

Taking of Oaths Forbidden

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Taking of Oaths Sanctioned

(Genesis 21:23-24, 31; 31:53; Numbers 30:2; Hebrews 6:13)

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(Matthew 5:34)

In Genesis 21:23-24, 31, Abraham and Abimelech made a peace treaty (Gen. 21:27). Treaties of this nature have been commonplace throughout man's history. These treaties are not commanded by God. Instead, God allows mankind the freedom to choose friends, allies, colleagues, etc., and make agreements with them. Therefore, the so-called "oath" in Genesis 21 is simply recorded in Holy Scripture because Abraham's life is important for posterity.

All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, ¹⁷that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work (2Tim. 3:16-17; NKJV used throughout unless otherwise noted).

There are many scriptural examples of oaths being made and God's name being invoked but these involved the actions of men who, in many cases, wanted to add credibility, or legitimacy, to what they were saying or doing. In most cases, God was not a participant, nor did He command these oaths to be taken.

And Saul answered, 'God do so and more also...' (1Sam. 14:44a).

As the Lord lives... (1Sam. 14:39a; cf. 19:6b; 2Sam. 15:21a; 1Kgs. 18:10a).

...as the Lord lives and as your soul lives (1Sam. 20:3b).

...the Lord is between you and me forever (1Sam. 20:23b).

The God of Abraham judge between us... (Gen. 31:53a).

The Jewish religious leaders also swore oaths "by heaven," "by the earth," "by Jerusalem," "by the temple," (Mt. 5:34-35; 23:16), and "by the angels" (Josephus Wars 2.16.4). Jesus Christ pointed out the foolishness of these oaths.

Woe to you, blind guides, who say, 'Whoever swears by the temple, it is nothing; but whoever swears by the gold of the temple, he is obligated to perform it.' ¹⁷Fools and blind! For which is greater, the gold or the temple that sanctifies the gold? ¹⁸And, 'Whoever swears by the altar, it is nothing; but whoever swears by the gift that is on it, he is obligated to perform it.' ¹⁹Fools and blind! For which is greater, the gift or the altar that sanctifies the gift? ²⁰Therefore he who swears (an oath) by the altar, swears by it and by all things on it. ²¹He who swears by the temple, swears by it and by him who dwells (dwelt) in it (cf. Ac. 17:24). ²²And he who swears by heaven, swears by the throne of God and by Him who sits on it (Mt. 23:16-22; Ed. notes in parentheses).

Some individuals even swore by the lives of distinguished persons (Gen. 42:15-16; 1Sam. 1:26; 17:55; 2Sam. 11:11; 14:19).

When someone asks God to be involved with an oath between two parties, it should not be assumed that He will perform the conditions of that man-made oath (Gen. 31:53). On the other hand, if God makes a covenant between Himself and an individual, or nation, all parties are bound to perform the conditions of that agreement.

Now, therefore, if you will indeed obey My voice and keep My covenant, then you shall be a special treasure to Me above all people; for all the earth is Mine. ⁶And you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation... (Ex. 19:5-6a).

So Moses came and called for the elders of the people, and laid (set) before them all these words which the Lord commanded him. ⁸Then all the people answered together and said, '**All that the Lord has spoken we will do.**' So Moses brought back the words of the people to the Lord (Ex. 19:7-8; Ed. note in parenthesis; emphasis added).

Because the nation of Israel agreed to this oath, they were obligated to fulfill all the conditions. If they failed, there were consequences.

But it shall come to pass, if you do not obey the voice of the Lord your God, to observe carefully all His commandments and His statutes which I command you today that all these curses will come upon you and overtake you (Dt. 28:15ff).

As human beings are weak and fallible, it is not wise to make promises to Almighty God that may be difficult, or even impossible to keep.

If a man vows a vow to the Lord, or swears an oath to bind himself by some agreement, he shall not break his word; he shall do according to all that proceeds out of his mouth (Num. 30:2ff).

If human beings had the ability to see into the future, which they do not, then perhaps fulfilling a vow to God would be possible. However, as the next scriptural reference shows, it is very unwise to make oaths to God because we cannot foresee what is going to occur in the next moment of time.

And Jephthah made a vow to the Lord, and said, 'If You will indeed deliver the people of Ammon into my hands, ³¹then it will be that whatever comes out of the doors of my house to meet me, when I return in peace from the people of Ammon, shall surely be the Lord's, or I will offer it up as a burnt offering.' ³²So Jephthah advanced toward the people of Ammon to fight against them, and the Lord delivered them into his hands (Jgs. 11:30-32).

When Jephthah came to his house at Mizpah, there was his daughter, coming out to meet him with timbrels and dancing; and she was his only child. Besides her he had neither son nor daughter. ³⁵And it came to pass, when he saw her, that he tore his clothes, and said, 'Alas, my daughter! You have brought me very low! You are among those who trouble me! For I have given my word to the Lord, and cannot go back on it' (Jgs. 11:34-35).

This example was recorded in scripture as a warning that making oaths is unwise, even if the motives are honorable. Jephthah's daughter remained unmarried for the rest of her life as a result of her father's vow (Jgs. 11:37-40). Therefore, it is inaccurate to claim that God sanctioned all the oaths that were made during the period of the First Covenant. In most cases, these oaths originated with human beings and God did not command them. However, God did lay down conditions for those who insisted on making an oath in which they promised to perform a task, or tasks, on His behalf (Num. 30:2-16). Again, within these instructions there was a clear warning that making oaths was not something that people should take lightly. When Jesus Christ commented on oaths and vows, his comments reflected the spirit of Numbers 30:2-16.

Those who use Hebrews 6:13 to claim that God sanctioned oaths are missing the mark

completely. The writer of Hebrews was commenting on some of the terms, conditions, and promises of the First Covenant agreement between God and Abraham, which would include Abraham's descendants. As stated earlier in this study, God does make covenants with individuals and nations. If they agree to the terms, they are bound to keep them or suffer the consequences.

For when God made a promise to Abraham, because He could swear by no one greater, He swore by Himself, ¹⁴saying, 'Surely blessing I will bless you, and multiplying I will multiply you' (Heb. 6:13-14).

Those who use Matthew 5:34, to claim that God contradicts Himself, are misquoting Jesus Christ. They purposely omit the preceding verse 33 because it states exactly what Christ was addressing, and it is in complete agreement with Numbers 30:2-16.

Again you have heard that it was said to those of old (ancient times), '**You shall not swear falsely**, but shall perform your oaths to the Lord' (Mt. 5:33ff; Ed. note in parenthesis; emphasis added).

Christ pointed out that making oaths was unwise for human beings because they are not omniscient and cannot predict what is going to happen in the next moment of time. Therefore, if they swear an oath and end up having to break it, they have sworn falsely which is a very serious matter. It would be better for them not to have sworn an oath at all. In fact, it would be wiser to simply state that their intent is to try to do something rather than emphatically swearing that they will perform some deed by an oath that invokes God's name,

But let your 'Yes' be 'Yes' and your 'No,' 'No.' For **whatever is more than these is from the evil one** (Mt. 5:37; emphasis added).

Christ pointed out in this last scripture that invoking God's name in an oath can be presumptuous, and in some ways an act of pride, because the ability of human beings to perform oaths is limited. As Satan is known for his pride, Christ stated that God's people should avoid swearing oaths that invoke his Father's name. Instead, they should simply state that they intend to perform some task to the best of their ability, which is compared to letting your 'Yes' be 'Yes.' Therefore, God neither sanctioned oath-taking nor did He forbid it altogether. Instead, God's word is clear that if human beings are determined to make an oath in His name, they need to be very careful to fulfill it; otherwise they have sworn falsely which is a sin.

When pride comes, then comes shame; but with the humble is wisdom (Prov. 11:2; cf. 16:18).

For all that is in the world – the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and **the pride of life – is not of the Father but it is of the world** (1Jn. 2:16; cf. 2Cor. 4:4; emphasis added).

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