**THE EXPOSITION OF HOLY SCRIPTURE BY ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

**LEVITICUS-002. STRANGE FIRE by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"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. 2. And there went out fire from the Lord, and devoured them, and they died before the Lord. 3. 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. 4. And Moses called Mishael and Elzaphan, the sons of Uzziel the uncle of Aaron, and said unto them, Come near, carry your brethren from before the sanctuary out of the camp. 5. So they went near, and carried them in their coats out of the camp; as Moses had said. 6. And Moses said unto Aaron, and unto Eleazar and unto Ithamar, his sons. Uncover not your heads, neither rend your clothes; lest ye die, and lest wrath come upon all the people: but let your brethren, the whole house of Israel, bewail the burning which the Lord hath kindled. 7. And ye shall not go out from the door of the tabernacle of the congregation, lest ye die: for the anointing oil of the Lord is upon you. And they did according to the word of Moses. 8. And the Lord spake unto Aaron, saying, 9. 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 for ever throughout your generations; 10. And that ye may put difference between holy and unholy, and between unclean and clean; 11. And that ye may teach the children of Israel all the statutes which the Lord hath spoken unto them by the hand of Moses."*

*Leviticus 10:1-11*

This solemn story of sin and punishment is connected with the preceding chapter by a simple and. Probably, therefore, Nadab and Abihu offered strange fire, immediately after the fire from Jehovah had consumed the appointed sacrifice. Their sin was aggravated by the time of its being committed. But a week had passed since the consecration of their father and themselves as priests. The first sacrifices had just been offered, and here, in the very blossoming time, came a vile canker. If such licence in setting aside the prescriptions of the newly established sacrificial order asserted itself then, to what lengths might it not run when the first impression of sanctity and of God's commandment had been worn by time and custom? The sin was further aggravated by the sinners being priests, who were doubly obliged to punctilious adherence to the instituted ritual. If they set the example of contempt, would not the people better (or, rather, worsen) their instruction?

Unquestionably, their punishment was awfully severe. But we shall entirely misconceive their sin if we judge it by our standards. We are not dependent on forms as Israel was, but the spiritual religion of Christianity was only made possible by the externalism of the older system. The sweet kernel would not have softened and become juicy without the shelter of the hard shell. Scaffolding is needed to erect a building; and he is not a wise man who either despises or would keep permanently standing the scaffold poles.

We draw a broad distinction between positive commandments and moral or religious obligations. But in the Mosaic legislation that distinction does not exist. There, all precepts are God's uttered will, and all disobedience is rebellion against Him. Nor could it be otherwise at the stage of development which Israel had reached.

What, then, was the crime of these two rash sons of Aaron? That involves two questions: What did they do? and What was the sin of doing it? The former question may be answered in various ways. Certainly the designation of strange fire seems best explained by the usual supposition that it means fire not taken from the altar. The other explanations, which make the sin to have been offering at an unauthorised time, or offering incense not compounded according to the prescription, give an unnatural meaning to the phrase. It was the fire which was wrong,--that is, it was fire which they had kindled, caught up from some common culinary hearth, or created by themselves in some way.

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 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. God must kindle the flame in our hearts if we are to render these else cold hearts to Him.

The prayers I bring will then be sweet indeed

If Thou the Spirit give, by which I pray.

The swift, terrible punishment does indeed bear marks of the severity of that earlier stage of revelation. But it was not disproportioned to the offence, and it was not the cruelty of a martinet who avenged ceremonial lapses with penalties which should have been kept for moral offences. 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. If His people do not set forth His infinite separation from all evil and elevation above all creatures, He will proclaim these truths in lightning that kills and thunder that roars. It is a universal law which Moses sternly spoke to Aaron instead of comfort, bidding him recognise the necessity of the fearful blow to his paternal heart. You only have I known of all the families of the earth, therefore I will punish you for all your iniquities.

The prohibition to Aaron and his sons to show signs of mourning is as stern as the rest of the story, and serves to insist upon the true point of view from which to regard it. For the official representatives of the divine order of worship to mourn the deaths of its assailants would have seemed to indicate their murmuring at God's judgments, and might have led them to participate in the sin while they lamented its punishment. It is hard to mourn and not to repine. Affection blinds to the ill-desert of its objects. Nadab's and Abihu's stark corpses lying in the forecourt of the sanctuary, and Aaron's dry eyes and undisturbed attire, proclaim the same truths,--the gravity of the dead men's sin, and the righteous judgment of God. But the people might sorrow, for their mourning would help to imprint on them more deeply the lessons of the dread event.

While the victims cousins carried their bodies to their graves in the sand, their father and brothers had to remain in the Tabernacle, because the anointing oil of Jehovah is upon you. That oil, as the symbol of the Spirit, separates those on whom it is poured from all contact with death, from participation in sin, from the weight of sorrow. What have immortality, righteousness, joy in the Holy Ghost, to do with these dark shadows? Those whom God has called to His immediate service must hold themselves apart from earthly passions, and must control natural affection, if indulging it imperils their clear witness to God's righteous will.

The prohibition (verses 8-11) of wine and strong drink during the discharge of the priestly functions seems to suggest that Nadab and Abihu had committed their sin while in some degree intoxicated. Be that as it may, the prohibition is rested upon the necessity of preserving, in all its depth and breadth, the distinction between common and holy which Nadab and Abihu had broken down. That distinction was to be very present to the priest in his work, and how could he have the clearness of mind, the collectedness and composure, the sense of the sanctity of his office, and ministrations which it requires and gives, if he was under the influence of strong drink?

Nothing has more power to blur the sharpness of moral and religious insight than even a small amount of alcohol. God must be worshipped with clear brain and naturally beating heart. Not the fumes of wine, in which there lurks almost necessarily the tendency to excess, but the being filled with the Spirit supplies the only legitimate stimulus to devotion. Besides the personal reason for abstinence, there was another,--namely, that only so could the priests teach the people the statutes of Jehovah. Lips stained from the wine-cup would not be fit to speak holy words. Words spoken by such would carry no power.

God's servants can never impress on the sluggish conscience of society their solemn messages from God, unless they are conspicuously free from self-indulgence, and show by their example the gulf, wide as between heaven and hell, which parts cleanness from uncleanness. Our lives must witness to the eternal distinction between good and evil, if we are to draw men to abhor that which is evil, and cleave to that which is good.