

NADAB AND ABIHU

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Lessons: *Leviticus 10*

When the Lord gave the Ten Commandments from Mount Sinai, He also gave instructions for building the Tabernacle. The tabernacle was a simple tent made of beautiful materials with the Ten Commandments kept inside. The people were told just how to build this tabernacle and what should be done with it. It had just two rooms. One—the “holy of holies”—had the Ten Commandments in it inside a golden ark. The other—“the holy place”—had three pieces of furniture, one of which was the altar of incense. Incense burned on this altar sent a sweet smell upwards toward heaven. Only certain people were allowed to enter this holy place.

The High Priest and his sons were allowed into this holy place. One of their jobs was to offer incense on this altar. Two of Aaron’s sons, instead of doing exactly what they should have done burned “strange fire.” This means that instead of lighting the incense with fire that was kept burning on a larger altar outside the temple, they used other fire.

Why was what they did so wrong that they were put to death? They were the only ones out of thousands of people who were allowed to do something so important. They had a sacred responsibility. And they knew just what they were supposed to do. They knew that if they brought in the strange fire, they would be going directly against the Lord’s command. Sometimes when people do something wrong, they are not to be blamed. It might be by accident, and we cannot tell how much wrong was in the heart. In this case it was wrong both in action and in the intention of the heart.

Each of us has a tabernacle with a holy place in it and an altar on which to burn incense. Each person has a tabernacle in a spiritual sense, that special part of the mind where we keep our thoughts of the Lord. The tabernacle of God is with men, and He dwells with them. The prayers of each person are like the sweet smell of incense going up toward heaven.

Prayer is speech with God. It is very clear to us that when we pray, the Lord can see exactly what we are thinking and feeling. The Psalm says this about prayer:

“If I regard iniquity in my heart, the Lord will not hear” (Psalm 66:18).

The Writings make it very clear that the Lord looks upon the heart of one who is praying (Arcana Coelestia 10143:4). In the Sermon on the Mount, we are told

to pray in the privacy of our room to our heavenly Father “*who sees in secret*” (Matthew 6:6).

Suppose someone was to pray to the Lord in a completely selfish way, even praying that bad things happen to other people. One could compare this to the bringing of “strange fire” or “bad loves” into the place of prayer. Well, there are people who have tried that. Swedenborg met some in the other world who complained that “the Lord did not hear their prayers,” and who said that the Lord doesn’t help people. But they were told that their purpose in praying had been a purpose of hatred. They were against the human race. They were told that:

“when they pray in this manner, heaven is closed, for those in heaven pay attention only to the purpose of those who are praying” (Arcana Coelestia 4227:4).

Although they had not admitted it, this was absolutely true, and so they said no more.

How might this apply to us? The Lord once said that if you come to the altar and there remember that someone has something against you, to go and first be reconciled with that person and then come to the altar to offer your gift (Matthew 5:23,24). We can live up to this without an “altar” or without coming to an altar and then going away from it. We live up to this when we make it part of our worship to say our prayers in a spirit that puts away feelings of hatred and selfishness.

The fires of selfishness are not the fires to be brought into our prayers. Indeed, it is part of the Lord's prayer that He may deliver us from evil. We do not go to the Lord pretending that we don't have any evil or selfishness. But we can go to the Lord with the sincere wish that we can be delivered from selfishness. A sincere intention is what the Lord looks for. We are not saying that our loves are pure “*...but it is the intention that is regarded by the Lord*” and He keeps on making the love ever more pure in those who sincerely desire it (Conjugal Love 71).

The Lord is present with everyone, and He wishes to be received. Our prayer to Him may rightly be compared to the altar in the Holy Place, and we can say as the Psalm says:

*“Let my prayer be set before You as incense,
The lifting up of my hands as the evening sacrifice.
Set a guard, O Lord, over my mouth;
Keep watch over the door of my lips”* (Psalm 14:2,3).