

Should We Make Vows Today?

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Our desires strongly influence our lives. At times we wish to have something so badly that we will go to almost any length to obtain it. Some people in business and industry have a ruthless, cutthroat desire to succeed, and they will ruin other people's lives and careers to reach their goals. A few even devote their lives to acquiring priceless art, rare automobiles, thoroughbred horses, antiques and other fine things to satisfy their cravings.

In today's society, our desires are reflected in astronomically high credit card balances, with many people carrying tens of thousands of dollars in debt. On top of this, they are paying usurious interest rates! Walking hand in hand with this credit card debt is bankruptcy. This legal admission that one cannot pay what he promised is at a modern all-time high.

If we are not careful, we can transfer this mentality over to our relationship with God. We can promise—vow—to change our way of living or do some specific deed in return for a request we ask from God. Should we do this? Is this wise? Should we really count the cost before we allow this thinking to be placed into action?

There are two examples of people making vows that we should examine. The first shows a right example of desire, thought, planning, and carrying out the promised deed, while the second example describes the results of an impetuous vow that produced terrible results.

Hanna

I Samuel 1 narrates the story of Hanna, the wife of Elkanah. She was barren, but with every fiber of her being, she desired a child. Though Elkanah treated her with love and kindness, his other wife, Peninnah, who had children, became Hanna's adversary, provoking her until she was miserable. Wisely, Hanna took her situation and desire to God. She vowed that if He gave her a son, she would give him to God for His service.

And she was in bitterness of soul, and prayed to the LORD and wept in anguish. Then she made a vow and said, "O LORD of hosts, if You will indeed look on the affliction of your maidservant and remember me, and not forget your maidservant, but will give your maidservant a male child, then I will give him to the LORD all the days of his life, and no razor shall come upon his head." (I Samuel 1:10-11)

In verses 19-20, God hears Hanna and gives her desire to her:

And Elkanah knew Hannah his wife, and the LORD remembered her. So it came to pass in the process of time that Hanna conceived and bore a son, and called his name Samuel, saying, "Because I have asked for him from the LORD."

God had fulfilled His part of the agreement, and now it was Hanna's responsibility to keep her promise. Notice how completely she holds up her end of the bargain:

Now when she had weaned him, she took him up with her, with three bulls, one ephah of flour, and a skin of wine, and brought him to the house of the LORD in Shiloh. And the child was young. Then they slaughtered a bull, and brought the child to Eli. And she said, "O my lord, as your soul lives, my lord, I am the woman who stood by you here, praying to the LORD. For this child I prayed; and the LORD has granted me my petition which I asked of Him: Therefore I also have lent him to the LORD; as long as he lives he shall be lent to the LORD." So they worshipped the LORD there. (verses 24-28)

Hanna's example shows how a proper vow works. She intelligently thought it through, made it solemnly and humbly, and kept it completely. God not only respected her vow and fulfilled it, but He also greatly used the product, Samuel the prophet! Notice, too, how the process caused Hanna to thank and glorify God and built humble and righteous character in her (II Samuel 2:1-10).

Jephthah

Jephthah, son of Gilead by a harlot, also made a vow, but he vowed rashly, without counting the cost to himself or to others. Because of his birth and the hatred of his half brothers, Jephthah had fled from his home and soon gathered a ragtag group of soldiers around him. When Ammon threatened Israel, the elders of Gilead asked him to lead his army against the enemy, offering him leadership over Gilead. Accepting their offer, Jephthah tried to negotiate a settlement with Ammon, but to no avail. War was inevitable.

On the eve of battle, whether out of weakness or ignorance,

Jephthah made a vow to the LORD, and said, "If you will indeed deliver the people of Ammon into my hands, then 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, and I will offer it up as a burnt offering." (Judges 11:30-31)

He seems not to have considered what the payment might be. He desired victory so greatly that he gave little thought to his part of the bargain. It was, as if he were saying, "Just give me what I am asking for, and I'll worry about my end later."

Jephthah's rashness and inconsideration cost him dearly:

When Jephthah came to his house in 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. And 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 I cannot go back on it." So she said to him, "My father, if you have given your word to the LORD, do to me according to what has gone out of your mouth, because the LORD has avenged you of your enemies, the people of Ammon." (verses 34-36)

Because of his impetuous behavior, Jephthah had to face performing what he had promised. His heart was filled with grief over what he had done to his daughter, his only child. Even so, as a man of his word, Jephthah resolved to keep his part of the deal.

Jephthah's daughter asked to be given two months to lament her virginity. Because of this, commentators feel that she was *not* offered as a burnt offering, but instead dedicated herself to God's service, to live without husband and children, as a virgin the rest of her life. (Request our July 1994 article "Did He or Didn't He?" for further information.)

The Rules of Vowing

What are the rules concerning the making of vows? This is so important to God that He devotes a whole chapter, Numbers 30, to this subject. Immediately, we need to note that this instruction comes from the Lord, the One who became Jesus Christ (verse 1). These rules are not just judgments of Moses but direct commands of God.

Verse 2 emphasizes that a person must always keep his word. Whether he swears an oath or vows a vow, he is bound to fulfill all its terms. If he does not, he has broken the ninth commandment.

Verses 3-5 focus on unmarried women still living at home. To God, she is still under her father's authority, so if he hears her vow and makes no comment, then her vow stands. On the other hand, if her father disallows her vow on the day he hears it, then her vow does not stand. God will forgive her of her foolishness because of her father's authority. This, however, does not negate other consequences that may result from her actions.

Though made somewhat unclear in the New King James, verses 6-8 deal with a betrothed woman and her fiancé. If she makes a vow before she marries and brings it into the marriage, her new husband, like her father before him, now has the authority to allow it or disallow it.

Verse 9 clarifies that widows and divorced women are held accountable for any vows they make.

Verses 10-14 discuss vows made by a married woman. As in the previous sections, if the husband hears it but does nothing, her vow stands, but if he disallows it, it does not stand, and God will forgive her.

Verse 15 stresses the importance of the husband being careful in these matters. God says that if the husband hears his wife's vows, accepts them, and later makes them void, he bears the guilt for renegeing on them. As the leader of his family, he is ultimately responsible for what he allows to happen.

The chapter concludes with a reminder that these statutes concerning vows are commands of the Lord. We can see that God holds the promises we make to Him to be serious undertakings. He certainly does not take them lightly; He considers it to be sin when we fail to perform what we have promised.

The New Testament and Vows

The New Testament mentions vows only twice, both times regarding vows made by Christians who had made vows consecrating themselves to God for some length of time, much like the Nazirite vow (Acts 18:18; 21:23; see Numbers 6:18). More often, the New Testament speaks of swearing oaths, a related concept.

Jesus advises us not to swear at all (Matthew 5:34), but to say simply, "Yes" or "No" (verse 37). If we are honest, we have no need to take an oath. He goes so far as to say that anything more than "Yes" or "No" has its source in the father of lies (John 8:44)!

There are several aspects to these verses. The overall statement Jesus makes is that we do not need to swear by anything to confirm that our statements are true. A Christian's word should be his bond, as the old saying goes. We should be so bound by the ninth commandment that nothing else is necessary.

The not-so-obvious meaning of these verses is that we should not lightly give an oath or make a vow to God to acquire something. We have many desires, and some might take it upon themselves to ask God for them, promising to perform a certain deed if He gives it to them. Jesus warns that once we get what we want, we may forget what we promised to perform. As we have learned from Numbers 30, God does not take reneging on our promises lightly.

Should Christians make vows today? God tells us the best course to take in Matthew 5:34, "But I say to you, do not swear at all." James writes that it is best not to make them so we do not "fall into judgment" (James 5:12).

Though God advises us not to vow, we can still make vows if we so choose. In making one, however, we should consider the examples of Hanna and Jephthah. We should seriously contemplate what we are requesting and what we are promising, always asking ourselves, "Can I make good on what I've promised?"

We are a special people to God. He has called us, and has great love for us. He hears our prayers as we obey and love Him. We should give a great deal of thought to whether we **need** to make a vow when we have such instant and open access to the very throne of God. He does indeed hear our prayers, and He answers them according to what He sees is good for us. Why should we make vows when we know that He will give us or deny us what is best for us?

Our society is plagued by its citizens failing to follow through on their agreements. Private debt and bankruptcy will play an equal or greater role than public debt in ruining the economy of this great nation. The chief cause of this is dishonesty. Let us make sure that we do not emulate the society around us, but instead fulfill all our responsibilities in our relationship with God.