

Vows are Serious

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[0 : 00] And if you can turn back to Leviticus chapter 27, that's where we're going to finish our book of Leviticus tonight. I don't know whether you're excited or disappointed, but it is what it is, as you young people say.

We're finishing. Desperate times call for desperate measures. I'm sure you've heard that said before. And it can drive us, like we see in the Bible, to turn to God for help.

Desperation prompts us to bold promises to God so that, you know, we might say, God, if you did such and such for us, we will do such and such for you in return.

So take Hannah. In the case of Samuel, she was childless. She was taunted by her husband's other wife, Penina, who had many children. And so in her desperation, she made a vow to God and said that if she had a son, she would give him to the Lord to serve him all his life.

But vows, as King Lee read earlier, are voluntary. Yes, prompted by desperation sometimes and often done without realizing the true cost of how to fulfill them, but still made freely.

[1 : 20] Often, the greater that's at stake, the more that's vowed or promised. Now, up to this point in Leviticus, we've seen what God has been commanding, what he requires.

But in the final chapter here, God actually contemplates situations where his people might offer more than he asks. And these are what are called vows.

And so as was explained earlier, the chapter is divided really into two sections. The first, verses 1 to 25, are sort of divided based on the subject of those vows, things that are vowed or people that are vowed.

Then in verse 26, God turns to the things, a list of things that actually are to be excluded from vows. And so with that in mind, let's look at the first in verse 1, where we deal firstly with people.

So the Lord said to Moses, speak to the Israelites and say to them, if anyone makes a special vow to dedicate a person to the Lord by giving the equivalent value, set the value of a male between ages of 20 and 60 at 50 shekels, according to the sanctuary shekel.

[2 : 35] For a female, set her value at 30 shekels. For a person aged 5 and 20, set the value of a male 20 shekels, a female 10 shekels. For a person between 1 month and 5 years, set the value of a male at 5 shekels and a female at 3 shekels of silver.

For a person 60 years old or more, set the value of a male at 15 shekels and a female at 10 shekels. So consider the scenario then, when someone like Hannah, for example, dedicates her son to the Lord.

Whether it's for life or for a period, I don't know. But if the vow is carried out, then I think under this scenario, no payment is to be made.

Because here it speaks of setting the value rather than making the payment. But if the person then decides to withdraw the vow, so Hannah now thinks that she needs her son back at the farm to do the work, and so she wants to redeem him, that's when she has to pay.

Now it's unclear whether these amounts here are one-off or periodic, depending on how long it is. But what we see, I think, is a calculation that is based, I would put it rather crudely, and don't judge me for it just yet, but crudely, it represents the economic output of the people vowed.

[4 : 01] So adult males are 50 shekels, because generally, generally, exception being me, they're generally physically stronger, right?

Lift more weights, carry more, you know, I don't know, buckets of water, things like that. Adult females, therefore, a bit lower at 30 shekels. Young people have a lower set value, again, not because you're worth less, but maybe slightly not so strong, maybe needing more supervision, right?

Like an apprentice rather than someone who's experienced. Retired adults 60 years and over, again, have lower values, given the stage of life. So it's not the intrinsic value of the person. Everyone's, you know, made in God's image, but more their economic output of the person. But regardless of whether you sort of agree with me or not, I think that's not the most important thing. What it really shows, however, is how seriously God takes vows. People aren't supposed to make them and then just forget about them. There is a cost to making those vows.

[5 : 13] Now, here I think God, even though it is serious, God is gracious as well, as we see in verse 8. Because it says there that if anyone making a vow is too poor to pay the specified amount, the person being dedicated is to be presented to the priest, who will set the value according to what the one making the vow can afford.

In other words, there's means testing. Very modern idea. Not quite. It was in Leviticus. And the same applies then as with animals in verse 9.

So we read, If what they vowed is an animal that is acceptable as an offering to the Lord, such an animal given to the Lord becomes holy. They must not exchange it or substitute a good one for a bad one or a bad one for a good one.

If they should substitute one animal for another, both it and the substitute become holy. If what they vowed is a ceremonially unclean animal, one that is not acceptable as an offering to the Lord, the animal must be presented to the priest who will judge its quality as good or bad.

Whatever value the priest then sets, that is what it will be. If the owner wishes to redeem the animal, a fifth must be added to its value. So here we see two categories of clean animals, those animals that are acceptable as offerings or sacrifices.

[6 : 32] And then we have another class of unclean animals. So in the Bible that's described as animals such as camels, things like that, the latter, unclean animals, can still be vowed because they are useful.

They can probably, like a camel, transport goods from here to there for the priest. But within these two categories, the animals are also assessed for quality.

So even animals acceptable for sacrifice can have different grades, good or bad. It's a bit like, if you think about it, grading beef, for example.

Wagyu beef, worth more than your normal supermarket variety, right? But here I don't think it's about how juicy or how tasty the beef is. It's more the external qualities like size and form.

And I think I could be wrong, but I think that's, you know, if you go to a cattle yard somewhere in rural Australia and they buy cattle by bidding on it, that's how they assess whether cattle, how much it's worth, maybe the breed as well and stock line.

[7 : 39] But they look at shape, form, and they bid on that. Now again, the exact details are not too important, but we see the same picture that vows are taken seriously.

Once you've made a vow, no substitution is allowed. So you certainly can't then sort of take a good animal back in exchange for a bad.

But it also says the other way around, that we can't even put a good animal back in to take a bad animal back. It does say in verse 10 that a like-for-like substitution is allowed.

But even here, when there's a substitution, both animals become holy to the Lord. That is, even the animal that is taken back is treated as holy, that is already given to the Lord.

And so if you take back that animal, what you can really, the only thing you can really do with it is, I think, offer it back again as a sacrifice to the Lord. As for unclean animals, which cannot be sacrificed, then redemption is possible.

[8 : 45] You can buy it back. But it comes at a premium or penalty. And that penalty is 20%. And so the idea is that once something is included in a vow to the Lord, there's a cost in reversing or going back on your word.

And, you know, if you're financially literate, you'll be thinking, I'm actually better off just going and buying this equivalent animal at the market.

There's no point in me paying 20% more to redeem what I can get for the market value. Can't I? And the same sort of principle applies with houses as well.

There is, again, applied a 20% premium for wanting to redeem houses. Notice here the priests in those days, you know, multitasking, isn't it? Men of many skills.

Able to value cattle. Then able to be a property valuer, a land valuer, on top of administering sacrifices. Pretty skilled.

[9 : 47] Anyway, I digress. The land, however, when we look at it, in verse 16 to 25, the land is treated slightly differently because it's more complicated since it has to recognize the rules that relate to the Jubilee year.

And all land, as we saw two or three weeks ago, is subject to the year of Jubilee. And so when we read verses 16 to 25, there is a distinction made between family land and land that's bought, that is subject to release on the year of Jubilee.

So, verse 16. If anyone dedicates to the Lord part of their family land, that's the land that was given by God to that clan or that tribe, its value is to be set according to the amount of seed required for it. Fifty shekels of silver to a homer of barley. If they dedicate a field during the year of Jubilee, the value that has been set remains. That is, 50 years worth of that.

But if they dedicate a field after the Jubilee, the priest will determine the value according to the number of years that remain until the Jubilee, and its value will be reduced proportionately.

[10 : 58] So, a value then is set based on how many more years it is to the Jubilee. But even though there's a penalty of 20% to redeem it, there's actually a very strong incentive to do so.

Because in verse 20, it says that if you don't redeem the land before it reaches the year of Jubilee, then verse 21, when the field is released in the Jubilee, it will become holy like a field dedicated. And that word, sorry, devoted, sorry. And that's the word that we talked about, the special word. Devoted to the Lord. Set aside for the Lord. It will become priestly property.

And so really, again, if you're thinking about this in financial terms, one should only use land in a vow if you intend to give it to the Lord in perpetuity. Otherwise, it doesn't make sense.

As for land bought from someone else, verse 22, it says this, if anyone dedicates to the Lord a field they have bought, which is not part of their family land, the priest will determine its value up to the year of Jubilee, and the owner must pay its value on that day as something holy to the Lord.

[12 : 11] In the year of Jubilee, the land will revert to the person from whom it was bought, the one whose land it was. And so here, the laws of the Jubilee actually restrict a person from making a vow with land that is bought.

Because if you remember, back in two chapters ago, whenever land is sold, the original family has a right to redeem the land at any time during the 50 years, right?

So technically, the one who has just bought the land, you can't vow that land because that land can be redeemed at any time. So what the priest does instead is to value the land based on the time until the Jubilee.

And so in order to fulfill the vow, what the person does is make an equivalent payment instead, instead of vowing the land. Because you can't vow the land because it might be called on you at any time.

So that's the complication there. But again, you know, it's pretty clear, isn't it? God wants them to be careful with what they promise. They may have a great desire or a great desperation to make vows, but they can't actually promise what's not theirs.

[13 : 22] Right? And that's the logic as well behind the second section. Because what we have is a list of things that don't belong to a person and therefore shouldn't be made the subject of vows.

So we start with number one, verse 26. No one, however, may dedicate the firstborn of an animal since the firstborn already belongs to the Lord. Whether an ox or a sheep, it is the Lord's.

If you go back to Exodus chapter 13 and verse 2, God already stipulated that all firstborn sons and animals belong to Him. This was when they were still in Egypt on the night of the, you know, just on the dawn of the Passover.

And that was because that the firstborn was a mark of His own redemption of them. Israel as a whole nation was considered to be God's firstborn, whom He would rescue, who belonged to Him. And so as a mark of that, so are the firstborn sons and animals. And so if they now make a vow with the firstborn animal, that's sort of double dipping.

[14 : 30] Right? And God's not going to be fooled by that. He already owns something. You want to give it to Him again? Same goes with verse 28. Because there we have yet another thing that belongs to the Lord, things that are devoted, that's the special word that I talked about, to the Lord.

So verse 28, But nothing that a person owns and devotes to the Lord, whether a human being or animal or family, may be sold or redeemed. Everything so devoted is most holy, that is, set apart to the Lord.

No person devoted to destruction may be ransomed. They are to be put to death. Now here, we're not really told or explained how someone or something becomes devoted to the Lord. And as we've read in verse 29, it can even relate to something devoted to be destroyed. However, no matter how it comes about, it is different to a vow in that when something is devoted, it's actually irreversible.

That is, it cannot be revoked and therefore cannot be redeemed. It's been set apart. That's the word holy, means set apart for the Lord. These things already belong to the Lord.

[15:40] And so you cannot make them the subject of a vow. And then finally, the same goes for the tithe, which is a tenth of the produce that goes to the Lord. Again, the principle is, it already belongs to the Lord.

Now with crops, there's a provision for it to be redeemed, so you can take it back, but at a premium of 20%. So verse 30, a tithe of everything from the land, whether grain from the soil or fruit from the trees belong to the Lord.

It is holy to the Lord. Whoever would redeem any of their tithe must add a fifth of the value to it. Every tithe of the herd and flock, every tenth animal that passes under the shepherd's rod will be holy to the Lord.

So here the sheep is being counted by the shepherd not to fall asleep, as on the slide. But as they are passing under the rod, the shepherd is working out, isn't it?

Every tenth sheep is to be given to the Lord. And there's no fudging, all right? You can't go one, two, three, four, nine, and then the tenth one looks a bit plump, sort of try and delay it, get the smaller one to become the tenth, and then you keep the eleventh.

[16:46] No, it's all pretty random passing under a rod. And when it passes under the rod, the tenth animal becomes the Lord's and is not to be redeemed. So verse 33, no one may pick out the good from the bad or make any substitution.

If anyone does make a substitution, both the animal and its substitute become holy and cannot be redeemed. And so what that means is that there's really no point in substitution, is it?

Because if you substitute, yeah, great, you get the animal back, but both animals are actually holy. And the second one, you know, the substituted animal can only really be used as an offering because it's holy.

So if you step back and look at the whole chapter as a whole, although the chapter seems to allow for vows, these laws actually make it economically unattractive to do so, right?

They're actually designed to make Israel think twice before they make rash and hasty promises, which some of them might otherwise do in order to bend God's will to their favor.

[17:56] And, you know, we can see how tempting that is, isn't it? Whenever we are in a tight spot and we want to get out of trouble, we would say, God, if you do this for me, you know, I will dedicate my remaining life doing this for you, right?

Now, you may ask, why does God discourage such dedication? Surely that's a good thing, isn't it? And, you know, when they break their vows, why is God so hard on them?

Well, to understand that, I think we need to remember firstly what we learned a few weeks ago in Leviticus chapter 25 in relation to the Jubilee year. Because, remember, in that chapter, we had a couple of verses, verse 23, where the Lord said, the land must not be sold permanently because the land is mine and you reside in my land as foreigners and strangers.

So the land actually belongs to the Lord. Secondly, in verse 55, the Israelites belong to me as servants. They are my servants whom I brought out of Egypt. I am the Lord your God.

And so, if you think about it, if the land belongs to God and the people themselves, because they have been redeemed by God from slavery, so both the land and the people belong to God, then, really, what do the Israelites have that they truly own that they can make vows with?

[19:18] Not much, right? Everything belongs to the Lord. And, you know, if you think about it, when we become Christians, that is similar, isn't it?

God has redeemed us, the same word, from sin by the blood of Jesus. It wasn't a 20% penalty. It was infinitely more, isn't it? Because it was the death of His own Son.

And Paul says in 1 Corinthians 6, verse 19, on the slide there, Do you not know that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit who is in you whom you have received from God?

That is, when you become a Christian, you are not your own. You were bought at a price. And likewise, in Romans 12, verse 1, Therefore I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy,

to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy, that is, given to God, and pleasing to Him. This is your true and proper worship. And so, everything we can do, everything that we have, is already something that belongs to God.

[20 : 33] It's something we ought to do as God's servants. And yes, God gives us freedom to do it willingly, voluntarily, but it's a bit rich, isn't it, to then think that God should be grateful when we serve Him or be impressed by our dedication to Him.

No, even Jesus says in Luke chapter 17, suppose one of you as a servant plowing and looking after the sheep, will he say to the servant when he comes in from the field, come along now and sit down to eat?

Would he rather say, prepare my supper, get yourself ready, and wait on me while I eat and drink? After that, you may eat and drink. Well, he thanked the servant because he did what he was told to do.

So you also, when you have done everything you were told to do, should say, we are unworthy servants. We have only done our duty. All the right things that we do for God is as we should, as His servants.

There is no need to brag about it. No need to think that we've done anything special. That is the truth of it all. And yet, and yet, God does not coerce us to serve Him, does He?

[21 : 51] No. He delights when we do so generously and willingly. And so, even though everything belongs to God, He actually gives it back to us as a way for us to serve Him freely with.

It's like when parents, for example, buy their children valuable things, like a laptop, for example, or even more, car. Now, does the laptop or the car, who does it really belong to, do you think?

The child or the parent? In case you children are wondering, it's the parent. Okay? It's their money, right?

But then, they give it to their children to use. Now, if one day this parent asks the child back for the laptop, let's say, you know, this is the best laptop in the family, has the most powerful CPU, and the parent needs to run a special program on it.

Now, how might the child react to that request? A number of scenarios, right? But one scenario could be that the child gets really upset because it's going to take away his time to play, I don't know, Minecraft or some latest game on his computer.

[23 : 09] Or, the child might realize that actually the laptop belongs to his parent and so willingly returns it to his parent to use for a time. I don't know which one you would think is more reasonable.

But it's the same with us, isn't it? Without Christ, the reality is that we were once dead in our sins. We had no hope, no future. It is only in Christ that God has redeemed us. And when God has now redeemed us, every moment of our lives from here on in is something we only have by God's grace. As we said earlier, we belong to God. And I'm not talking about our physical life, I'm talking about our spiritual and eternal life. Everything now is like the land that God gave to Israel.

We belong to him. All that we have and all of us belongs to God. And yet, God says, I will give them all back to you so that you can then offer it back to me freely and willingly.

[24 : 23] Now for Israel, the tithe, the firstborn and the offerings belong to God, but the rest, God gave them to enjoy. And yes then, to bring it back to him as free will offerings and as part of vows.

So likewise, our time, our money, our talents, God doesn't want to force it out of us, but to actually give it back to us so then we have the pleasure of giving it back to him freely and joyfully.

Because when we do, we experience what it's like for God to do the same to us. We practice being generous, gracious, sacrificial.

We learn how to be like Jesus. But God wants us to do all of this thoughtfully. That is, to think about this carefully and count the true cost and be careful with our promises.

How do we serve God, not just with some, but with all that we have every single minute with every single dollar and then of course once we make those promises to ask God to help us to fulfill them, to follow through on them.

[25 : 33] He doesn't want us to make rash vows in desperation or in order to get him to do what he wants. But whether it's the promises that we make publicly and we do that, like for example, Michelson and Taylor next week with their baptism or with, you know, the children, some of you later on when you baptize your children or dedicate them or even the hymns we sing and the songs we sing.

I don't know whether you realize that when we sing songs we actually do make promises in those songs. Like the one that we might sing after this, This Life I Live. They are promises, aren't they? Or it may just be promises that we make quietly with God in our prayers. But whatever they are, God is saying we need to take them seriously. Even the vows we make in Christian marriage, they're actually different than those that are made in a civil ceremony because the promises we make in marriage, a Christian marriage, aren't just made to each other. They're made before God and therefore to God as well. And in the Anglican service in particular, we promise in our marriage to live according to God's word.

And those are serious vows, aren't they? And the thing is, you know, I'm guilty of this as well, we often make vows and promises without fully appreciating how hard it is to keep them, don't we? [27 : 00] I know some of you, for example, I'm just picking out an example, but some of you want to be TYA leaders. Great. Step up. That's a noble thing to do. If your motives are right.

And then, you find actually, ooh, this task is more challenging than I thought. It's not as easy that I, I know I'm really enthusiastic, but actually, it's quite challenging.

Now, when that happens, that's when we need to ask God's help to commit to what we've promised, or at least to talk to your leader to try and work out what to deal with it, instead of just saying, oh, I give up, and not go through with that initial promise that you made to God.

You see, even in doing this, what God is doing is trying to train us to be like Him because God is the one who being faithful to His promise to save us and redeem us did not let a single word fall to the ground.

And so, even though we're not perfect, we ought to aspire to the same standard as our Father in Heaven, shouldn't we? And so, in that other New Testament reading, Jesus taught in the Beatitudes, you've heard that it was said to the people long ago, do not break your oath, but fulfill to the Lord the vows you have made.

[28 : 16] But I tell you, do not swear an oath at all, either by Heaven, for it is God's throne, or by the earth, for it is His footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make even one hair white or black, or in my case, grow.

All you need is to say yes or no. Anything beyond this comes from the evil one. Now, God is not saying we can't take oaths when we're in court or make promises like baptismal vows, but what Jesus is saying here is don't try and bolster your words with oaths and vows if you don't intend to keep them.

Because none of the things you swear by, whether it's Heaven or Earth or your head are yours to offer as surety. Instead, just let your yes be yes and your no be no.

That's all God is looking for, for us to follow through on our promises instead of making extravagant claims. In fact, all we need to do is obey Him as servants do, but humbly and joyfully.

If we could only just do what He asks, don't worry about doing more than that, just do what He asks, God would look at all those things and be full of pleasure with what we've done.

[29 : 39] So let's try and do that and let's pray that God will help us. Father, thank you that we can serve you, that even though everything belongs to you, you bless us so that we can in turn offer them back to you with joy and gratitude.

Help us to be faithful with what we have and to be truthful with what we promise. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.