

## Strange Fire

Aaron's sons, Nadab and Abihu, foolishly disobeyed God's clear revelation concerning how the priests were to carry out worship at the Tabernacle. They offered "strange fire" [whatever that is, or was] before the Lord. And the nation discovered to its horror that worship is to be according to what God stipulates and not however individuals may want to do it. God immediately struck dead both sons, and Aaron was warned not to mourn their deaths. So for us today, what is **worship**? Is it really what so many churches claim it is?

The Church is not commanded anywhere in Scripture to worship God. Nor to worship Jesus. We worship God by our love for Him and, out of that love, by obedience to His will. Worship is fulfilling the first great commandment, which is to love the Lord with all our being. That's to occur all day, every day, all thru life. Loving God, moreover, always results in some form of personal sacrifice. There's no such thing as "worship" without sacrifice. I'm suggesting here that, if we suppose that attending church services on Sunday mornings is "worship," that's equivalent to offering strange fire.

Let's be warned! We don't have the right to give biblical terms a meaning we want them to have. The Scriptures are from God Himself, having His full authority. So regarding worship, we can't simply sit passively thru a Sunday morning church service and assume that we've worshipped God. And that by doing so we've satisfied whatever obligations and responsibilities to Him we may have.

The command to love the Lord with all our heart, mind, and strength, if we abide by it, is life-changing. Christianity is inherently radically transformative. If we don't think we need to be changed in any way, we haven't grasped the reality of the most fundamental of biblical truths. And especially we've missed who Jesus is and what Jesus has done for us and will do. If we don't love the Lord, we're probably simply playing an empty religious game.

Another biblical term we've emptied of meaning is **salvation**. In today's American churches, salvation means being in heaven when we die. If we believe what the Bible says about Jesus' work on the cross, that He died for sins, then we're saved from hell and will be in heaven instead. We can live as we please knowing that a necessary transaction was made the day we believed, and so our destiny is assured no matter what we do or don't do the rest of our life. That's modern evangelical belief. And it's not biblical. It's more "strange fire."

In the Psalms, and in Isaiah especially, "salvation" means God will rescue the Nation of Israel from her enemies. It will happen when Messiah comes to restore Israel and establish a Messianic kingdom. When Jesus came, He preached that that promised Messianic kingdom had arrived. Mary the mother of Jesus, Zechariah the father of John the Baptist, John the Baptist, and Simeon who awaited the Messiah in the Temple, revealed thru the Spirit that Jesus was the promised One who would bring that "salvation" for Israel. When Zaccheus the tax collector encountered Jesus, he repented of stealing money from people, and Jesus announced, "salvation has come to your house." In other words, desire to be with Jesus and repentance were (are) the key to entry into the promised Messianic kingdom and enjoyment of the privileges and blessings of the Kingdom.

In Romans 13:11, Hebrews 1:14 and 9:28, and 1 Peter 1:5, "salvation" is yet future. It's the Millennial Kingdom, which Jesus will establish when He returns to earth. To be "saved" in the biblical sense is to participate in that future kingdom. This is our premillennial understanding of Scripture, and it is correct. Amillennials reject it because (at least in part) their "theology" claims that God has rejected Israel because the Jews rejected their own Messiah/King. (They also reject it because they [nonsensically] suppose that going directly to heaven instead of to an earthly kingdom is more "spiritual.") This amillennial notion is simply a holdover from centuries of false Roman Catholic theology.

Why is this important? (i) Because there needs to be a desire for Jesus, to be with Him, to know Him. Salvation isn't a contract, and Jesus isn't just an agent of God to secure our destiny. Satan knows full well who Jesus is and all that He's done, and he even obeys Jesus (he *must*); but Satan has no desire for Jesus whatsoever. So let me ask: How are we different from Satan? And (ii), because repentance, that is, a changed life, a radically new life following Jesus, a life of obedience and service is necessary to be in the future Messianic Kingdom. To be a Christian is demanding. This is not "works salvation." It's Bible.

But now someone will ask, Isn't salvation about being in heaven? Yes, of course, it's the ultimate blessing that comes after the promised Messianic kingdom era, just as Revelation 21 comes after 20. It seems that "salvation" acquired new significance in the early church age as Jews insisted on rejecting Jesus despite his resurrection and Paul turned to the Gentiles with the Gospel. So being *in Christ*, deliverance from the power of sin and of Satan thru Spirit empowerment, access to God and Jesus' intercessory work are some of the blessings that the term salvation also includes, benefits of the Atonement that Jesus effected. A totally glorious present and future are for the one who loves and serves the Son.

Another biblical term we've emptied of meaning by supplying our own understanding of the word is "**belief**." This is more strange fire.

In Scripture, "belief" is relational. To believe in someone, or to believe someone, means being in relationship with that one. The Scripture says, "Abraham believed God . . .," not Abraham "believed that . . . [about God]." Belief is not simply holding a certain intellectual idea, regardless how true that idea may be. That kind of belief, at an entirely intellectual level, may be valid as, for example if I say I believe it'll rain tomorrow. But we can't merely believe a certain proposition about Jesus, for example that He died on the cross for sins, and suppose that that's biblical belief. To believe *that* . . . is simply to have certain information. Yes, that information needs to be there, in our minds. But Jesus is a real, live, unique Person, the most wonderful Being in existence. To believe in Jesus is to know Him, and to know Him is to love Him and trust Him and obey Him. To believe in Jesus is to be in relationship with Him. Without that relationship, well . . . there's no salvation. See Matthew 7:21-23, where "I never knew you" means there was no personal relationship.

Most of us don't really want a relationship with Jesus. Relationships require effort to maintain them. And they require commitment. Personal relationships exist only because of a desire for communion, for together-ness, and we have lots of other things to do in life to occupy us. We can and will only have a relationship with Jesus if we know Him and love Him.

If my readers will indulge me, I offer here one more biblical term we've gotten wrong. The **Gospel**. Evangelicals talk all the time about the Gospel, but almost no one seems to know exactly what the Gospel is. Too often, the wrong meaning is proclaimed in our churches, on TV and radio, and in Christian literature. The Gospel is not "having Jesus in my heart," nor is it the "4 Spiritual Laws." Most evangelicals assume that the Gospel is, "Believe in Jesus for the forgiveness of sins and you'll have the assurance of being in heaven when you die." This is a partial truth, and partial truths are lies also.

The forgiveness of sins is, by itself, necessary but insufficient to be in heaven. We also must be *in Christ*, righteous, sanctified, glorified, and endowed with eternal life to be in God's presence. In love, God does all this. "Forgiveness of sins" is really a relational term: God brings those who embrace the Gospel into a personal relationship with Himself.

In Scripture, the Gospel is Jesus. *Everything* Jesus: Who He is, His earthly work, His character, His teachings and commands, and all that He is doing and will do in the future. It's everything about Jesus, everything about our need for Jesus, and the purpose of all that Jesus did. The Gospel includes what our response to Jesus must be, and the benefits that come to us from being in relationship with Him. It includes the privileges as well as the responsibilities that attend being in relationship with Him. The Gospel is big; we can't crassly reduce it to a simple phrase.

OK, so why is the Gospel "good news"? Because the One who was promised all thru the Hebrew Scriptures from its opening pages on, who would come to redeem fallen humanity, at last came to fulfill all that was promised. And the redemption that's now graciously on offer is available to whomever wants it. That's *really* good news. A key verse for the Gospel is John 14:6, "I am the way, the truth and the life." Jesus is the One who takes us to the Father for fellowship and eternal blessing. The Gospel is focused on Jesus, the incarnate, eternal Son, the sovereign Ruler of heaven and earth, the One who has authority over and who will judge all humanity.

I have to conclude. We must not create our own comfortable religion by taking terms from the Bible and giving them meanings we self-indulgently want them to have. That's idolatry! Let's instead be faithfully biblical. There's way too much at stake to do otherwise.