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THE SIN OF STRANGE FIRE

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Text: "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."—Lev. 10: 1.

Here is a weird and unique incident in the story of the chosen people. The text records a religious tragedy. It transpired during Israel's wilderness wanderings. It followed hard upon one of the sublimest hours in the nation's history.

The descent of the holy fire had just taken place. The tabernacle, that temple-tent of a pilgrim people, had been finished. The altars were complete and the sacrifices had been laid thereon. Around this shrine of their faith gather an expectant people in the solemn act of worship. There stands Moses, the man of God, who had led the nation out of slavery. And there is Aaron, the high priest, whose function is to mediate between the people and eternal mysteries. These two have just lifted their hands in benediction upon the great congregation.

Now will God answer? Every heart is intense. Will Jehovah indicate, by some outward sign, His presence and assure them that the cry of a nation's soul has entered into the heart of the Infinite?

Suddenly, as they wait, a flame of miraculous fire parts from the Shekinah in the holy place, leaps upon the altar, and

kindles the sacrifices. The glory of the Lord has appeared unto His people. Heaven has answered. And "when all the people saw, they shouted and fell on their faces."

The holy fire had come, and the command was that Israel must never allow it to die out. From that altar the nation was to light its firesides, and with the flame of that fire, the priests were to kindle every sacrifice offered for the people's sins.

Hardly has the mighty shout died from the camp before Nadab and Abihu desecrate the hour. They were priests, the older sons of Aaron, and the last of whom sacrilege was to be expected. Yet these are the men who count the holy fire a common thing. Filling their censers with strange fire, in the afterglow of this august ceremonial, they attempt to enter the holy of holies, a place they were not permitted to enter under any circumstances, and offer the strange fire before the Lord. The penalty was swift and terrible. In the very act of committing blasphemy, they fell dead. Clad in their priestly raiments, swinging their smoking censers, seemingly offering to God worship, these profane priests were smitten. "And there went out fire from the Lord, and devoured them; and they died before the Lord." The tragedy must have spread consternation through the camp. The people spoke in whispers, and a moan took the place of the shout which was but awhile ago on the nation's lips.

It was a strange funeral. Moses and Aaron come and stand over the dead. They are Aaron's sons, and the grief of a father for his children is breaking his heart. But he is high priest also and must not be disloyal to the God his sons have profaned. It is a battle between grief and duty. Which will win? As they stand there Moses quietly says to his brother: "Aaron, this is 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!"

Not a murmur, not a sob, only a mist before his eyes the people could not see. His was a silent grief. It is one of the sublimest instances on record of a man rising above the ties of natural affection out of loyalty to God and public duty.

Let us stop a moment to honor the memory of this Jewish priest. His faith was great. Could you have stood as true? Could I?

No outward signs of mourning were allowed. There was to be no uncovering of the head nor rending of the clothes. The people were not permitted to lament men guilty of such sacrilege.

Carried by their cousins, the bodies of the dead priests were borne out. There was no mark of fire on them. Their priestly robes were intact. A bolt of divine wrath had smitten. "So they went near, and carried them in their coats out of the camp."

A deep solemnity fell upon the people, and a strange message came from God 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; it shall be a statute forever throughout your generations. And that ye may put a difference between holy and unholy, and between clean and unclean." Such is the story of Nadab and Abihu, the priests who offered the strange fire before the Lord.

THE SIN.

What was their sin? So far as the act of which they were guilty is concerned, there is no repetition. The forms of worship have changed. Types have been supplanted by the prototype and symbols have given way to the spirit. We no longer worship God with swinging censers and smoking altars and visible fire. As to the act, the offense of the strange fire is not to be repeated, but as to the sin behind the act, nothing is more common. It has become so common that it has almost ceased to provoke comment.

IT IS THE SIN OF TREATING AS COMMON A THING GOD HAS MADE
HOLY.

The thing may be a sacrament.

It may be the sacrament of baptism, when parental faith

enters into covenant relations with God, and makes a holy vow to train up the child in the fear, nurture, and admonition of the Lord. That hour is sacred, and to depise the vows of the baptismal altar is to be guilty of sacrilege.

It may be the sacrament of the Lord's Supper. To treat as common those symbols of the body and blood of our Lord, to neglect Christ's command, "Do this in remembrance of me," is to be guilty of the sin of the strange fire. It is to commit the sacrilege against which Paul warns when he says: "Whosoever shall eat this bread, and drink this cup of the Lord, unworthily, shall be guilty of the body and blood of the Lord."

The thing may be a name. It may be God's name. It may be the violation of that law which says: "Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain, for the Lord will not hold him guiltless that taketh his name in vain." The sin of profanity is the sin of the strange fire.

The thing may be a day. It may be God's holy Sabbath. It may be the violation of that divine law which says: "Remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy." To treat the Sabbath as a common day, to make it a day of sport or secular work is to get into the class of Nadab and Abihu. Even priests may do a thing like this. Those who minister in holy things may assail the sanctity of the Sabbath. When they do, they drag their priesthood down to the level of the men for whose death Israel was forbidden to mourn.

The thing may be a book. It may be God's book. It may be the Holy Scriptures, written by holy men who spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost. To treat the Bible as a common book, as mere literature, to drag it down to the level of any other book, is to commit the sacrilege of the strange fire.

Or the holy thing may be something beyond all this. It may be the Holy Son of God Himself. To approach Christ without reverence, to deny His deity, is sacrilege. It is bad enough to despise Moses' law, but "of how much sorer punishment, suppose ye, shall he be thought worthy, who hath trodden under foot the Son of God, and hath counted the blood of the covenant, wherewith he was sanctified, an unholy thing?"

These are some of the forms which this sin may take. God is a holy God in all that He is and does and makes Himself known.

But there are those who say: "What of it? Is not our fire as good as His? If I choose to disobey the vows I took at the baptism of my child who shall call me to account? If I choose to treat the communion as superfluous, who shall say me nay? Suppose Moses did say: 'Remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy'; suppose he did forbid profanity, who is Moses that he should bind the conscience of the twentieth century? Suppose I do reject Christ, and pay no attention to Calvary, is not this a free country? May not a man do as he pleases?"

Reverence is going out of fashion. Respect for constituted authority is on the wane. People no longer uncover their heads for anything. There is no longer anywhere a spot where men feel a solemn awe and concerning which the divine voice seems to say: "Draw not nigh hither; put off thy shoes from off thy feet, for the place whereon thou standest is holy ground." There is no longer anywhere a silence in which men seem to feel the call of God, and to which, with holy awe, they answer: "Speak, Lord, for thy servant heareth."

Men have grown "too scientific to be superstitious." The sin of the strange fire is a common sin. The fact that the penalty does not come in the old way is no proof that it does not come; nor any sign that sacrilege in modern times will be allowed to go unscathed.

We need a revival of reverence, of respect for constituted authority. Our doctrine of personal liberty has gone to seed.

We are hatching here in America a brood of malcontents who have no respect for anything. The only law they recognize is their lusts. They mistake liberty for license. They need to feel the grip of a strong hand and to hear a voice that has the right to command.

They will not get it short of an altar. The nation or age which breaks away from awe of holy things will not hesitate

to make short shift of every other restraint. There is no greatness without reverence. No life which refuses to bow in the august presence of the Eternal and cry, "Holy! holy! holy!" can be truly great.

God give us a revival of reverence for His sacraments, His name, His day, His Book, His Son! God give us a new faith in the unseen! God emancipate us from the bondage of the material and clothe us with that vision which is "the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen!"

When we go deeper into the story, we find that the sacrilege of these bold priests took the form of a threefold profanation.

THE PROFANATION OF A HOLY PLACE.

In the sanctuary, erected according to the plans furnished Moses by God, they had built an inner room. In it was the mercy seat over which hovered the cherubim, and within which reposed the tables of the law. It was the "holy of holies." There dwelt the Shekinah, the divine presence, and into this room but one person—the high priest—was allowed to enter and he but once a year. That entrance into the inner shrine was the most solemn and august ceremonial of the Jewish worship. Into this holy of holies Nadab and Abihu attempted to enter with strange fire. They dared to profane the *sanctum sanctorum* and treat the mercy seat as a common court.

Through Christ's grace, the divine presence is now approachable by every soul and at any time, but never save in reverence. Jesus has broken down "the middle wall of partition," so that each soul may now come boldly to the mercy seat, but it must be in faith. In every life there is need of a holy of holies, a place where the soul may meet face to face with God, a shrine where the spirit may commune with its Maker. One may call it prayer, meditation, or what he will, but every life needs the quiet hour. The Christian must be something of a mystic. Four hundred years ago a monk wrote a book which is even to-day one of the most widely read books

in existence. By many "The Imitation of Christ," by Thomas a Kempis, is regarded as, next to the Bible, the greatest book ever written. Indeed, it is largely made up of quotations from Sacred Scripture. The Imitation is a book of devotion for the inner life. It ministers to the mystical element in religion and its wide and continued use is an evidence of the need of the soul for the quiet hour with God.

Perhaps the need of it now is greater than ever before. We live in a day when the practical side of Christianity is greatly developed. This is not to be regarded as a mistake; but it makes all the more important the fostering of the mystical. No man's piety will last long before an audience in this strenuous age that is not constantly fed by devotion at the inner shrine.

The sin of strange fire is the sacrilege of life's holy of holies. It is the destruction of a religious retreat. It is the desertion of the closet of communion. It is allowing meditation and prayer to be submerged by business. It is permitting the sanctuary to be broken up by the world. Such sacrilege is at the peril of one's spiritual life.

There is a story of the approach to an ancient feudal castle through a succession of gates, over each of which the knight found written a sentence to guide him. Over the first he read: "Be bold." Over the second: "Be bold! be bold!" Over the third: "Be bold! And evermore be bold." But over the fourth he read: "Be not too bold!" For the soul, as it passes through this world, there must likewise be the gate of reverence; the portal of mystery nearest the divine presence where boldness becomes awe and progress worship.

"And thus looking within and around me, I ever renew
(With that stoop of the soul which in bending upraises it too)
The submission of man's nothing—perfect to God's all—complete,
As by each new obeisance in spirit, I climb to His feet."

THE PROFANATION OF A HOLY CALLING.

Nadab and Abihu were priests. The existence of their calling depended on the maintenance of the people's faith in the

God whose mystic fire had lighted the altar. Their mission was to foster this faith and mediate between the souls of the people and the God of the altar. Instead, they desecrate their own shrine and by that act slay their own priesthood.

Is there no parallel of this in our day? What shall be said of the modern minister who uses his holy office to weaken the faith of the people in the integrity and authority of the Bible, to suggest doubts as to the deity of Christ, and to undermine with hostile and irreverent criticism, the foundations of religious belief? Is he not a priest of the strange fire? He may wear the livery of heaven, but he is in the service of another. He scuttles his own ship. The worst enemies of Christianity are not those who fight in the ranks of the enemy. They are the men in Christian pulpits who attack the faith once delivered to the saints. Joseph Parker used to say: "I honor the Unitarian who takes the consequences of his own convictions, for he is undoubtedly honest, but I dread the knavery that takes Evangelical money and preaches Unitarian doctrine!"

There is no room for tolerance when it comes to a thing like this. Christianity is intolerant of any and everything that is disloyal to Christ. It is a false notion of liberty which leads a minister to lend his pulpit to any message or messenger who is not loyal to Christ. Paul has a word to say about this, and he does not mince matters. He says: "If any man love not the Lord Jesus Christ,"—what? Invite him to your pulpit and listen to him damn your Lord with feint praise and smile while you listen and congratulate yourself on being a broad and catholic member of the clergy? That was not Paul's view of such a performance. He said: "If any man love not the Lord Jesus Christ, let him be Anathema. Maranatha!"—"Let him be accursed. The Lord cometh!"

We need to recover the lost note of assurance in religion. This strange fire is a counterfeit flame. We must have the supernatural. The soul refuses to bow save to that which is positive. Nobody is going to endure sacrifice for the sake of an interrogation mark. A man will not lay down his life for

"the great perhaps." He must have certitude. Out upon these irreverent priests who would rush into the holy place with strange fire. "If any man speak, let him speak as the oracles of God." "Give us your faiths," cried the German poet. "As for doubts, we have quite enough of our own."

THE PROFANATION OF HOLY LIVING.

Immediately following the tragedy, Aaron had that solemn revelation from God: "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: it shall be a statute forever throughout your generations."

Why such a message at such a time? The usual interpretation, which would seem to be warranted, is that it was while under the influence of wine and strong drink that Nadab and Abihu committed the act of sacrilege. It was while they were intoxicated that they attempted to invade the holy of holies and offer strange fire before the Lord. Their profanity was the result of a debauch.

What a fearful picture of sin is this!

We are familiar enough with the ruin wrought by the drink habit in the realm of the secular. It is a terrible curse. One father out of every five in this land furnishes a son to fill a drunkard's grave. Ninety-two per cent. of the crimes committed may be traced to the indulgence in intoxicants. It destroys manhood, ruins home, and robs the offspring of their heritage. It takes from the wife her husband, and from the children their father and sometimes their mother. It makes of man a vagabond. It is responsible for a large part of the woes and miseries of human life.

But here is something worse. It is the ruin wrought by drink in the realm of the spiritual. It is the spectacle of priests profaning God while under the influence of drink. It is the sight of a minister degrading his high calling with the vice of the drunkard. It is the case of one whose mission is to lift the fallen and point the erring to the path of rectitude, yielding to

the very ruin against which he warns. Can such a thing be possible? Alas that it is, and sometimes in our own day!

Could there be a more solemn warning against the curse of strong drink than this? It is the profanation of life. It is the degradation of the soul. It is the discrowning of all that is godlike in man. It is the unfrocking of all noble functions. It is the vice that slays the best, and whose penalty is death.

A holy place is important, a holy calling is scarcely less important, but most important of all is holy living. It is the man's life behind his message that tells. An immortal priesthood is the doom of religion. It is what we are that speaks louder than what we say. People look at the life. There is no eloquence like that of a holy life. "Pure religion and undefiled before God and the Father is this, To visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction, and to keep himself unspotted from the world!" No preacher can please God who lives in known sin. No teacher can do much with a Sunday-school class, whose own life is not right with God. The servant of the Lord must be holy.

God give us a new vision of holiness, a new faith in the divinity of holiness. We have been talking so much about the holiness of beauty that we are near to forgetting the beauty of holiness. We need a revival of reverence in order that we may have a revival of holy living. "If any man defile the temple of God, him shall God destroy, for the temple of God is holy, *which temple ye are.*"

May God give us the old prophet's vision of holiness, until in its clear light the deformity and depravity and hideousness and ruin of all that is wrong may glare out upon us; and until, with a perfect hatred of evil and a passionate reverence for right, we shall turn anew to the courts and altars of the holy God!