

PROMISES, PROMISES, PROMISES

by Ray C. Stedman

We have come to that wondrous time when we will finish the book of Leviticus. I almost feel like standing and singing Auld Lang Syne, for it seems as if we are leaving an old friend. I have grown to love this old book in a new and fresh way as we have been working through it these many weeks together and seeing the marvelous pictures by which God teaches us, as his children in the kindergarten of faith, the lessons that he has for us. This book has come to be of rich meaning to me, more than ever before, and I hope that is true for you also.

In the twenty-seventh chapter God, most appropriately, ends his instructions to his people with a word about vows to him. Whether you call them vows or resolutions or determinations or promises, they are all in the same category and God has certain instructions for us about them which it is important that we understand.

This latter section of Leviticus is dealing with human behavior. The book began with instruction and revelation to us about our basic humanity, our basic human needs. Then it told us God's provision to meet those needs. Finally it moved into this area of the behavior expected of us on the basis of the provision God has made. It is appropriate, therefore, that it should end by dealing with the promises that we make to God in response to what he has done for us.

These promises, as you well know from your own experience, are made in times of danger, or in moments of strong desire, or sometimes out of gratitude and thanksgiving as God has blessed our hearts. If you have ever said, "Lord, if you'll just do such-and-such, then I'll do such-and-such for you," then you will be very interested in what this chapter has to say.

I must point out immediately that in all the Scriptures, both Old and New Testament alike, God never commands a vow. Vows are never mandatory, never obligatory, upon the people of God. You don't have to promise God anything in order to get something from him. God is a Giver. He delights in giving; that is his nature. "Every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change," James tells us {Jas 1:17 RSV}. Because God is a God of love, he delights in giving. John Oxenham says,

Love ever lives
and ever stands with open hands
and while it lives, it gives
for this is love's prerogative
to give and give and give.

God is always giving, and there is nothing that you need from God which, in order to obtain, you must promise him something in return. All this is voluntary on your part.

And yet it is significant that there is something innate in human beings which makes us want to vow, to promise new resolutions or determinations to God. So God recognizes that tendency and makes room for it, and he gives us instructions about it. You remember that when he left home Jacob made a vow in an attempt to bargain with God. There are records in the Scriptures of many others who made various vows before God. This is certainly something with which we all identify. And what the Scriptures everywhere also teach is that once you make a vow, God expects you to fulfill it. If you turn to the next book in the Bible, Numbers, and look at chapter 30 you will see how clearly that is stated in the opening verses:

Moses said to the heads of the tribes of the people of Israel, "This is what the Lord has commanded. When a man vows a vow to the Lord, or swears an oath to bind himself by a pledge, he shall not break his word; he shall do according to all that proceeds out of his mouth." {Num 30:1-2 RSV}

He doesn't have to make the vow. But once he makes it, God expects him to keep it. There are various passages which remind us of that fact. Proverbs says, "It is better never to vow, than to make a vow and not pay it." So God does expect us to fulfill the promises we make to him during the course of our life.

There are several categories of vows listed in this chapter. We are not going to get involved with the details of them because they largely apply to the then prevailing conditions of the nation Israel in their relationship with God. But the principles behind them are of permanent application, and with these we will be concerned.

The first category is those vows made concerning persons, Verses 1-8:

The Lord said to Moses, "Say to the people of Israel, When a man makes a special vow of persons to the Lord at your valuation, then your valuation of a male from twenty years old up to sixty years old shall be fifty shekels of silver, according to the shekel of the sanctuary [That was a considerable amount, a very high valuation]. If the person is a female, your valuation shall be thirty shekels. If the person is from five years old up to twenty years old, your valuation shall be for a male twenty shekels, and for a female ten shekels. If the person is from a month old up to five years old, your valuation shall be for a male five shekels of silver, and for a female your valuation shall be three shekels of silver. And if the person is sixty years old and upward, then your valuation for a male shall be fifteen shekels, and for a female ten shekels. And if a man is too poor to pay your valuation, then he shall bring the person before the priest, and the priest shall value him; according to the ability of him who vowed the priest shall value him." {Lev 27:1-8 RSV}

There are several items which require comment in that passage.

First of all you will notice that the nature of this vow is that it was made about persons, either about the individual who made the vow himself, or often it was a vow made out of desire for the benefit of someone else a parent, a child, a servant, or a friend. As we all know, there are times when we become concerned about someone and tend to pray, "Lord, if you'll just do such-and-such for this person, then I'll do something for you. I'll invest to an unusual degree in your work." What it amounts to here is that in Israel they were saying to God, "I'll support the work of the priesthood and give above and beyond what I ordinarily would give if you'll just benefit or bless or help so-and-so."

When a promise of this nature was made there was a scale of values predetermined by God which Moses was to transmit and from which he was not free to deviate in any degree. If the person in question were a certain age and sex then there was an amount set for him or her, and that had to be paid if the blessing was received. God gave careful instructions to his people regarding this kind of promise.

From the Women's Liberation point of view Moses here is a male chauvinist pig, for this scale of values differs between the male and the female. But we must remind ourselves that this is not at all an assessment of the worth of the persons before God. In both the Old and the New Testaments there are clear statements that men and women are of equal value and standing as persons before God. As Paul says in Galatians, "In Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek, bond nor free, male nor female..." All distinctions, including sex, are wiped out when we are standing in the presence of God and our worth to him is being evaluated.

Rather, this is a reckoning of the opportunity for service before men. Differences of age and sex, in Israel, made for varying opportunities to serve and thus for different values. That is what is recognized here -- the obligation of service which could be rendered to the priesthood to further its outreach and strengthen its ministry within the nation of Israel, on the basis of the person who received the benefit, who was blessed.

It is clear from Verse 8 that other people are involved: "And if a man is too poor to pay your valuation, then he shall bring the person [about whom he made this vow] before the priest, and the priest shall value him."

Note that he was not to bring him to Moses, but to the priest. That indicates that there are two kinds of vows. You see, provision was made here in verse 8 for inability to pay. Moses is always the representative of the

throne, the government, the way of God, while the priest is always the representative of the grace and mercy of God, the tender character of his love.

If a man were bargaining with God on a legalistic basis: "I'll do this for you, if you'll do that for me," then he had to pay the full price. There was no way that he could get out of it. Moses could not lessen or change the price in any way. God demanded full deliverance of what was promised.

On the spiritual level, of course, this applies to us. If we promise God certain things in moments of danger, or if we try to bargain with him, try to get him to work for us, God expects us to pay to the full exactly what we promise.

But if a man recognized that he didn't have what it took, that he was too poor to pay the price, he could still offer a promise to God out of thanksgiving and gratitude, but the priest, the representative of God's grace, would enter the picture and, in a sense, intercede on his behalf and establish a valuation he could meet.

This is a beautiful picture of those vows and promises we make not to bargain with God but to express to him our thanksgiving for all that he has been to us. When our hearts are melted by grace and we stand awed in his presence and say, "Lord, here I am, take me," or "Here are my children, Lord, take them and use them as you like," these are vows made on a gracious basis, and God promises to meet any attendant need himself. What the people of God cannot gain by the law they can have by grace and, as the New Testament puts it, "exceeding abundantly above all they could ask or think," {cf, Eph 3:20 KJV}. That is the way God always operates in grace.

The rest of the chapter is simply detailed instruction as to how these vows could be paid. We will not take time to read it -- you can do so at your leisure.

Verses 9-13 list certain animals which could be given, both clean and unclean.

Verses 14-15 specify that houses could be dedicated to God in payment of a vow.

Verses 16-25 provide for the dedication of land, in connection with the year of jubilee, when all land had to return to its original owner, regardless of who was using it at the time, because God held absolute title to the entire land.

In Verses 26-34 certain things were excluded as payment of vows. For instance, the firstlings of animals could not be used to pay a vow because God had said, "Every firstborn person or animal that opens the womb shall be mine," {cf, Exod 13:2}. Therefore that could not be used to pay a vow because it already belonged to God.

Then there were devoted things which could not be used, Verse 28:

"But no devoted thing that a man devotes to the Lord, or anything that he has, whether of man or beast, or of his inherited field, shall be sold or redeemed; every devoted thing is most holy to the Lord." {Lev 27:28 RSV}

In Israel it was possible to take a child or a servant or an animal and devote that person or animal for the entire span of his life to the service of God. Hannah did this with her son Samuel {see 1 Sam 1:1-28}. Even before he was born she promised him to God. And when her boy grew old enough she took him to the temple and gave him to God to be used in the service there. Samuel the prophet grew up in the temple as a devoted thing unto God.

This verse also helps to explain a puzzle in the book of Judges which many have wondered about. Remember the story of Jephthah, who made a rash vow. He went out to battle against the enemies of Israel and said to God, "If you'll give me victory, then whoever comes out of the doors of my house to meet me when I return I will offer as a burnt offering," {cf, Judg 11:30-31}. To his horror, his only child, his daughter, came out to meet him. His heart sank, for he knew that he would be called upon to fulfill that vow. He explained it to her

and she very bravely said, "Well, father, if you've made a vow to God then you can't break it. And I am willing that you fulfill your vow. Only let me spend two months with my friends first," {cf, Judg 11:36-37}. The account tells us that she did spend the time with her friends, going up and down the mountains of Israel. At the end of that period, the account says, "she returned to her father, who did to her according to the vow," {Judg 11:39 RSV}. Many have recoiled at that, understandably, and asked themselves, "Did he actually offer her as a living sacrifice, as a burnt offering on the altar?" Some have tried to escape the reality of that by saying that he paid redemption money for her. But you notice that Verse 28 of Leviticus 27 says, "No devoted thing ... shall be sold or redeemed." It must be given to God. My personal opinion is that Jephthah did offer his daughter as a burnt offering. His was a very foolish vow, one that he had no business making in the first place. This represented a time of moral decline in the nation of Israel. The whole period of the Judges was such. But this illustrates the rigidity with which the law of vows was fulfilled within Israel and indicates how seriously they took the matter of devotion to God.

Finally, Verses 29-33, no condemned person could be used to pay a vow, because he belonged to God already. Nor could tithes be used to pay a vow, because they also belonged to the Lord already.

All the detail of this chapter, of course, is speaking to us. And we must ask the question, What do vows mean to us? What is the function of vows in our lives? For it is impossible not to make vows. Every time we deal with God we tend, in some sense, to make a vow or a promise. On one hand, the flesh within us wants to bargain with God. We have all felt this way. We have all wanted to say to God, whether we've actually said it or not, "Lord, I want this so badly. If you'll just do this for me, I'll do something for you." We tend to come to God on that legalistic, bargaining basis. And when we come on that basis God says, "All right, whatever you say. But remember, you are going to have to fulfill it!"

A few years ago a young man came up to me after a service. He was rather nervous and very disturbed, and he said, "I want to tell you a story." So I sat down with him and he told me, "Two years ago I was in Vietnam. Our company was pinned down under an enemy barrage. I was in an exposed position, bullets were whistling over my head, shrapnel was exploding all around me, and I was scared stiff. I was sure I would not get out of there alive. I prayed and cried out to God (the young man was already a Christian), 'Lord, I know what you want: you want me to enter the ministry. If you'll get me back safely, I'll go to school and start training for it.' And God answered that prayer and brought me back safely."

Then he said that the minute he got out of the Army he went into business and started making money. He put the vow in the back of his mind. "But," he said, "you know, an amazing thing has happened. At first I made lots of money. I was a success. I almost forgot this promise I had made, and I thought God had forgotten it. But strange things have been happening recently. Despite the general success of my type of business, despite the favorable conditions for business, despite everything I can do, I've been gradually losing money. In very odd ways my business has been falling apart, and, just yesterday, I lost the whole thing. I know what God is saying to me. He has taken me at my word. He has taken my business away, and I know what I've got to do. I just wanted you to hear the story. I don't need any advice; I know what God wants me to do."

He enrolled in seminary the next day and today he is in the ministry. God holds us to that kind of legalistic bargaining.

But, on the other hand, if we come to God, and say, "Lord, you have done so tremendously much for me! My heart is so moved that I just want to promise you this, and this, out of my life. But I don't know how to pay it. I know that I won't be able to do that myself, and so I look to you, Lord, to help me fulfill it." That kind of promise God loves, and he will pick us up and make the performance of that vow richer and fuller than we could ever have dreamed, fulfilling it "exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think," {Eph 3:20 KJV}. You see, God uses our vows to stretch us, to bring us out.

Have you ever noticed how often our hymns reflect promises or vows we make as the people of God? Yesterday I was in Oakland listening to a talk by Dr. Charles Allen, pastor of the huge, 10,000-member First Methodist Church of Houston, Texas. He told of an experience he had recently, when he was conducting a morning worship service, and, right in the middle of singing a hymn, he broke into loud laughter. His wife rebuked him afterward. She said, "I was embarrassed that you would break out in laughter like that right in the

middle of a song, for no reason at all." "Well," he said, "I couldn't help it. We were singing 'Take my life and let it be consecrated, Lord, to Thee,' and I noticed the words of the third verse: 'Take my silver and my gold, Not a mite would I withhold.' It suddenly struck me, with all the millionaires sitting in the congregation, what if God would answer that prayer right then? Some of them would be very upset and angry with him. I've been encouraging them to give their silver and gold for a long time, but they've not been willing. But now they're singing, 'Take my silver and my gold, not a mite would I withhold.'"

I often think, as we sing hymns, of Jesus' admonition that we will have to give an account for every idle word that we utter. We ought not to sing hymns without meaning what we say. I don't know if you watch me, but sometimes when we are singing a hymn and I see what the words are, I shut up! Because I'm not ready to say that yet, and I know that God is listening. Hymns are not just to fill in the time, nor to give you a chance to stand after you have been sitting awhile. They are a way of saying something to God.

So what are vows? They are a way God has of drawing us along toward maturity and of claiming his rightful ownership of us.

If you read this passage through carefully you will see that in every case, whether it is persons or animals or houses or lands or whatever being pledged, ultimate title, absolute right, belongs to God. Ownership was vested in God. It is all his. We sing it sometimes in our offertory hymn:

We give Thee but Thine own,
Whate'er the gift may be:
All that we have is Thine alone,
A trust, O Lord, from Thee.

That is true. That is the meaning of the words carved in the wall behind this platform: "You are not your own; You are bought with a price," {cf, 1 Cor 6:19-20}. If you belong to God then you are already his. And vows and promises are ways he has of fulfilling that fact and leading us into its realization. Sometimes we make rash promises, as Jephthah did, and give God things that we wouldn't ordinarily, because we want something from him. And then he holds us to it, and leads us along. The young man I mentioned probably would never have gone to seminary if he had not made that vow in the heat of conflict in Vietnam. God used that vow to fulfill his purpose in that man's life.

God also uses the promises we make when our hearts are moved and stirred to thanksgiving. We offer ourselves to him and he takes us at our word and claims us and thus establishes his right in our life.

A woman said to me the other day, "I know I don't have too many years left (she had had cancer, and an operation had given her a reprieve for awhile), but I promised the Lord that I would give the remaining years of my life to him in a way I never have before. I'll be available for whatever he wants me to do." God was using that vow to fulfill her life and to bring her along to the place where he could claim his rightful inheritance in her. This is the way God deals with us.

Last night I was listening to a talk by Howard Butt, Jr., an articulate layman from Corpus Christi, Texas. He said that God deals with so many people as if they were apples. He seems to take them like eating a whole apple with one bite. But he felt that he was more like an onion -- God kept taking him layer by layer. I identify with that. I think that this is way God has dealt with me. And he uses these promises, these moments of intense gratitude, these feelings of deep devotion, when we offer God our lives. Remember the plaque that you sometimes see hanging on a wall:

Only one life
T'will soon be past
Only what's done
For Christ will last.

God uses these promises to remind us of that fact. I like to change that last line and say, "Only what Christ does in me will last." Only that part of my life which I give back to him will I have throughout eternity. That

which I keep for myself will never make it beyond the grave. But that which I give back to him, whatever it is, I will have throughout all the ages of eternity.

I'm tempted to close this service with a time of giving ourselves to God. And yet I'm not impressed with public demonstrations like that. I think God is not much impressed with them either, because we tend to think that was the moment we gave ourselves to him, and then we forget it. What impresses God is when we give ourselves to him in the daily course of events. The book of Leviticus is closing at exactly the point to which Paul brings us in Romans 12:

I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable unto God which is your reasonable service. And be not conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, {cf, Rom 12:1-2a KJV}

That is reasonable for you as a human -- to present your body. And the word means "keep on presenting." The presentation God is impressed with is: perhaps this afternoon at home, when your children irritate you or your wife does something you don't like, or your husband is a grouch, and you are tempted to say something sharp and caustic but instead you stop and you yield yourself not as an instrument of unrighteousness unto sin but of righteousness unto God. Instead of saying something sharp and cutting you say something encouraging and helpful, something which changes the situation. "Soft words drive away wrath, but sharpness produces strife." That is the kind of presentation God is talking about.

In the closing pages of the book we are brought face to face with those moments when we want to say to God, "Lord, here is my life. Here I am; I give it to you. And here are my children; I give them to you. My friendships -- whatever -- Lord, here they are. I want you to have them, to possess them. And even though I struggle with you, please take them anyway, and help me to fulfill my promises to you in the day to day, moment by moment living of my life." In such a moment you can simply stand quietly before God and say whatever you want to say to him about your life. He already owns it! What a joy it is to take that which is his inheritance in the saints -- your life and mine -- and return it to him and say, "Lord here is your inheritance: claim it for yourself." You can read again those verses from Romans 12 while you say to him whatever he lays upon your heart:

I appeal to you, therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that you may prove what is the will of God, what is good, and acceptable, and perfect. {Rom 12:1-2 RSV}

Prayer:

Our Father, we don't want to come to you like Jacob, bargaining with you, or like Jephthah, making rash promises we cannot fulfill or that would hurt ourselves or someone else terribly if we did fulfill them. We want to come trusting your love and grace, Father, returning to you what is rightfully yours. Keep us from robbing you, Lord Jesus, of your rightful inheritance. Help us give back to you that which properly belongs to you -- all that we are, our very lives. We do it in your name. Amen.

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