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The Death of Nadab and Abihu
10: 1-11

The death of Nadab and Abihu DIG: What was the sin of Nadab and Abihu? What hint do we have about the cause of their death? How did Nadab and Abihu vividly demonstrate the principle of the sacrificial system? What was the result of two dead bodies laying in the Tabernacle courtyard? What are the sobering implications for the Church today?

REFLECT: Do you relate to God more as ADONAI, your Buddy, or as Ha'Shem, your Holy God? Does YHVH seem dangerous to you? The Israelites had to personally kill their sacrifice before it was offered as a substitute. Their atonement was up close and personal. What keeps you focused on the personal sacrifice that Messiah made on the cross for you?

The death of Nadab and Abihu revealed the holiness of God before the Israelites.

Nadab and **Abihu** were not shamans or snake-oil salesmen who infiltrated the camp of **Isra'el** in order to spread the Canaanites' superstitions among **the people**. **They** were by all appearances righteous, respectable **men** and godly spiritual leaders. **They** were **priests** of the one true **God**. And **they** were no middling **Levites**. **Nadab** was heir apparent to the office of **high priest**, and **Abihu** was next in line after **him**. These two **brothers**, together with the other **elders of Isra'el**, were privileged at **Sinai** to ascend **the mountain** partway and watch from a distance as **Ha'Shem** talked with **Moses (Exodus 24:9-10)**. **They** were **the** eldest **sons** of **Aaron**. **Moshe** was **their** uncle. Aside from **their father, Aaron, they** are the only ones singled out by name the first time the Bible mentions **Isra'el's seventy elders** who shared spiritual oversight in **the Hebrew nation (Numbers 11:16-24)**. Scripture does not introduce **them** to us as sinister figures or notoriously wicked **men** – quite the opposite. In other words, **Nadab** and **Abihu** had seemed to be closer to **God** than almost anyone. No other **Israelites** except for **Moshe**, **their** uncle, and **Aaron**, **their** father, had ever been given higher privilege. These men seemed to be godly, trustworthy spiritual leaders and

faithful servants of **ADONAI** – young men of renown. No doubt virtually everyone in **Isra'el** respected **them** highly.[142]



The consequences of sin (10:1-7): But . . . Nadab and Abihu, sons of Aaron, each took his censer, put fire in it, laid incense on it, and offered strange fire before ADONAI, something he had not ordered them to do. At this, fire came forth from the presence of Ha'Shem and consumed them, so that they died in His presence (10:1-2). The phraseology here is similar to that of **Numbers 16:35**, where it is said that **God's fir**e consumed **Korah** and **his** faction as **they** stood near **the Tabernacle** to offer incense that had been rejected by **YHVH** (see the commentary on **Numbers, to see link click Cr – The Response of God**). Why did **they** die? These verses don't really tell us, so how can we understand **their** death and **Ha'Shem's** wrath on **them**? When we encounter such difficult passages such as this one, we need to move away from the details and see how this episode fits into the context of not only the few connecting chapters, but the teaching of the whole of **Leviticus** and the whole of the Scriptures. Is it possible that **they** entered **the Most Holy Place** and offered **strange fire**? Possibly, But, **their** consequence seems like it was more about the attitude of **their** hearts rather than **their** actions on that day. In the next file both **Eleazar** and **Ithamar** also made very serious mistakes (**to see link click Bi – The Mercy Shown to Eleazar and Ithamar**), but **they** were spared. What was the difference?

*Dear Heavenly **Father**, Praise **You** for being the **God** of both Love and Holiness. Both of these wonderful and powerful attributes are always working in every situation that you see and judge. **You** are so willing to forgive. **Your** love has even paid our penalty for sins. **You** offer forgiveness and **Your** righteousness **(Second Corinthians 5:21)** as **a gift (Romans 6:23)**. It is **a gift** because we can never pay the price for our sins to be atoned; yet **the gift** is not free in the sense that **the***

gift *cannot be taken, nor grabbed, nor seized.*

The gift *is given only to those who receive* ***the gift (Romans 5:17)*** *by faith in* ***You*** *as their Lord and Savior* ***(Romans 10:9-10)*** *and their heart full of love for* ***You****.* ***And He said to him: You shall love ADONAI your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.' This is the first and greatest commandment (Matthew 22:37-38).*** *The responsibility connected with the receiving of* ***the gift*** *is actually a wonderful privilege. Many people want* ***the gift****, but they ignore their own privilege to love* ***You****. Thank* ***You*** *for being such a wise* ***God*** *who sees beyond the outward action, into the heart to discern the real motive for why something was done – was it done selfishly or with a heart of love for* ***You****. In* ***Yeshua's*** *holy name and power of* ***His*** *resurrection. Amen*

We need to look at the condition of the hearts of those who come near to **ADONAI**. No sacrifice was accepted unless there was repentance. Could it be that these two **priests** were not spiritually fit to bring **the incense** before **Him** (see the commentary on **Exodus Fp – The Altar of Incense in the Sanctuary: Christ, Our Advocate with the Father**)? From this point of view this chapter speaks volumes to us, that a sincere heart should precede any actions we take for **the LORD**. This is seen throughout the Scriptures. **Yeshua** gave us a starting point when **He** said: **God is spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth (John 4:24).** A hardened heart annuls any outward action that we might take for **ADONAI** (see the commentary on **Isaiah Aj – Stop Bringing Meaningless Offerings**).[143] It seems as though **Nadab and Abihu** didn't approach **YHVH** as sinners but with a self-righteous attitude.



Moshe said to Aaron, "This is what ADONAI said: **Through those who are**

near me I will be consecrated, and before all the people I will be glorified" (10:3a). The words of **Moshe** may be loosely paraphrased, "the closer a person is to **YHVH**, the more attention they must pay to holiness and the glory of **God**." The unspoken implication was that **the sons** of **the high priest** ought to have known better than to act so presumptuously. The same theological point is made in many different ways in the TaNaKh. It is because **Isra'el** is **God's** covenant **people** that **she** faces the covenant curses listed in **Leviticus 26** and **Deuteronomy 28**. Holy men within **Isra'el** are judged by an even higher standard than the world; they are expected to carry out **God's** mitzvot to the last jot and tittle. In their case, the slightest transgression tends to attract the most startling punishment. The greatest of all **Isra'el's** leaders, **Moses**, was denied the fulfillment of **his** lifelong ambition for slightly deviating from **Ha'Shem's** commands (see the commentary on **Numbers Df – The Death of Aaron**).[144]

It is therefore reasonable to suppose that when we **draw near to God** we must **sanctify Him (make Him holy)**. That is to say, we must treat **the Sacred** with **sanctity** and we must treat **the Holy** with **holiness**. In other words, **Nadab and Abihu** needed to display **God's glory** in the sight of the people. In that sense, **the deaths** of **Nadab and Abihu** accurately revealed **ADONAI** before **the Israelites**. **His** holiness was no longer a matter of theory, it was revealed, and when **God's** true nature is revealed, **He is glorified**. **And before all the people I will be glorified."** Thus, **Moshe** comforted **Aaron** that **his sons** did not **die** in vain. **Their** deaths were meaningful, purposeful even, in that they served to **sanctify (make holy)** and **glorify God in the sight of all Isra'el. Aaron** accepted the consolation **silently (10:3b).**[145]

We should have expected **the brothers** of **Nadab and Abihu** to have buried **them**; instead, the task was delegated to **Aaron's** cousins **Misha'el and Elzafan**. **Moses** ordered **Levite** relatives to carry out the bodies of the two **priests** for burial, but **He** forbade **Aaron and his** two remaining **sons** from leaving **the Tabernacle**. **Moshe called Misha'el and Elzafan, sons of 'Uzzi'el Aaron's uncle, and told them, "Come here, and carry your cousins away from in front of the sanctuary to a place outside the camp,** like the useless parts of sacrificial animals.**"** And **they** carried **them** in **their** tunics out of the camp, just as **Moshe** had said **(10:4-5)**.[146]

Then Moshe stepped in right away to encourage **his brother** to maintain the proper ritual order. **He told Aaron and his sons El'eazar and Ithamar** to

continue to function as **priests** and not to show the customary signs of **mourning** over the deaths of those who so blatantly disregarded **the LORD's** mitzvot – even though **they** were **his** own **sons,** and their brothers! **Don't unbind your hair or tear your clothes in mourning, so that you won't die and so that ADONAI won't be angry with the entire community. Rather, let your kinsman – the whole house of Isra'el – mourn, because of the destruction ADONAI brought about with his fire. Moreover, don't leave the entrance to the tent of the meeting, or you will die, because ADONAI's anointing oil is on you (10:6-7).** Rare are men like **Job**, who can mourn the loss of relatives and praise **the LORD** at one and the same time **(Job 1:20-21)**.

The basis for the punishment: **Moshe** had just completed seven days of training and instruction for **the priests** (**Ba – The Meal and Seven Days of Training**). This was the first time **the** Levitical **priesthood** was going to be fully functional. It was graduation day! It was supposed to be a day of joy and celebration. **But Nadab and Abihu** turned it into a day of tragedy and mourning. **Each took his censer, put fire in it, laid incense on it, and offered strange fire** on the altar of incense (see the commentary on **Exodus Fp – The Altar of Incense in the Sanctuary: Christ, Our Advocate with the Father**) **before ADONAI, something he had not ordered them to do (10:1).**



Moshe explained the basis for the punishment in **10:3**. **By those who come near Me I will be treated as holy, and before all the people I will be honored.** The crux of **their** sin was approaching **YHVH** in a careless, self-willed, inappropriate manner, without the reverence **He** deserved, so **Ha'Shem** demonstrated **His** own **holiness** through judgment. While the judgment seems rather severe, this is probably because we don't fully appreciate the seriousness of **God's** holiness. Defending **His** reputation for holiness required more than a slap on the wrist. The

deaths of **Nadab** and **Abihu** leave us in awe of the awful holiness of **the LORD.**[147] **Ha'Shem's** response was swift and deadly: **Fire came forth from the presence of ADONAI and consumed them, so that they died in the presence of ADONAI (10:2).**

Divine punishment has to be more severe at the beginning of a new Dispensation (see the commentary on **Acts At – Ananias and Sapphira Lie to the Ruach**). What was the sin of **Nadab** and **Abihu**? What could have motivated them to do such a thing? They had just spent seven days alone with their father, going over the teaching which **Moses** so carefully imparted to **them** about the proper way to do work in the Tabernacle. In addition, they had just been witnesses to the awe-inspiring arrival of **the Sh'khinah glory** into the Tabernacle as well as the miraculous fire from above as it consumed the burnt offering on the bronze altar. And, do not forget the awesome worship which arose up to **the Eternal One** from **the** entire **House of Isra'el**.[148]

Through **the death of Nadab and Abihu**, we are reminded that **the fear of ADONAI is the beginning of wisdom (Proverbs 1:7).** If **God** is to be approached, **He** must be approached on **His** terms, not on ours. The writer to the **Hebrews** warns us to **offer to God an acceptable service with reverence and awe; for our God is a consuming fire (Hebrews 12:28-29). Nadab and Abihu** are proof that this statement was not just symbolic. **YHVH** is dangerous. **He** holds life and **death** in **His** hands and owes nothing to anyone. If we are to enter into **His** presence, we must do so with some form of atonement to cover us. **Nadab and Abihu** were atoned for by way of sacrificial services and **their** dedication into the priesthood. But **their** atonement was efficacious only up to the boundary of **their** specified service. Once **they** stepped over that boundary, the atonement of the sacrifices failed **them**. **They** encountered **Ha'Shem** face to face, so to speak, without protection, and since **no one can see YHVH and live (Exodus 33:20), their** souls returned to **their Maker**.

In the same way that God consumed the sacrifice on the bronze altar with a holy fire, He consumed Nadab and Abihu. Like the sacrifices, they were brought near to Him. In fact, they came too close to Him, and they became an inadvertent human sacrifice.

You can imagine how stunned everyone must have been, especially **Aaron**, at the sudden deaths of **his** two **sons**. Compounding the emotional trauma was the fact that this tragedy came so closely after one of **Isra'el's** – and **Aaron's** – greatest

moments of joy. It is interesting to see how **Moshe's** leadership ability really shines here. He seemed to know how to be firm, decisive and, yet, compassionate.

This was the function of the sacrifices (Hebrew: *korbanot*). Remember that *a korban* is *something brought near*. One was to draw near to **God** by the vicarious means of the animal sacrifices (which were consumed by **fire** on the bronze altar), not by means of direct contact with **Ha'Shem**. Nevertheless, **Nadab and Abihu** vividly demonstrated the principle of the sacrificial system. If there was any question about the need to send *a korbanot* on one's behalf, it was settled by **Nadab and Abihu's** misadventure. Thus, through **the death** of **Nadab and Abihu**, the holiness of **YHVH** was demonstrated before the entire nation of **Isra'el**.

As the time for the first sacrificial service drew near the nation was in utter disarray. The Sanctuary and courtyard were rendered ritually impure from corpse contamination (see **Bk – Ritually Clean and Unclean Animals**). This was the highest level of impurity; the "grandfather of impurities" if you will. The corpse confers such a high degree of impurity that if the corpse had been in a tent, everything in the tent, even things which were not touching the corpse, would become impure. **The purification offering** was not eaten because it was burnt up by mistake, and **the grain offering** remained uneaten **(10:13-14).** What a mess.

Instructions for the priests (10:8-11): Then, we read a very touching moment in the text. Only here in **Leviticus** does **God** speak to **Aaron** directly and by **himself**; elsewhere it is always with or through **Moses**. This shows the importance of what follows, and that **Aaron**, despite **his son's** misdeeds, was still **high priest**, able to mediate between **YHVH** and mankind.[149] It's as if **God** was saying to **Aaron**, "**I** know **your** heart. **You** will be my **high priest**." **God** said: **Don't drink any wine or other intoxicating liquor, neither you nor your sons with you, when you enter the Tabernacle, so that you will not die (10:8-9a).** It seems to be an assurance from **the LORD** that although **He** had to take **his** two **sons** and even prohibit **Aaron** from showing the customary **mourning** signs, nonetheless, **He** still loved **Aaron** and cared how **he** felt. So, **Aaron** was given the privilege of hearing the comforting voice of **the Eternal One**.

This is to be a permanent regulation through all your generations, so that you will distinguish between the holy and the common, and between the unclean and the clean; and so that you will teach the people of Isra'el all the mitzvot ADONAI has told them through Moshe" (10:9b-11). The priests were not just men who offered sacrifices, but were also **teachers**. To **teach the**

people meant to **teach the people the Torah**, which included both teaching the revealed mitzvot and making decisions about difficult cases not explicitly covered in the Sinai revelation (see the commentary on **Deuteronomy Dg – Judges**).[150]