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TWO TALES OF TWO BROTHERS

Worship in Spirit and Truth

By Edward Fudge

God's chief concern in worship is our heart. We must go farther than that. Throughout the entire Bible, no one has ever approached God in a spirit of genuine humility and reverence and been turned away. Whether God is looking for worshipers or a king for Israel, his focus remains the same: man looks on the outward appearance but **the Lord** looks on the heart (1 Sam. 16:7; John 4:23). "But what about Nadab and Abihu?" For many of us, these two are household names. Less well known, however, are Eleazar and Ithamar, whose story completes the same chapter Nadab and Abihu's saga begins.

The First Tale

Nadab and Abihu were the oldest sons of Aaron, Moses' brother and Israel's first high priest. Leviticus 10 relates how, on a particular day, Nadab and Abihu filled their firepans with incense, lit it with fire and offered it to God. But instead of approving their sacrifice, God was displeased. Fire fell from heaven and consumed the two priests on the spot. The text says that they offered "strange fire" which God "had not commanded."

Before we rush to their defense in

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sympathy, we ought to be aware of one thing. This is not the innocent error of two well-meaning greenhorns. Nadab and Abihu are not newcomers in their dealings with God. Early in the story of Israel's covenant with God, Nadab and Abihu had been among choice representatives who had intimate contact with God (cf. Exodus 24). After a vivid, public covenant ceremony involving congregational recitations, sacred obelisks, altars and blood, God invited Moses, Aaron, Nadab and Abihu and 70 elders of Israel for a special audience. The Bible says these men went up on the mountain and saw God in his splendor and glory. They ate and drank in his presence, an act of communion which in their culture was no less than sacramental. This momentous occasion should have impressed an indelible vision on the minds of all those men present. It should have informed and motivated all their worship from that day on.

But that is not all. Leviticus 9 tells how the Aaronic priesthood was inaugurated — including, again, Nadab and Abihu. These men, with their brothers Eleazar and Ithamar and Aaron their father, were consecrated and ordained in an elaborate ceremony. At its conclusion, Aaron lifted up his hands and blessed the people. He and Moses entered the Tent of Meeting. When they came out again, the Glory of the Lord appeared before all the people. God sent fire from heaven and consumed the burnt offering on the altar. "When all the people saw it," Scripture reports, "they shouted and fell on their faces."

This is the setting for the story of Nadab

and Abihu's "strange fire" and subsequent death. The fire had fallen once already that day. It symbolizes God's holiness — and necessarily also his judgment. The same divine perfection that purifies and blesses the sincere heart condemns and destroys the frivolous and irreverent.

But what of the "strange fire"? Use of the same adjective elsewhere suggests that this fire was knowingly substituted in direct disobedience to a clear word from God (Ex. 30:9). Be that as it may, we are not left to wonder about the fundamental sin involved. Moses immediately says to Aaron, "It is what the Lord spoke, saying, 'By those who come near me I will be treated as holy, and before all the people I will be honored'" (Lev. 10:3). The "strange fire" of Nadab and Abihu was but an outer manifestation of a much deeper flaw. These two men, for all their history of special calling and blessing and fellowship with God, basically lacked respect for the Almighty. It is as simple as that, and we are told so outright.

Perhaps other sins were involved as well. These two might have gone into the Tent of Meeting when, or where, they ought not. They might have come to work intoxicated, or gotten drunk on the job (see the warning at verse 9). But whatever else was involved, the basic sin here was irreverence. Nadab and Abihu did not respect God. Their story forever reminds us that it is a dangerous matter to treat God as if he were not!

The Second Tale

We must also read the rest of the chapter, however, if we are to profit from its two-sided lesson. The following verses relate a second tale of two brothers, also Aaron's priestly sons. The deaths of Nadab and Abihu unnerve the entire family, to put it mildly. But there is work to be done, and Moses feels responsible to see it through. So Moses advises Aaron and his two surviving sons, Eleazar and Ithamar. "Eat the grain offering," he reminds them. They also are to eat selected cuts of meat from the sin offerings. God has told them specifically to do this not long before this fateful day (Lev. 6:24-26).

Needless to say, Moses was deeply impressed with the need to obey God carefully. He policed the precincts of the sacrificial site to see that no detail went unobserved. Scripture says that "Moses searched carefully for the goat of the sin offering, and behold it had been burned

up! So he was angry with Aaron's surviving sons Eleazar and Ithamar, saying, 'Why did you not eat the sin offering at the holy place?' . . . You should certainly have eaten it in the sanctuary, just as I commanded" (10:16-18).

Aaron had lost two sons already since daybreak, and he is not anxious to see his other two perish as well. He defended Eleazar and Ithamar to his brother Moses. "Behold, this very day they presented their sin offering and their burnt offering before the Lord," he responded to the great lawgiver. "When things like this happened to me, if I had eaten a sin offering today, would it have been good in the sight of the Lord?" (10:19).

"Yes, we disobeyed the commandment," he as much as said. "But under the circumstances, how could we presume to eat the sin offering today as if we were not sinners ourselves? After **these** things have happened? Would you take such a chance, Moses?" "When Moses heard that," the Bible says, "it seemed good in his sight" (10:20). Apparently it satisfied God as well, since he ordained Eleazar as the next high priest upon the death of Aaron his father (Num. 20:25-28).

This same chapter thus contains two different tales of two brothers, tales which show us different aspects of the God whose ways are higher than ours and whose thoughts our own logic simply cannot contain. Here lie Nadab and Abihu, silent testimonial to the truth that God

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must be approached with reverence and awe, and that the very holiness which purifies the humble also consumes the profane. But here also stand Eleazar and Ithamar, living proof that God is far less concerned with external technicalities than with the inner motives of the heart. Nor do they stand alone in the Old Testament, as

we see in the story of Hezekiah's great Passover, perhaps 500 years later.

Hezekiah's Great Passover

No king in Jerusalem was ever more wicked than Ahaz. Apostate from the beginning,

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his evil increased with the years. He erected idolatrous shrines throughout Judea, then, with impiety in reserve, he destroyed the temple utensils and "closed the doors of the house of God" (2 Chron. 28:22-25). Not surprisingly, Ahaz' death was welcomed by the godly in Jerusalem, and he was buried without state honors (28:26-27).

Yet from this wicked monarch came one of Judah's most righteous kings, remembered still as "good" King Hezekiah. Crowned at age 25, he immediately began spiritual reform. His first month in office, he repaired and re-opened the house of God (29:1-3). Then he assembled the priests and preached them a rousing sermon, challenging them to lead the nation in repentance and spiritual renewal (29:4-19). They responded as he had hoped. Civil leaders soon joined the holy revolution, and God's blessings flowed (29:20-35). "Hezekiah and all the people rejoiced over what God had prepared for the people, because the thing came about suddenly" (29: 36).

Next Hezekiah's vision enlarged in scope to the nation. Realizing that Israel had not kept Passover for many years, he determined to correct the error immediately. Plans could not be made to celebrate during the First Month, as the law prescribes, so Hezekiah called for a national assembly on the alternate date of choice a month later (30:1-4; see Num. 9:10-11).

The king dispatched heralds throughout Judah and Israel, though his jurisdiction included only Judah. All of Israel was urged to repent and come to Jerusalem for Passover. In the northern kingdom, most people laughed at Hezekiah's proposal and mocked his couriers, but a few men of Asher, Manasseh and Zebulun

"humbled themselves and came to Jerusalem" (30 :10-12).

Finally the great day arrived. The priests worked feverishly to consecrate all the pilgrims, but there were too many worshippers and the time was too short. The fire of reformation had so spread that the priests could not complete the legal formalities (30:13-17). Hezekiah knew that many would not be properly consecrated according to the commandment, and he also knew that their hearts were full of zeal for God. The good king interceded for the multitude, and asked God to accept the sincerity of their hearts despite the incorrect externals. His prayer was simple and to the point:

"May the good Lord pardon everyone who prepares his heart to seek God, the Lord God of his fathers, though not according to the . . . rules" (2 Chron. 30:18-19). Can we anticipate what happened next? "The Lord heard Hezekiah and healed the people" (30:20).

The spirit of true worship had fallen on the people and they were unaware of the clock. They extended the feast an extra week, and the Levites and priests led praises "day after day." The Bible says "there was great joy in Jerusalem, because there was nothing like this in Jerusalem since the days of Solomon the son of David, king of Israel" (30:26). The chapter concludes with this wonderful statement:

"The levitical priests arose and blessed the people, and their voice was heard, and their prayer came to God's holy dwelling place, to heaven" (30:27).

Once again, righteous intentions overshadowed wrong formalities. True to his character throughout Scripture, God did not focus on the outward appearance but looked at the heart. If this is true in the Old Testament, it is particularly reinforced in the New Testament, and especially by the words of our Lord himself. Let us look at two conversations of Jesus — first with some hostile Pharisees, then with a humble woman of Samaria.

Vain Worship

Jesus was in Galilee, where he had just fed a multitude with a handful of food, hiked across the Sea as if on dry land, calmed a storm with his word, and by mere physical contact of his clothing, healed the sick from many towns. Now Pharisees, who had traveled all the way north from Jerusalem, came and asked him,

“Why do your disciples transgress the tradition of the elders? For they do not wash their hands when they eat bread” (Matt. 15:1-2). In good rabbinic fashion, Jesus met their question with one of his own. “And why do you yourselves transgress the commandment of God for the sake of your tradition?” Then he explained. God has commanded you to honor your father and mother, Jesus told the Pharisees with their scribes. Yet, you maintain a tradition which allows one to ignore his aged parents’ needs by a technicality in the way he stubs his Sabbath contribution check. Jesus was outraged. “You hypocrites!” he explodes. “Rightly did Isaiah prophesy of you, saying, ‘This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far away from me. But in vain do they worship me, teaching as their doctrines the precepts of men.’”

Jesus charged the Pharisees with two evils. First, their worship is “vain.” The word means “empty” or “hollow.” It was vain because they honored God with their lips but not their hearts. They cultivated pious tones and polished eloquent phrases, but it had nothing to do with the sentiment of their soul. It was empty and hollow and vain.

The Pharisees had a second problem. Their doctrines were born of human logic. The old rabbis were truly wise and pious, but they could not claim divine authority for their conclusions. The Pharisees had taken the best of the rabbinical teaching and put it to the worst of uses. Rather than teaching Scripture so as to enable the hearers to grow closer to God and to each other, the Pharisees turned texts into weapons to batter their fellow Jews. With their analytical minds, they wrapped heavy packages of logic, then laid their conclusions like giant bundles on their hearers’ shoulders. It is little wonder that the ordinary people responded with joy when Jesus offered them relief as his disciples, assuring them that his burden was easy and his load light (Matt. 11:27-30). Also unlike the Pharisees with their “vain” or empty worship, Jesus’ fellowship with God was always pure, the product of a filial heart perfectly attuned to the Father’s will and glory. God seeks and welcomes worshipers whose hearts honor him, as Jesus explained to the Samaritan woman we consider next.

Worship In Spirit And In Truth

You recall the story as John relates it in

chapter 4 of his Gospel. Jesus traveled through Samaria en route to Galilee. He stopped at the Sychar village well while the disciples went for food. While Jesus waited, a woman came to draw water. Jesus surprised her by asking for a drink. He offered her water that would never run dry. Their conversation turned to personal matters and the woman, much-used but little loved until now, changed the topic. It was easier for her to discuss religion in the abstract. “Where is the right place to worship?” she asked Jesus, a question about which Jews and Samaritans had argued for centuries. “Is it Gerazim — or Jerusalem?” **True** worship, Jesus responded, does not depend on being either here or there. It is not “in Gerazim” or “in Jerusalem” that matters but “in spirit” and “in truth.” What is more, proclaimed Jesus, God **seeks** such worshipers, wherever they happen to live and whatever their cultural forms.

“In Spirit”

But what does it mean to worship “in spirit” (or is it “in Spirit”)? Scripture suggests at least three ideas.

First, Jesus might simply mean that true worship comes from the depth of the human spirit and that it is not external (like that of the Pharisees) in origin. God searches the heart, and he listens eagerly for praise and petitions that flow from the core of our beings.

Second, Jesus might mean that true worship flows from the wellspring of the Holy Spirit, who abides in all who believe in Jesus. John suggests as much elsewhere in noting that the Spirit gives life (John 6: 63) and quenches

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the believer’s thirst with an unending supply of living water (7: 37-39). This would also find support in Paul’s similar teaching in such passages as Ephesians 6:18; Romans 8:26-27; 1 Corinthians 14:12-17, as well as Jude’s (1: 20).

Third, and perhaps nearest John’s mind,

is the thought that to worship “in Spirit” is to approach God as a believer in union with Jesus Christ. For it is the Spirit who identifies and empowers Jesus (John 1: 32-33), mediates Jesus’ presence (14:16-18), bears witness to Jesus (15:26) and glorifies him (16:14), who convicts the world with reference to Jesus (16: 8-11) and regenerates believers in the first place (3: 3-5). Like God, who gives the Spirit without measure (3: 34), the Spirit cannot be predicted or controlled (3:8).

Combining these ideas, to worship God in spirit (or “Spirit”) is to worship from our inner depths, prompted by the indwelling Spirit of Jesus, caught up in fellowship with the Father through union with the crucified and risen Son.

“In Truth”

What, then, is it to worship “in truth”? Undoubtedly, the simplest meaning is also the best. Throughout the New Testament, writers express by prepositional phrases notions for which we would use an adverb. “In truth” means “truly.” John elsewhere exhorts us to love each other, “not with word or tongue” but “in deed and in truth” (1 John 3:18). Paul notes that some preach Christ “in pretense” but others “in truth” (Phil. 1:18). To worship “in truth” then is to worship genuinely, authentically.

It is not to perform ritual while our minds are somewhere else, or to recite familiar words which lack meaning through their disconnection with our hearts. It is not to go through formalities, however “correct,” or to perform particular “acts” or to check off special “items.” It is rather to present the sacrifice of praise and adoration and thanksgiving to the Father in words that are sincere — and, to the extent we are able — to incarnate them with fitting gestures and postures and motions which accurately embody what our yearning hearts ache to say. It is to express in words and deeds of homage the new life we have in Jesus who is Truth (John 14:6).

The Samaritan woman measured worship by externals. Jesus directed her to look inside. She was fixed on forms, but Jesus pointed her to substance. She thought God was interested in outward appearances. Jesus told her what God really scrutinizes is the heart. As we have seen, this truth is underscored by Old Testament narrative as well as by Gospel teaching. Whether we are considering the fate of Nadab and Abihu, or that of their less famous brothers, Eleazar and Ithamar, we know that God looks humbled hearts and prostrate lives. Such that approach him do so in spirit and truth.

That is the purpose of praise — to respond to the experience of God’s grace and power, to exalt the one who is seen and known to be gracious and powerful, and to bear witness to all who hear that God is God.

Patrick Miller
