"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.

"And there went out fire from the Lord, and devoured them, and they died before the Lord." - Leviticus x,1,2

Psalm 39

New Book of Worship, Psalms 45,46, pp.56,57

In its letter the story of Nadab and Abihu seems to attribute vindictiveness to God. But spiritually it points to the truth that there are two fires of life possible to man, one of which leads to death and destruction and the other to life and salvation. Often in its letter the Bible seems to threaten. That is because the evil may in this way be restrained. To the good it serves as a warning, telling them to beware of the strange fire, that fire which will inflame the interior life with lusts so that they end up where their fire is not quenched.

The true fire on the altar is worship of the Lord from love in the heart. Any other fire is some foreign love in man which is not of heaven, and so must be from some other source.

That fire corresponds to love is well known. We may say we are warm-hearted,
are fired with enthusiasm, or aflame with zeal. What fire is on the plane of material things love is on the plane of the spiritual. And on each plane there is one origin or center of the fire. On the material plane the sun is that center, through which the Lord governs the world of matter. This sun is the symbol of what the Lord is on the higher spiritual plane. The sun there is His love and wisdom, and the source of all spiritual heat and light. This is the one eternal, perpetual fire, the changeless love of God. This love was represented by the fire which was to be constantly burning on the altar: "the fire shall be ever burning on the altar; it shall never go out." The Divine Love is always about us, omnipresent as the air we breathe. We can never escape from it. It is about us even if we make our bed in hell. The incense of the censer should have no other fire than that.

But there is another kind of love, that represented by the strange fire of Nadab and Abihu. This strange fire is the love of self, which includes within itself every evil. It may disguise itself as good to gain its advantage. One may seem to do good works, to be public-spirited and even pious, when yet self-promotion is the fire that burns within. It matters not where you go, in small circles or great, in a remote village or in a large international gathering, you find these two fires. And these two fires are very real.
Recall the story of the making of the golden calf at Sinai while Moses was absent on the mount. Moses stands for the Law, which was given through him, that Law which was to be the light and guide to life. The complaint of the people when Moses was away represents the feeling that the spiritual has nothing to offer that is worth having. It pictures the state when bodily and earthly things dominate everything with men and they thus turn themselves from heaven and the Lord and turn to themselves and the world, loving self with all the heart and life, saying, "As for this Moses, we wot not what has become of him."

When men have closed their minds against the heavenly and eternal law for man, they make for themselves systems of their own, in which there must be nothing but what is pleasing to the self-love. It is not the true love, but external, natural, sensual love — what man likes for himself — that must rule. Instead of the Divine law of order, they must make their own laws into a religion. "I cast it into the fire, and there came out this calf."

This is the danger that is threatening the world in these times. There has been a vast turning from the Word and making a system based on self-interest. This movement began with the materialistic interpretation of history, which appealed to the selfish affections of the natural man and has carried nations before it. This materialistic philosophy is perhaps the greatest menace of our times. It has been made a religion, for what men love they worship. There is no Divine truth in it to enlighten and restrain man. He can seize what he likes, if only he has the power. It is this kind of love that is represented by the strange fire of Nadab and Abihu. Talk to one in whom this love rules about the lovely ideals of the heavenly and eternal world above, which should establish our pattern for life in this world, and it will call forth only ridicule. Such is the result when one is in externals without an internal, for his interiors he has closed and he delights only in those things which he sees with his eyes and touches with his hands, declaring that only they exist. And when he hears anything about the Lord as God and Savior, about heaven and a life after death, and the sublime truths which the church teaches from the Word, his mind reacts against them. It is all figment and fancy, he says, and he can get along very well without it. This is the language of man's selfhood, seeing the Word in his own thick darkness, for such natural light of a mere world-looking ideology, without the light of heaven, is in spiritual things like darkness. It is as though men said, This is the life for us; this is the thing to live for — all you can get for yourself in the world; as for talk of a Savior and heaven, and a life of mutual uses and service hereafter for which life here is the training, that is nonsense.

Yet all these things end with life in this world, whereas the good, the satisfaction and happiness given and provided for man by the Divine are eternal.
The true fire is love to the Lord and to the neighbor; the strange fire is the love of self. While we are in this world, we are between these two fires. Every moment in this life we are in conflict, and we can turn either to the fire of heaven or to the infernal fire. We can offer on the altar either the true fire or the fire of Nadab and Abihu.

The teachings of the Word and of the church disclose the quality of these two fires, for they describe the spiritual realities of life. We are living in the spiritual world now, although we are not conscious of it, and it is what takes place in our souls that determines the real quality of what we do outwardly.

Everywhere, in every city and home, men are either blessing people with the heavenly fire or cursing them with its opposite. In the writings of the church there are many descriptions of life in the heavens. There all desire to communicate their blessings to others. We read: "And since all are of this character, it is plain how immense is this delight, for there is communication of all with each and of each with all. This flows forth from the two loves of heaven, love to the Lord and love towards the neighbor, which are communicative of their delights." Such is the true fire on the altar of God. On the other hand, we are told of the kind of life that springs from the infernal fire, the love of self and of the world. From this fire come "contempt of others, enmity and hostility, envy, hatred, revenge, and consequently savageness and cruelty... since these evils continually breathe destruction and murder against any that they call enemies, against whom they burn with hatred, it is the delight of their life to destroy and murder." Such fires have broken out in some of the leaders of the dictatorship states, and we see evidences of them even in churches, among those who utter the name of God, filling their censers with the strange fire.

Is it any wonder then that, in the representative incident, it is said that fire went out from the Lord and devoured them, that they died? It all simply denotes the quality of the fire that possesses them, which completely destroys every human feeling and compunction, until as men they are destroyed. It is not a Divine vindictiveness but a Divine mercy that tells us this and warns us in such dramatic fashion. The Divine love is telling us: "Beware of strange fire; let it not burn in your heart either in life or in worship, or all that is human in you will become extinct, so that as to heaven ye will die."

The true delight of life is to forego all selfish ambitions in the love of seeing others benefited. In doing this, the beauty of life and also the beauty of the world is found, for it is God's world. Love Divine all loves excelling. It is pure, unselfish love from the Lord which must infill every good we do and every truth we love. This is the true fire on the altar, of which it is said that it is the joy of heaven. Amen