breast, and waved it for a wave offering before the Lord: for of the ram of consecration it was Moses’ part; as the Lord commanded Moses.”**

**Leviticus 8:34-36 “As he hath done this day, so the Lord hath commanded to do, to make an atonement for you. Therefore shall ye abide at the door of the tabernacle of the congregation day and night seven days, and keep the charge of the Lord, that ye die not: for so I am commanded. So Aaron and his sons did all things which the Lord commanded by the hand of Moses.”**

Now, I go through all of that to point this out: do you suppose that God was particular? Can we read that and conclude that “worship is worship, and it really doesn’t make any difference how we worship because God is only concerned about our hearts and our sincerity?” God told them back there to do it a certain way or they would die.

I am thankful that we don’t live under the Levitical system and the burdensome, cumbersome Old Testament law. Worship is much simpler on this side of the cross, yet still very profound. What has NOT changed is the fact that God is holy and He still demands that He be revered, and worshipped in spirit and in truth. When Jesus talked with the woman at the well, as we read earlier, the “*true worshippers*” He noted were not a reference to the people back there under the Old law; He was telling her “*the hour is coming*” when the true worshippers would worship in spirit and in truth (**John 4:24**).

Back yonder, Moses told Aaron exactly how to prepare and offer a sacrifice. He was very specific. It was to be placed on the altar exactly as God desired, and if he did it according to God’s word, Moses said that the glory of the Lord would appear to Aaron, and fire would fall from heaven and consume the sacrifice, showing that God had accepted it. Well, all of the congregation gathered around, and they watched as Aaron very carefully carried out God’s instructions to the very letter.

**Leviticus 9:24 “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.”**

What an awesome thing to behold! To see the fire of God come down in approval and consume that sacrifice! You see, Aaron didn't approach the altar willy-nilly and just place whatever he wanted to on it in some casual or arrogant way. He didn't dare.

**Leviticus 9:5 “And they brought that which Moses commanded...”**

Aaron feared the Lord, and he only brought to God what God asked for. But his sons were a different story. These two newly appointed priests under their father, Aaron, stepped up to burn incense before the Lord.

**Leviticus 10:1 “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.”**

What a difference here, between what we read in the two previous chapters, how their father did as the Lord commanded to the letter, and how Nadab and Abihu did that which the Lord did not command.

There is a lot of speculation about what exactly the sin of Nadab and Abihu was. Some say they shouldn't have been burning incense at all, or that their offering was performed at the wrong time. That's not what the Bible says here. The record says that they offered “*strange fire before the Lord.*”

Throughout the year, incense was to be burned upon the golden altar twice every day, once in the morning and once in the evening, then yearly on the Day of Atonement, the high priest, which was Aaron, was to take incense into the holy of holies and burn it before the mercy seat.

**Leviticus 16:12 “And he shall take a censer full of burning coals of fire from off the altar before the Lord, and his hands full of sweet incense beaten small, and bring it within the veil:”**

Now, why was that important? Why would God be concerned about such a procedure? Because the fire upon the altar, you see, came from God. God kindled *that* fire; it was divine in origin. The Bible doesn't give us every detail about what Nadab and Abihu did, and what may or may not have been wrong with it, but it does tell us this much: the fire they used was “*strange fire.*” That means it was *alien or foreign*. In other words, it was unholy and unsanctified. It didn't come from the Lord. It was from their own thinking. We don't know where they got it, but it was not the fire that God had prescribed.

Some say, *well they were new priests and they may have gotten excited when they saw the fire of God come down and fall upon the altar and heard the people shout, so they got caught up in the moment and grabbed the censers and started burning incense...* Regardless of why they did it, what they did was wrong. It was presumptuous and sinful. It was an act of will worship: they were doing what pleased them instead of what pleased God.

Notice what the Bible does NOT say: It does not say that they did that which the Lord *forbade*. It does not say that they did what God had told them *not* to do. That is very significant. Some people think that anything that God doesn't explicitly forbid is fine in worship, but that's not what the Bible says.

**Leviticus 10:1 "...offered strange fire before the Lord, which he commanded them not."**

In other words, God didn't say, "Thou shalt not..." Rather, His worship had already been outlined and they were presumptuously adding to it and substituting for what God had said to do. Did you know that "*Nadab*" in the Hebrew means "*liberal*." Bible names were significant in their meanings, and I find that interesting. When we think of the word *liberal* today, in theological terms, what do we think of? A liberal is someone who takes a loose and permissive view of the word of God. The liberal often says things like, *as long as the Bible doesn't say NOT to do it, then it must be alright*. That's apparently what Nadab and his brother thought. Wherever they had obtained the fire from, God didn't say NOT to get it from there. But, you see, God really did tell them NOT to when He told them where TO get it. What God said *positively* excluded everything else.

Can you imagine the kind of law book that they would've had to carry around, the weight of the scrolls they would've had to tote about and how burdensome it would've been? Imagine how impossible it'd been for those scribes and experts of the law to pour over the law and commit it to their hearts had God anticipated every single possible deviation or departure or device that man's imagination would come up with over the stream of time, and had to spell every one of them out and write them down? *Don't do this, and don't do that. Someone might think to do it this way, but don't do that either...* That's not how the Bible teaches. Rather, God told them what TO do. He outlined His pattern and His plan of worship. Anything that was contrary to that was forbidden by God. Anything that was in addition to that was forbidden by God. Anything that substituted what God said was sinful in the eyes of God.

Many today tell us that the silence of God permits us to do as we please. Perhaps Nadab, caught up in the moment, allowed himself to think that way—Nadab, which means liberal. People today say, as long as the Bible doesn't explicitly say that it's wrong, then it must be okay...Well, Nadab and Abihu learned a lesson the hard way: Don't play with fire. It DOES matter what we do. It DOES matter that we only do what God said in the way that God said to do it.

There is a lot of *strange fire* being offered in religion today. There is a great deal of worship that is being offered to the Lord today that you don't read anything about in the scriptures. It's being offered up to God because it's exciting, or it draws a crowd. It makes people feel relevant to the modern generation. It makes people feel good, and they simply don't see the harm in it. But, you see, it's the same thing that Nadab and Abihu offered: *"strange fire which the Lord commanded them not."*

Let me give you an example. Friend, did you know that there is not one word in the New Testament that authorized instrumental music in the worship of the church? Not one single word.

**Ephesians 5:19 "Speaking to yourselves in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord."**

**Colossians 3:16 “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom; teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord.”**

If you can tell me how a song played on the piano teaches anybody anything, I'd be interested to hear it. If you can tell me how a melody pumped out on an organ can somehow teach, edify, instruct or admonish a person, I'd be interested to know how that can be done. The Bible says that in our singing and our music, we are to teach and admonish one another in psalms, hymns and spiritual songs and we're to do that by "*singing with grace in (our) hearts to the Lord.*"

Someone says, *it doesn't really matter that Paul didn't mention instrumental music; that's just incidental because we're all still singing.* But, you see, with instrumental music, we're no longer just doing what God commanded, and that is singing. We're now also playing; something that God did NOT tell us to do. He said that we are to make melody in our heart, not on the strings of an instrument. We are to praise Him with the fruit of our lips, not on the strings of a guitar or the keys of a piano or the pipes of an organ or with a set of drums.

I am very aware that people in the Old Testament used such instruments to praise God. But they also offered incense in censers containing fire that came from beneath an altar holding an animal sacrifice. Nobody that I know of is proposing that we do that today. You see, the New Testament says nothing of doing those things. Neither does it say anything about playing an instrument in the worship of the church. If we're going to leave animal sacrifices and incense and all of those other things back under the old law, then we have to leave instrumental music back there where it belongs as well.

Is it merely coincidence that the only commandments given to the early church in the New Testament that pertained to music were to *sing*? Church history shows us that the early church did not use instrumental music and it did not appear in so-called "Christian worship" for nearly 600 years after the church was established in the first century.

You see, worship is serious business, and it requires three things to be accepted of the Lord: the right motive, the right mandate and the right method. That is, it has to be offered in the right spirit, or from the heart. It has to be what God has mandated, or commanded. And it has to be done that way that God revealed it in His word.

**John 4:24 “God is a Spirit: and they that worship him must worship him in spirit and in truth.”**

If worship isn't performed in spirit and in truth, then it is *strange fire*, or that which the Lord did not command. I hope you'll stop and think about that today as you gather with others for worship, and consider the kind of music you're offering to the Lord. I hope you'll stop and remember the story of Nadab and Abihu when you walk into the assembly today and see how the Lord's table is spread. Read **Matthew 26, Mark 14, Luke 22** and **I Corinthians 11**. When you see who steps up into the pulpit, read **I Corinthians 14**. Then look not only at what the word of God says, but look at how you're about to worship, and ask yourself: *Am I offering strange fire to the Lord?*

What happened to Nadab and Abihu?

**Leviticus 10:1-2 “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.”**

Now that seems harsh. That seems excessive to us today as we read that from the standpoint of human wisdom. Why would God be so punitive? Well, the Lord doesn't strike people dead who offer unscriptural worship today, but you see, God was making an example back there out of Aaron's sons. He was telling those people then as well as us today, that it matters how we worship. In **Leviticus 9**, Aaron followed God's pattern and what happened? Fire fell down from heaven in approval of the sacrifice. But then, in the next chapter, his sons disregarded the pattern and fire fell down in judgment upon them. That's a warning to us, even today.

Aaron must have been very sad as he watched his sons die like that. Perhaps if we had been Aaron, we would've remonstrated, argued and protested with God. But, if Aaron was so disposed, Moses stopped him.

**Leviticus 10:3 “...This is it that the Lord spake, saying, I will be sanctified in them that come nigh me, and before all the people I will be glorified. And Aaron held his peace.”**

Aaron couldn't argue with that. The sin of those young men was not a sin of ignorance. It was a sin of pride and self will. They worshipped their own way. What could Aaron say? He was the high priest; he knew what God had said, and he now saw that God meant what He said. The deaths of those two notable and respected men of Israel preached a sermon to the people that day, and it preaches a sermon to us yet today: *God will be sanctified in those who come before Him*. In other words, Don't play with fire.