**VOLUME 8; CHAPTER 03 - THE PREACHING OF G. CAMPBELL MORGAN**

**FALSE FIRE by G. CAMPBELL MORGAN**

*And Nadab and Abihu, the sons of Aaron, took each of them his censer, and put fire therein, and laid incense thereon, and offered strange fire before the Lord, which He had not commanded them. And there came forth fire from before 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.*

*Leviticus 10:1-3*

TO UNDERSTAND THE STORY OF NADAB AND ABIHU, SO FAR AS it has any value for us, it is necessary to recognize the situation in its widest aspect. While the preacher of olden times declared that the eyes of the fool are in the ends of the earth, and thereby indicated the unutterable folly of gazing at the distances while the near and the immediate is neglected, it is nevertheless true that the near things may be most woefully misinterpreted unless we take in the wider range of vision and see them in relation thereto.

That is particularly the case in such a story as that of Nadab and Abihu, intermixed as it is with the code of laws, and being a brief historical narrative telling how, when the people were coming to consciousness of their national existence, and at the very commencement of the observance of all the symbolic ritual which had been provided for them, two men ministering in the holy place were suddenly smitten with death.

We must begin at the Divine standpoint, and in order to understand this swift and fiery judgment we must see not merely Aaron and his sons, not merely the encamped tribes of the children of Israel, but the whole wide world, and we must see that world as loved by God. We must remind ourselves as we approach this Old Testament story that the declaration of the New Testament revelation was as true then as when the New Testament writer penned it, the declaration that "God so loved the world that He gave His only-begotten Son." All the peoples were loved by God, and of all of them He thought, and for all of them He wrought in all His dealings with the Hebrew people.

This nation had been created by God for the blessing of that world which He loved. Through strange and devious ways had the Hebrew people been brought to this hour. With the infinite majesty of perfect workmanship, which we sometimes count almost unutterable slowness, God had moved to that moment; from the hour in which He spoke in the soul of one man in Ur of the Chaldees and called him to the high venture of faith, to become a pilgrim seeking the establishment of the Divine order in the world and the building of the city of God; through those strange and troublous times of the history of his son, through the long sojourn in Egypt, and now in bringing the people unto Himself and so creating a nation, not in order to have some one people upon which to lavish His love, but in order to have a nation through which He might manifest His love for all the nations of the world.

Thus we come to the third circle, an inner circle, the circle of the priesthood, the circle of those who in this wonderful economy had been set apart for specific work, the work of mediating between these people comprising the new-created nation and their God, the men whose work should be that of intercession, the men who were to be admitted to the holy place to stand in the presence of God and there to intercede on behalf of men, the men who were to move out from the holy place into the presence of the multitudes, and there intercede with men on behalf of God. Thus we the mediating priesthood at the center of the national life, the national life at the center of all the world; the nation created for the world, the priesthood created for the nation.

The world needed one thing supremely, to live by the law of God. "All souls are Mine," said a later prophet of people: His by creation and by preservation. All men are perfectly known to His heart; His heart is the heart of love; His law for men is the only perfect law of their lives; the world therefore needs, and waits for the law of God. Within that wider world there now existed the nation; its specific equipment for the fulfilment of the Divine purpose lay in the fact that the law of God had been given directly to them, that they might know it, that they might obey it, that they might be transformed by it into the very likeness of their God, and so reveal to the world the breath, beauty, and beneficence of the Divine Kingdom.

Yet, again, at the heart of the nation, associated with its symbolic ritual and worship, there existed this priesthood, having as its final responsibility the necessity for the strictest observance of the law of God, the most entire abandonment to the will of God, in order that it might mediate between God and His own nation, and that in order that the nation incarnating His will might be the means of blessing to the nations lying beyond.

What Nadab and Abihu did that day must be measured by these larger issues, for a disobedient priesthood means a corrupted nation, and a corrupted nation means a wronged world. This indeed is the story of the ultimate temporary failure of the Hebrew people: corrupted in its priesthood, therefore in its national life, therefore failing to fulfil its mission in the world. The final example of the failure is that of the refusal of the Messiah. The whole story of it is written in those brief, striking words of John, "He came unto His own, and His own received Him not." A corrupted priesthood, Sadducean, demoralized, departed from the place of loyalty to God; a corrupted nation under the influence of such a priesthood resulted in the refusal of the One toward Whom the whole economy had moved, and, therefore, so far as the Hebrew people were concerned, the world was wronged and robbed and degraded. The world triumph of Messiah will not result from Israel's realization, but from God's overruling grace, whereby Israel itself will presently be restored. The triumph will be the triumph of grace.

In view of these wider responsibilities we can understand the immediateness and severity of this swift judgment at the very commencement of the national life. As to the exact form of the strange fire which was offered speculation is unnecessary and valueless. The facts are sufficiently patent for our instruction. They "offered strange fire before the Lord, which He had not commanded them. And there came forth fire from before the Lord, and devoured them, and they died before the Lord." Men appointed to the most sacred service, rendered the service, but rendered the service in disobedience, and were consumed.

We are far removed from the Hebrew ritual; the chapter which was read in our hearing was a little wearisome to some of us; it seemed almost meaningless - a chapter of offerings, goats and rams, ritual and ceremonial; and we sighed with relief that we had escaped these things, and in some senses quite properly so; but let us not forget the illuminative word of the New Testament concerning these things, for they were the "shadow of the good things to come." While it is perfectly true that they were only shadows, and that when that is come which is substance, the shadow is of no value; nevertheless, the shadow demonstrates the substance. There can be no shadow apart from substance. The photograph demonstrates the person of whom it is but a shadow; you will hold the photograph and look on it, and love to look on it, until he comes of whom it is the shadow, and then you are independent of the shadow; but the shadow demonstrates the substance, for there could have been no such picture apart from the person. We are living under the Covenant of the Substance. We have nothing to do with this ritual, these ceremonies, censers, fires, and this material incense.

We are unconsciously inclined, it may be, to boast our freedom from these things. Let our boasting be intelligent. We are set free from the shadows only because the substance come; those who live in the presence of the Substance have a far greater responsibility than those who live in the shadow. All of which means, not that the teaching of this Old Testament story has no application to us, but that the service which we are called on to render is more sacred, and the responsibilities are more solemn, and, consequently, the impact of this story on the soul of an honest man will be a forceful one. As Christ is greater than Moses, so is the responsibility of the priests of the new covenant greater than that of Nadab and Abihu.

Let us, then, with all solemnity consider the teaching of this story in regard to two matters: first, the sin which was thus judged as the fire of the Lord came out and devoured Nadab and Abihu; and, second, the responsibility which that judgment reveals.

Let us consider what the sin of Nadab and Abihu was externally, actually; what it was inspirationally; and, finally, what it was influentially.

What was it externally? Let us at once admit that it is difficult to answer that question. These men were in the holy place, arrayed in holy garments for actual service, for that is the meaning of the phrase, "they drew near, and carried them in their coats out of the camp" - and they were rendering holy service. It was a great hour in the religious life of the nation, when the glory of the Lord was manifested; and the people were hushed and awed into the very solemnity of worship. It was then, in the holy place, arrayed in holy garments, occupied in holy service, that these men sinned the sin which was immediately punished by death. How are we to account for it? Let us glance on to a later chapter in this book of Leviticus.

In the sixteenth chapter we have an account of the ceremonial arrangements for the great Day of Atonement, and in the course of that account we find instructions given to the priests concerning their entering into the holy place and the burning of incense: "He shall take a censer full of coals of fire off the altar before the Lord, and his hands full of sweet incense beaten small, and bring it within the veil." A remarkable fact is that the chapter thus giving instructions concerning the Day of Atonement and how the High Priest must enter in and offer incense is prefaced with these words, "And the Lord spake unto Moses, after the death of the two sons of Aaron, when they drew near before the Lord, and died." Here, then, perhaps we have some light on what happened that day. I think it is not an inaccurate deduction that in that hour of religious enthusiasm these men placed on their censers fire that they obtained from somewhere other than the altar of God. They did a right thing in a wrong way. An amazing fact! So amazing that we are at first inclined to revolt against the judgment. Let us, however, ponder the matter more carefully. How came it that these men did a right thing in a wrong way? It is never the act that is the important thing, but rather the reason that lies behind the act. God is a God of justice, and He weighs actions by investigating motives. What lay behind this strange act that seems to be so harmless? The fact that in high enthusiasm these men rushed in their holy garments into the holy place and took fire other than that which came from the altar of God shows that they were yielding to wrong motives. I crave your very patient following or we shall miss the very core of this matter. Was it a wrong motive to desire to burn incense before the Lord? It depends on the reason for the desire. Perhaps it was excitement that made them careless of the moment of the Divine provision and Divine requirement.

There is a dark hint in this story. I would not care to overemphasize it, but there is no escape from the suggestiveness of the fact that subsequently "the Lord spake unto Aaron, saying, Drink no wine nor strong drink, thou, nor thy sons with thee, when ye go into the tent of meeting, that ye die not: it shall be a statute for ever." It is at least significant that the solemn warning is placed in immediate relation with the story of the death of Nadab and Abihu. It at least suggests that when they went in they may have done so under the influence of some false stimulant; that they may not have been drunk but had been drinking wine, forgetting the, necessity in the exercise of their holy office of having their spirits clear of everything that could influence them in any direction, save under the complete control of the God Whom they served. In the excitement of passionate desire to take part in the awful hour of Divine manifestation they snatched strange fire and offered it; and fire from God consumed them. It may be that it was merely carelessness, they did not pay sufficient attention to the Divine requirements. Or, again, it may be that it was a matter of convenience, adaptation, that word which may tell the story of the ruin of the work of God in the world as well as the story of its victory. All seemed so harmless, whatever the motive, whether of excitement, carelessness, or adaptation and convenience. But these men were acting on their own initiative, and not under the control of God. God was dethroned, all unconsciously to themselves it may be; and self was enthroned, and that in the holy place. At the center of the religious life of the nation the priest himself had failed to believe and obey. It is not said that Nadab and Abihu were lost. In all probability they went straight into heaven. We have nothing to do with the matter of their individual salvation. At the heart of the national life it was necessary that the lesson should immediately be impressed on the priest and on the people, that men must do God's work in God's way; there must be no deflection from the Divine appointment and arrangement.

Sin in the priesthood must produce sin in the people. If the priesthood yield to the false authority of some excitement, some expediency, then they will exercise false authority and inspire false activity. All the subsequent history of these people is full of illustrations of that great principle, and we may tell the story of the Hebrew people by declaring that they sought the Divine goal in a wrong way and consequently never found the goal they sought.

The story speaks eloquently to us. It deals, first of all, with the question of the end and the means. It exposes and gives the lie to the whole heresy which is the heart and soul of Jesuitry, that the end justifies the means, that in order to reach the Divine goal we may travel any way, that in order to accomplish the Divine purposes we are allowed to choose any method. The essential lie of that heresy is that the right end is ever reached by the wrong means. It never can be, it never has been, it never will be. For the moment it may seem that deflection from the strict path of the Divinely marked out economy may not matter much, because we are arriving; but wait the long issues, and we discover that there has been no arrival. We cannot build the temple of truth on a foundation of fraud. We cannot erect the palace of purity on a foundation of corruption. We cannot accomplish the building of the city of God save as we are true to the Divinely prepared plan. We cannot glorify God by incense whose smoke arises from false fire, from fire which has not been taken from the altar of sacrifice. Therefore, to adopt any method in worship or in work which is a departure by a hair-breadth from the Divine is to defeat the purpose of effort.

We learn from this story, therefore, that the test of means is motive. The motive of reaching God's goal is not enough. The motive which permits an action which in itself is born of thinking or planning or arranging which leaves God out of account is in itself untrue, and though it looks toward God's goal it never travels there, There are thousands of men to-day in England who actually desire the coming of the Kingdom of God, but they are doing nothing to bring it about. They pray for it. They would be willing to vote for it if we could have an election on the basis of its propositions. But in their own lives, in their own planning and arrangements of business, of dwelling places, of friendships, they forget God. Then no voting will help God, and no effort that they may make will bring the Kingdom of God any nearer. God refuses to be distanced to the ultimate from putting forth energy in the life of any man; He must be there at the moment, must be consulted immediately. It is not enough to join with the multitudes on the great day and offer any fire in order to glorify God; the fire must be fire God-appointed, it must be fire that comes from the altar.

To us in this age the will of God is being revealed, not by laws written on tables of stone, not by sign or symbol or ritual, not by an order of priests within the church, nor by order of prophets. Within the sacred enclosure of the Church today there are those whom God has called to prophetic work, but it is ever that of interpretation of the last and final speech of God to men through His incarnate Son. Therefore, I say, to us the will of God is revealed, not even by the prophet, but by the ever-present Spirit Who takes of the things of Christ which are the things of God and interprets them to us. We are not to be bound by the hard and fast requirements of an ecclesiastical system; we are not to be bound to some particular form of ritual; we are to wait before every action, and before every enterprise, and to inquire in the very moment of our desire to serve God, What is the mind of the Lord? and we are to seek the answer from the ever-present Spirit of God. To us to cease to wait is to cease to go. To go without waiting before the Lord for instruction is never to go at all. Moreover, it is to fall under the displeasure of God and to be in danger of being consumed by fire from God, and that in the interest of the world for which Christ died, and which God loves.

To state the responsibility which that swift judgment reveals to us is to take the story and look at it from the stand-point which is revealed in the last words of my text. This is the lesson which the judgment teaches.

"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."

All I have been trying to say is there involved. Before all people He will be glorified; that is the ultimate purpose, and therefore He will be sanctified in them that come nigh Him. Those who stand in His presence for service must be those who have enthroned Him, those who inquire at His gates, those who obey His behests. He will be sanctified in them. They shall be the sanctuary in which He dwells. Within them He will be sanctified, enthroned, inquired of, obeyed. And for what purpose? "Before all the people I will be glorified." God must be glorified in the priests who represent Him. God must be glorified in the service which the priest is rendering. God must be glorified in His own work, which must be done in His way. God must be glorified through that work which He will most assuredly do when His laws are observed. The teaching of the story of responsibility is that in our worship and in our work, we are not merely to seek for the ultimate, far-distant realization of the Divine glory, we are to seek that glory in the methods we employ. We believe in the "far-off Divine event to which the whole creation moves," but it is not enough to desire that event, and then proceed to attempt to realize it in our own way and by our own wit and wisdom. The one far-off Divine event to which the whole creation moves can be realized by God only in fellowship with men, by men in fellowship with God. The deflection of the servant of God by a single hairbreadth from the Divinely marked path becomes ultimately an infinite and abysmal distance between that worker and God. When the skilful engineer would drive his tunnel through the mountain, the deflection of half an inch at the commencement, what matters it? Everything! For the next half inch will conform to the first one, and the third to the second. So here, at the beginning, two sons of Aaron, in undue excitement of wine, or carelessly, or for convenience and greater speed, did enthrone their thinking above the Divine command, and fire from the Lord consumed them in order that the priests might know forever that they themselves must believe and obey if the work of God is to be completed work.

This teaching may be applied by all Christian workers. Suffer me the broadest of all applications. The Church of God must not only be true to the work of God in the world as to the general conception; she must also be true to the work of God in the world as to the particular methods which He did ordain. So surely as we imagine that we can improve on the Divine method in the instructions left us by our Lord Himself and by His holy apostles in these sacred writings of the Scriptures, so surely we shall find that while we are desiring the accomplishment of the Divine purpose, yet all the while we are preventing it. That is the solemn lesson concerning our responsibility.

This is without question a story full of solemnity. It gives pause to all who are called to service, as it reminds us of the necessity for a constant and sustained loyalty to God in our methods of service. It calls the Christian Church ever and anon to halt in her progress in order that she may readjust her relationships with her Lord. It calls us to examine every organization that is springing up, lest haply we find that they are not in accordance with the Divine method, even though they desire the realization of the Divine purpose. I am not at all sure that if the Church would give herself to such solemn consideration and readjustment, she would not find many organizations which are merely fungus growths, sapping her life, and contributing nothing to the work of God.

When we turn from the larger outlook to the more particular, with what awful solemnity does this word speak to us of our work for God, and of the sources of the inspiration of our work for God. The dark appalling hint of the story needs emphasizing in all its applications; the worker for God must never touch God's work in the strength of any false stimulant. To attempt God's work under the stimulus of passion for fame, or desire for notoriety, is to burn false fire on the altar. To us, I repeat, prescribed forms are no more; but the living and ever-present Spirit of God is with us, and the greatest matter in all our Christian service is that we seek to know His will and submit ourselves to His direction.

Yet I cannot end at that point. There is one other word that must be uttered. So solemn is the story that not only is it calculated to give us pause, it is liable to make us so full of fear that we hardly dare touch our work. That is exactly how Ithamar and Eleazar felt, that they dared not continue their work. Moses instituted investigation, inquired why they had been disobedient and had failed to observe things of privilege within the holy place; and the answer was that the day had been so appalling that they were afraid; and in grace, on that explanation, they were excused for the failure. But I think the story of Ithamar and Eleazar is told that we be warned that though it is a terrible thing in many senses to do God's work in the world we must not neglect it. We have no right to say that because the responsibility is terrific we dare not approach it. He has made us a kingdom of priests, and it is not merely the saving of our own souls that is in His view, but the need of the world beyond. Therefore, with all solemnity and with hushed spirits, we must take up our work, praying ever to be delivered from the sin of burning false fire in the presence of God.