

"Let's Be Wise With Our Words"

Numbers 30

A young man was smitten by the beauty of this young woman he had met. He vowed to her to prove his love that he would swim the deepest ocean, climb the highest mountain and cross the hottest desert if she would marry him. She agreed, and he fulfilled his vows. But then she divorced him. Because he was never home.

That's a bad vow. Neither of them thought through the consequences of that vow. And while it is fictitious, it introduces this unusual passage about vows here in Num. 30. Why is it here? At the end of Ch. 29, after hearing about all the sacrifices that needed to be offered on each day, week, month and on the Holy Days, God ends the chapter through Moses saying,

³⁹ " 'In addition to what you vow and your freewill offerings, prepare these for the Lord at your appointed feasts: your burnt offerings, grain offerings, drink offerings and fellowship offerings.' "

⁴⁰ Moses told the Israelites all that the Lord commanded him.

It was the custom for Israel when making a vow to God, that they would bring a sacrifice (called votive offering) as a thank you to God for answering a prayer or that they were able to fulfill the vow with God's help. We'll look at some examples in the Bible about vows so we can understand what God was referring to here.

As we go through Num. 30, we'll see that the main thing was don't make a rash vow or impulsive vow that you cannot possibly keep or may hurt those around you. We don't deal much with vows today except for marriage. Many of us have taken those vows very seriously. We wear wedding rings to remind us of those vows. Yesterday I married Braeden and Leah and when they exchange vows and rings I always pray for the couple to honour the vows that they have taken. Sadly, some of you have experienced the breaking of those marital vows.

The marriage vow, however, illustrates the point that you are making promises you desire to keep out of your devotion to this one person. And that illustrates for us why God takes seriously vows made to Him. These vows are made in God's Name or in prayer that if God does something for you will respond in some way. And the seriousness of making promises to God begins the passage:

This is what the Lord commands: ² When a man makes a vow to the Lord or takes an oath to obligate himself by a pledge, he must not break his word but must do everything he said.

God wants all of us to know that

He Places a High Value on our Words **(30:1-2)**

Oaths and vows are to be taken seriously. These are promises to do something. God expects this from His people. We should stand out from the world because so few people keep their promises. If we say we're going to do something we should follow through because we reflect God, and God always follows through on His words. Sometimes we forget our promises and when we're reminded, we need to apologize and ask forgiveness and do all we can to keep our word. So before we make a promise or a vow, we should think through whether we should even make it. Listen to Ecc. 5:4-5

⁴ When you make a vow to God, do not delay in fulfilling it. He has no pleasure in fools; fulfill your vow. ⁵ It is better not to vow than to make a vow and not fulfill it. ⁶ Do not let your mouth lead you into sin. And do not protest to the temple messenger, "My vow was a mistake." Why should God be angry at what you say and destroy the work of your hands? ⁷ Much dreaming and many words are meaningless. Therefore stand in awe of God.

Jesus, fully aware of the hypocrisy of the religious leaders of His day who knew how to manipulate around their vows with false promises said in Matt. 5:33

³³ "Again, you have heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'Do not break your oath, but keep the oaths you have made to the Lord.' ³⁴ But I tell you, Do not swear at all: either by heaven, for it is God's throne; ³⁵ or by the earth, for it is his footstool; or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the Great King. ³⁶ And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make even one hair white or black. ³⁷ Simply let your 'Yes' be 'Yes,' and your 'No,' 'No'; anything beyond this comes from the evil one.

The religious leaders would never swear by God's Name but by the temple or by something else but Jesus points out that God is behind everything. So you're always swearing to God when we swear by anything in the world He created! James echoed Jesus' words in James 5:12

¹² Above all, my brothers, do not swear—not by heaven or by earth or by anything else. Let your "Yes" be yes, and your "No," no, or you will be condemned.

The context (see v.11) in which James said that, was when we need patience when we are suffering. He may well have been warning people: when you're suffering, don't make a rash vow to God saying, 'If you get me out of this, God, then I will ... do this for you'. That's possibly the situation James was addressing.

Here in Num. 30, God had a specific context in mind also; the home. Here God addresses unmarried daughters or wives to be careful about their vows. God was saying,

Before Making Promises, Think About Who Will Be Affected **(30:3-8)**

It may seem odd at first that the father or husband has the authority to veto an oath by his daughter or wife but not when we understand God has given him the responsibility of spiritual leadership in the home. Perhaps the vow might affect the income of the home. What kind of vows would they make? Culturally (among the pagans), it was not uncommon to swear to a god that if the god gives you a husband or a child that you would dedicate wealth to it. Maybe wealth you don't have. This kind of thinking may creep into your worship of the true God. 'God if you give me a rich husband I'll give you 10 sheep.' If her father hears that, he can override her vow because he's her dad and responsible for the well-being of the family. We can't afford that! Don't make an impetuous or rash vow. Or a barren wife makes a similar kind of vow to God that if God would provide children ...

And yet we have an illustration of this kind of vow in 1 Sam. 1 where we meet a young woman named Hannah married to a man named Elkanah. Elkanah has another wife named Penninah, who is listed second, so we are given the assumption that Hannah was not able to produce children so Elkanah added a second wife. Not uncommon in the day.

[Read Ch. 1]

Hannah made a vow to dedicate her boy to God and Elkanah did not object. Hannah also followed through with her vow and her boy Samuel lived at the Tabernacle with Eli and grew up to be a great man of God. But Hannah's vow was genuine because

Made promises that honour God (vv.3-4)

Another good example of a man swearing to God that he would do something because it honoured God was Boaz, the older bachelor who was not the first in line to redeem his deceased cousin Elimelech's land, which would include marrying Ruth and looking after Elimelech's wife Naomi. He knew there was an older cousin who had the first claim on Elimelech's land. But Boaz tells Ruth in Ruth 3:12

¹² Although it is true that I am near of kin, there is a kinsman-redeemer nearer than I. ¹³ Stay here for the night, and in the morning if he wants to redeem, good; let him redeem. But if he is not willing, as surely as the Lord lives I will do it. Lie here until morning."

"As surely as the Lord lives" is oath formula. He is swearing by God that he would redeem Ruth and Naomi if God makes a way for him to do it. God does and Boaz did. God would reward them both by being the great-great grandparents of David, future king of Israel.

In vv.5-8 God talks about the making of a rash vow. The word rash means without thought. Some translations use 'impetuous'. Again, the idea is that you haven't thought this through as to how it affects those around you. So God warns His people

Don't make rash or unwise promises (vv.5-8)

I have two biblical examples of rash vows. The first comes from Judges 11 by an immature Jewish leader who is thrown into leading Israel in a war against the neighboring Ammonites. Willing to be their commander because they promised he could be judge over Israel if he won, he agreed but he made a rash vow to God:

³⁰ And Jephthah made a vow to the Lord: "If you give the Ammonites into my hands, ³¹ whatever comes out of the door of my house to meet me when I return in triumph from the Ammonites will be the Lord's, and I will sacrifice it as a burnt offering."

A Jewish house consisted of two sections, one for the animals and one for the family. Basically the barn was part of the house. So it would be quite natural for animals to go in and out of the house to the courtyard. But that's not what happens:

³⁴ When Jephthah returned to his home in Mizpah, who should come out to meet him but his daughter, dancing to the sound of tambourines! She was an only child. Except for her he had neither son nor daughter. ³⁵ When he saw her, he tore his clothes and cried, "Oh! My daughter! You have made me miserable and wretched, because I have made a vow to the Lord that I cannot break."

Jephthah understood the severity of vows to God. Another Israel leader who also made a foolish vow was King Saul. Once while chasing after the Philistines. Saul in his attempt to sound godly made a foolish vow. We read in 1 Sam. 14:24,

²⁴ Now the men of Israel were in distress that day, because Saul had bound the people under an oath, saying, "Cursed be any man who eats food before evening comes, before I have avenged myself on my enemies!" So none of the troops tasted food.

²⁵ The entire army entered the woods, and there was honey on the ground. ²⁶ When they went into the woods, they saw the honey oozing out, yet no one put his hand to his mouth, because they feared the oath. ²⁷ But Jonathan had not heard that his father had bound the people with the oath, so he reached out the end of the staff that was in his hand and dipped it into the honeycomb. He raised his hand to his mouth, and his eyes brightened. ²⁸ Then one of the soldiers told him, "Your father bound the army under a strict oath, saying, 'Cursed be any man who eats food today!' That is why the men are faint." ²⁹ Jonathan said, "My father has made trouble for the country. See how my eyes brightened when I tasted a little of this honey. ³⁰ How much better it would have been if the men had eaten today some of the plunder they took from their enemies. Would not the slaughter of the Philistines have been even greater?"

Later. When the very tired and hungry army comes across some livestock, they act like savages and eat the meat raw. Saul says this is a sin against God but he is blind to see it's because of his rash vow. Later when he finds out Jonathan ate honey, he's about to kill his own son who was responsible for the victory over the Philistines in the first place! And the Israelite army rescues Jonathan from being put to death.

Both of these promises did not take into account those who might be affected by them. And the general principle applies to us. Don't make promises rashly. Don't make a promise to your kids or wife that you know may not happen. You will surely disappoint them if you don't follow through. If you're unsure you can keep it, then don't make a promise that you will. It discredits us when we do, and we make withdrawals from the emotional bank account of trust we have hopefully built up. Otherwise the withdrawals continue and no one believes our words.

The reason why God gave the wives and the daughters an out if they make unwise vows that their husband/father hears and says that's not happening, is not because God is belittling women – it's the opposite, he is protecting them. God expects the father and husband to be the protectors of the family. To watch out for everyone's interests, to be the spiritual leader. If someone threatens your family, no one has to teach men to defend them. We get ornery naturally because that's how God has wired us. There's a larger principle that God was pointing out when it comes to making important decisions:

Seek Wise Counsel Before Making Promises **(30:9-16)**

Notice the father or husband is not sought for advice regarding this vow. God says "when he hears of it" he must decide whether it is a wise vow or not. Whether it will affect the family negatively or not. The first people we should go to when we need to make an important decision is our

Spiritually mature family (vv.10-16)

Not all of us have spirit-minded parents or grandparents. Our decision may not have significant spiritual implications and there's a lot of common sense wisdom that our unsaved families can provide. But if the decision has spiritual implications – looking for God's will regarding a major decision – then seek godly counsel. Ask those around who you respect that will give you an honest and God-directed answer and not just what you want to hear. This is what the father and the husband's role was here, to give wise godly counsel that agreed or disagreed that the vow to God was wise.

Which brings me back to Elkanah and Hannah. Hannah made this vow to God about wanting a son but she vowed to God that He could have him should He open her womb. What did Elkanah think

about that? Would he not have wanted a son from the wife he loved for his own? Perhaps he knew how deeply Hannah wanted a son, that if she was willing to give him to the Lord all his life, he too believed that only God could do this miracle and that maybe God had a special plan for this boy. Which he did.

Also notice in v.9 here that if a divorced or widow made a vow then she was totally responsible for her own vow. She didn't have a husband to seek counsel from, but she still has her heavenly Father. We should seek spiritual counsel but we should always

Pray and look to God's Word for direction (v.9; Prov. 2:1-8)

God does not abandon us. Prayer and the Word are essential for seeking wisdom and direction when needing to make major decisions. There isn't always a direct verse that will give us the answer but through prayer and the Word and counsel, I believe God directs us to make wise decisions that affect us and others close to us for God's purposes. Solomon wrote many that deal with seeking wisdom from God. Listen to Prov. 2:1-8,

2:1 *My son, if you accept my words and store up my commands within you,*
² *turning your ear to wisdom and applying your heart to understanding,*
³ *and if you call out for insight and cry aloud for understanding,*
⁴ *and if you look for it as for silver and search for it as for hidden treasure,*
⁵ *then you will understand the fear of the Lord and find the knowledge of God.*
⁶ *For the Lord gives wisdom, and from his mouth come knowledge and understanding.*
⁷ *He holds victory in store for the upright, he is a shield to those whose walk is blameless,*
⁸ *for he guards the course of the just and protects the way of his faithful ones.*

The Book of Proverbs contains many wise sayings about the kind of words we use. People make rash promises because they are not thinking or talking too much.

^{10:19} *When words are many, sin is not absent, but he who holds his tongue is wise.*
²⁰ *The tongue of the righteous is choice silver, but the heart of the wicked is of little value.*
²¹ *The lips of the righteous nourish many, but fools die for lack of judgment.*

And the letter of James is very proverbial. He writes in James 1:19-20

¹⁹ *My dear brothers, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry,* ²⁰ *for man's anger does not bring about the righteous life that God desires.*

And two verse later he says:

²² *Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says*

Pray - Father in heaven, perhaps our poor decision-making or bad promise-keeping stems from our failure to control our lips. Maybe we said things to make people happy – in the moment – but we knew in our hearts we couldn't keep our word. Help us to think before we speak; even choose not to speak when we don't need to. If no one asks for our advice maybe there's a reason. Thank you for always listening, that You have great wisdom in Your Word to guide us to make better choices that affect our families and friends positively. Help us to think that through too before making promises we may not be able to keep. Help us not to rely on our own understanding but to seek You and wise spiritual wisdom from our families around us, because we do want to honour You. Father, vows and

promises are serious because they can also be hard, like Hannah's. Give us Your peace and wisdom when making hard choices to do what glorifies You the most.

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