

Laws Concerning the Taking of Vows

Numbers 30

Numbers 30 - *“Then Moses spoke to the heads of the tribes concerning the children of Israel, saying, “This is the thing which the LORD has commanded: ² If a man makes 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.*

³ “Or if a woman makes a vow to the LORD, and binds herself by some agreement while in her father’s house in her youth, ⁴ and her father hears her vow and the agreement by which she has bound herself, and her father holds his peace, then all her vows shall stand, and every agreement with which she has bound herself shall stand. ⁵ But if her father overrules her on the day that he hears, then none of her vows nor her agreements by which she has bound herself shall stand; and the LORD will release her, because her father overruled her.

⁶ “If indeed she takes a husband, while bound by her vows or by a rash utterance from her lips by which she bound herself, ⁷ and her husband hears it, and makes no response to her on the day that he hears, then her vows shall stand, and her agreements by which she bound herself shall stand. ⁸ But if her husband overrules her on the day that he hears it, he shall make void her vow which she took and what she uttered with her lips, by which she bound herself, and the LORD will release her.

⁹ “Also any vow of a widow or a divorced woman, by which she has bound herself, shall stand against her.

¹⁰ “If she vowed in her husband’s house, or bound herself by an agreement with an oath, ¹¹ and her husband heard it, and made no response to her and did not overrule her, then all her vows shall stand, and every agreement by which she bound herself shall stand. ¹² But if her husband truly made them void on the day he heard them, then whatever proceeded from her lips concerning her vows or concerning the agreement binding her, it shall not stand; her husband has made them void, and the LORD will release her. ¹³ Every vow and every binding oath to afflict her soul, her husband may confirm it, or her husband may make it void. ¹⁴ Now if her husband makes no response whatever to her from day to day, then he confirms all her vows or all the agreements that bind her; he confirms them, because he made no response to her on the day that he heard them. ¹⁵ But if he does make them void after he has heard them, then he shall bear her guilt.”

¹⁶ These are the statutes which the LORD commanded Moses, between a man and his wife, and between a father and his daughter in her youth in her father’s house.”

Background Notes

Leviticus 27 records the laws about vows of consecration and dedication in Israel. Any man or woman in Israel could make vows to dedicate their material possessions to the Lord. For example, you could dedicate your house to the Lord. *“When a man dedicates his house to be holy to the LORD, then the priest shall set a value for it, whether it is good or bad; as the priest values it, so it shall stand. If he who dedicated it wants to redeem his house, then he must add one-fifth of the money of your valuation to it, and it shall be his” (Leviticus 27:14-15).* Notice that you could choose to still live in your

dedicated house, but if you did, you had to “redeem” it by giving the market value of your house plus 20% in money to the Lord. This would certainly eliminate false dedications, wouldn’t it?

Furthermore, a man or a woman could take a vow of consecration to the Lord, such as the Nazirite vow. We read about the Nazirite vow in Numbers 6. *“When either a man or woman consecrates an offering to take the vow of a Nazirite, to separate himself to the LORD, he shall separate himself from wine and similar drink. All the days of the vow of his separation no razor shall come upon his head; until the days are fulfilled for which he separated himself to the LORD, he shall be holy. Then he shall let the locks of the hair of his head grow. All the days that he separates himself to the LORD he shall not go near a dead body” (6:1-6).* And verse 8 – *“All the days of his separation he shall be holy to the LORD.”*

Taking a vow was voluntary. No one was forced to make a vow. Vows were not to be made lightly, and breaking a vow was a serious matter. However, Numbers 30 gave certain conditions under which a vow could be invalidated or annulled.

When a man made vow or took an oath, it was binding (v2). There was no “back door” or “escape” clause if he changed his mind later. So, men - if you lived in Old Testament Israel, you’d better think it through very carefully before you made a vow such as, “I vow before the Lord that I will pray three hours every day.” That sounds like a good and godly vow, but can you keep it? If you can’t, then you’d better not make that vow!

In the case of women, the vows that they took were also binding, but a woman’s vow could be invalidated by a father of a young girl who made a vow, or by the husband of a woman who made a vow. However, in both cases, if the father or husband failed to annul the vow when it was made, or when he heard about it for the first time, the vow remained as valid before the Lord. The vows of widows or divorced women were binding.

Now comes the obvious question that is in all of our minds at this point. Why did God give all of those different cases of annulment of women’s vows? And what is the Bible teaching us here, besides the historical record?

Doctrinal Points

1. God expects His structure of authority for the family to be honored.

God has ordained several lines of authority, and He expects all of them to be honored. There is God-given authority in the church, in the state, and in the home, and God expects us to honor His structure of authority in all these areas.

God’s line of authority in the home is that the children are to be subordinate to the parents, and the wife is to be subordinate to the husband. *“Wives, this means submit to your husbands as to the Lord. ²³ For a husband is the head of his wife as Christ is the head of the church. He is the Savior of his body, the church. ²⁴ As the church submits to Christ, so you wives should submit to your husbands in everything” (Ephesians 5:22-24).*

Notice that I didn’t say that the wife is “inferior” to her husband! “Inferior” and “subordinate” are not synonymous terms. A helpful illustration of this concept is found in our Lord Jesus. As the Son of God here on this earth, the Lord Jesus was

subordinate to God the Father - but never inferior. Philippians 2 says He didn't have to grasp equality with God - because Jesus is God! Jesus and the Father are One (John 10:30; John 17:21).

The bottom line concerning the annulment of certain vows is that while self-imposed religious vows were good in God's sight, they were subject to God-given duties and the God-given structure of authority for the family. The worship and service of children and women is just as good and acceptable to God as is the worship of men, but God's structure of authority is to be maintained.

If a teenaged girl, for example, made a vow such as, "I will never get married so that I can better serve the Lord," her father might decide to invalidate that vow because she might change her mind later. The father's authority actually protected the daughter from what could have been a rash vow, made in the emotion of a moment. However, if the father and his mature daughter discussed the vow, and if it was determined that this was not a rash vow made in a moment of emotion, then the father would let the vow stand. The vow then was binding.

This was also the case if a married woman made a vow. Suppose a wife and mother vowed that she would give the Lord every afternoon of every day to meet the needs of the poor. That sounds like a good and godly vow - but what about her responsibilities to her family and home? Her husband could invalidate such a vow for obvious reasons. But if he let the vow stand, then it was binding.

I think that we can see how these same principles would apply today. Godly commitments of time and talent that are made by Christian daughters and wives must be subject to God-given roles and responsibilities in the family structure. God expects His structure of authority for the family to be honored.

2. God expects the vows people make to be honored.

All kinds of protections about taking vows were divinely built into God's Law, but once a vow of consecration or dedication was made and not annulled, it was binding. And God expected the vow to be honored.

This is true today as well. God expects people to honor the vows they make. The obvious example is marriage. Marriage vows are made before God – and the state as well - and God expects people to honor the vows they make. Sadly, some people today (even Christians) take the attitude that, "Well, if this marriage doesn't work out, we'll just get a divorce and try again." That kind of thinking is totally foreign to the teaching of the Bible. God expects the vows people make to be honored.

In Matthew 5:37 our Lord said, "*But let your 'Yes' be 'Yes,' and your 'No,' 'No.'* For whatever is more than these is from the evil one." How does this teaching relate to vows? When you look at this verse's context, in Matthew 5 the Lord was correcting an incorrect teaching of the Jews at that time. They believed that if they backed up a statement with an oath, it made their statements more truthful. In essence, the Lord Jesus was saying, "No! You are not to have 'two levels' of

truth. You should not have to add, 'So help me, God,' or other oaths to make your statements more truthful. Yes or No should be good enough."

This should be true today, too. People shouldn't have to cross their fingers behind their back, or say, "So help me, God" to raise themselves to another "level of truth." Just "*let your 'Yes' be 'Yes,' and your 'No,' 'No.'*" This same truth is taught in James 5:12 - "*But above all, my brethren, do not swear, either by heaven or by earth or with any other oath. But let your 'Yes' be 'Yes,' and your 'No,' be 'No,' lest you fall into judgment.*"

The New Testament is not opposed to vows made before the Lord that are in line with the Word of God, but vows are serious. It's better not to make a vow than to make it and break it. God expects the vows that people make to be honored.

Practical Application

Don't make rash vows!

In some translations the word "rash" is used a couple of times about vows that were annulled by fathers or husbands. God built safeguards against making rash vows into His Law. The Bible teaches that we should not make rash, spur-of-the-moment, emotion-driven vows.

Proverbs 20:25 says, "*It is a snare for a man to devote rashly something as holy, and afterward to reconsider his vows.*"

And Ecclesiastes 5:2-5 says, "*Do not be rash with your mouth, and let not your heart utter anything hastily before God. For God is in heaven, and you on earth; therefore let your words be few. For a dream comes through much activity, and a fool's voice is known by his many words. When you make a vow to God, do not delay to pay it; for He has no pleasure in fools. Pay what you have vowed - better not to vow than to vow and not pay.*"

It sounds like a great and godly promise if I vow to read and study God's Word every day for at least four hours, doesn't it? But it is very likely a **rash** vow! There may be all kinds of reasons why I may not be able to keep that vow. It's better simply to commit to reading and studying the Bible every day, without attaching a vow of four hours!

So be careful! Don't make **rash** vows.