

OATHS AND VOWS

The first exposure of most youngsters to 'swearing' is bad language and blasphemy in the home. They may grow up regarding such language as ordinary or not too bad a thing thinking its not like murder or adultery. In the Sermon on the Mount, however, Christ proceeds to expose the evil of murder and anger, then the evil of adultery, a lustful eye and unlawful divorces and then the evil of profane speech. He regards all of these as evil, deserving of judgement and damnation. A right practice concerning 'swearing' is important. It is important to know the difference between evil swearing and an oath which is good and necessary. Examples of the latter are an oath in law courts and marriage vows in church services. A lawful *oath* involves calling God to witness what is asserted (See Westminster Confession 22.1). A *vow* is a promissory oath. God is called upon as witness of what is promised. In both cases God is called as witness and heaven, earth, Jerusalem, or any other is not to be used. (An excellent summary of lawful oaths and vows is given in the Westminster Confession of Faith Chapter 22.)

I. The Divine Oath

God's swearing in his own name shows that an oath is not evil in itself. Examples are found in Genesis 22.16-18, Psalm 132.11-12, and Isaiah 45.22-23. God's oaths preach the Gospel to us as we see from three references to oaths in the Epistle to the Hebrews.

A. God's oath stirs us to urgency

In Hebrews 4, verses 1-3 we read, 'Let us therefore fear, lest, a promise being left us of entering into his rest, any of you should seem to come short of it. For unto us was the gospel preached, as well as unto them: but the word preached did not profit them, not being mixed with faith in them that heard it. For we which have believed do enter into rest, as he said, As I have sworn in my wrath, if they shall enter into my rest: although the works were finished from the foundation of the world.' The Old Testament background to these words is in three passages.

(i) Numbers 14 verses 22-23, 'Because all those men which have seen my glory, and my miracles, which I did in Egypt and in the wilderness, and have tempted me now these ten times, and have not hearkened to my voice; Surely they shall not see the land which I swear unto their fathers, neither shall any of them that provoked me see it.'

(ii) Deuteronomy 1 verses 34-35, 'And the LORD heard the voice of your words, and was wroth, and swore, saying, Surely there shall not one of these men of this evil generation see that good land, which I swear to give unto your fathers.'

(iii) Psalm 95 verses 7b-11, 'To day if ye will hear his voice, Harden not your heart, as in the provocation, and as in the day of temptation in the wilderness: When your fathers tempted me, proved me, and saw my work. Forty years long was I grieved with this generation, and said, It is a people that do err in their heart, and they have not known my ways: Unto whom I swear in my wrath that they should not enter into my rest.'

The message is plain enough, in all generations there must be a heart-hearing productive of believing response to the Gospel that results in the 'trust and obey for there's no other way'. Many 'hear' and perish for lack of sincere dependence upon Christ. Let us, therefore, with reverential fear draw near to God.

B. God's oath shows us the Saviour

In Hebrews 7 verses 20-21, the apostle writes of Christ, 'And inasmuch as not without an oath he was made priest: (For those priests were made without an oath; but this with an oath by him that said unto him, The Lord swear and will not repent, Thou art a priest for ever after the order of Melchisedec:)', When you have a puzzle to solve you look for hints to help you. As the perfect instructor, God used hints. The Jewish ceremonial priesthood was not confirmed by divine oath but that of 'Jesus' was. The conclusion is rather obvious, 'By so much was Jesus made a surety of a better testament' (Hebrews 7.22). What comparison is there between Aaron the man

and ceremonies that made nothing perfect and the eternal Son of God incarnate who atoned for sin and made peace by the blood of the everlasting covenant?

C. God's oath fills believers with assurance

Our final reference in Hebrews is Chapter 6 verses 16-18, 'For men verily swear by the greater: and an oath for confirmation is to them an end of all strife. Wherein God, willing more abundantly to shew unto the heirs of promise the immutability of his counsel, confirmed it by an oath: That by two immutable things, in which it was impossible for God to lie, we might have a strong consolation, who have fled for refuge to lay hold upon the hope set before us.' In the affairs of men an oath settles a matter in God-fearing society. In spiritual things, God has verified his unchangeable decree by divine oath that we might be sure that all the promises of God are yea, and Amen in the Son of God, Jesus Christ (2 Corinthians 1.20,19).

II. Legitimate Oaths

Here are three examples of legitimate oaths of Abraham, David and Christ respectively.

A. Abraham's oath

In Genesis 21, verses 22-24, we read how Abraham's neighbour Abimelech comes to him saying, 'God is with thee in all that thou doest: Now therefore swear unto me here by God that thou wilt not deal falsely with me, nor with my son, nor with my son's son: but according to the kindness that I have done unto thee, thou shalt do unto me, and to the land wherein thou hast sojourned.' Abraham replied saying, 'I will swear'. Matthew Henry comments on Abraham calling the place 'Beersheba' ('well of an oath') as follows, 'Bargains made must be remembered, that we may make them good, and may not break our word through oversight.'

B. David's oath

We have an oath of David referred to in Psalm 132.1-5 as follows,

'Lord, remember David, and all his afflictions: How he swore unto the Lord, and vowed unto the mighty God of Jacob; Surely I will not come into the tabernacle of my house, nor go up into my bed; I will not give sleep to mine eyes, or slumber to mine eyelids, Until I find out a place for the Lord, an habitation for the mighty God of Jacob.' (Psalm 132.1-5). There is a great challenge in David's zeal for the sanctuary. It became apparent that it was not God's will for him to build the temple but we see that it was not because he lacked love of God or zeal for his worship. He was a faithful forerunner of the Son of David in this respect and consequently an example to us. It is sad in these days that the church has to be conformed to the world in order to be pleasing to professing Christians. The worship of Christ was always reverent and centred around the Word of God sung in psalms, read from the scriptures and expounded with reference to himself.

C. Christ's oath

Many find the psalms solemn and tedious but they are full of Christ. They not only tell us about him but take us into his inner heart. A case in point is Psalm 116, verse 14, repeated in verse 18. In both verses we read, 'I will pay my vows unto the Lord now in the presence of all his people'. The only person in whom such a thing has been perfectly fulfilled since Adam fell is Jesus Christ. Many think they have a good record of service but the truth is that the very best of believers are sinners still but in Christ we find perfection. He who solemnly undertook the redemption of his brethren in eternity past paid his vows in this present evil world securing salvation for sinners such as we by his perfect life and atoning death. We can take the cup of salvation confidently because Christ took the cup of wrath completely. Matthew Henry comments on verse 13, 'David spoke the language of the Son of David. John 18:11, The cup that my Father has given me, shall I not take it and drink it?'

III. Sinful Oaths

We must not overlook the fact that our Lord's words recorded in Matthew 5, verses 33-37, condemn all trivial and false swearing. The Quakers were right to emphasize that our word should be

reliable but not right to conclude that all solemn swearing is precluded. As we have seen, though God's decree is sure and his promises utterly reliable, he added his oath for the comfort of believers. The oath benefits and convinces the hearers as well as pledging the speaker. This is seen in Exodus 22, verses 10-11: 'If a man deliver unto his neighbour an ass, or an ox, or a sheep, or any beast, to keep; and it die, or be hurt, or driven away, no man seeing it: Then shall an oath of the Lord be between them both, that he hath not put his hand unto his neighbour's goods; and the owner of it shall accept thereof, and he shall not make it good.' I have no idea how much perjury has been committed in UK courts since I was born but we can be sure that many, with a hand on the Bible, will have sworn to tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth. No man knows they lied, notwithstanding their oath, but God knows and will call them to account at the grand assize along with all blasphemers and those swearing. All shall give an account for every word. Ecclesiastes (5.2) counsels, 'Be not rash with thy mouth, and let not thine heart be hasty to utter any thing before God: for God is in heaven, and thou upon earth: therefore let thy words be few.' Who is sufficient for these things?

Conclusion

That oath in Isaiah 45.22-23 is a fitting conclusion, 'Look unto me, and be ye saved, all the ends of the earth: for I am God, and there is none else. I have sworn by myself, the word is gone out of my mouth in righteousness, and shall not return, That unto me every knee shall bow, every tongue shall swear.'

FOOTNOTE

There follow several things to remember concerning oaths and vows as summarized from Chapter 22 of the Westminster Confession of Faith:-

We are calling *God* as witness (S.1).

We are only to use the name of God in swearing and with reverential fear (S.2).

Lawful oaths imposed by lawful authority ought to be taken (S.2).

We must only bind ourselves by oath to that which is good and just (S.3).

An oath is to be taken in the plain and common sense of the words (S.4).

The words of the oath must be without equivocation or mental reservation (S.4).

No oath can oblige to sin but if lawful it is not to be violated (S.4).

A vow is a promissory oath (S.5).

A vow must be voluntary (S.6).

A vow must be lawful and in one's power to perform (S.7).

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