

Text: Heb 6.16-18

In our Ask the Pastor series, no one has asked me a question about swearing oaths. Some Christians, isolating certain passages over others, have taken the view that Christians should never make oaths, even in a court of law.

The Bible teaching about oaths is not entirely negative, rather, it is regulated.

What is an oath?

Merriam Webster:

1 a (1) : a solemn usually formal calling upon God or a god to witness to the truth of what one says or to witness that one sincerely intends to do what one says

(2) : a solemn attestation of the truth or inviolability of one's words¹

OED:

"A solemn or formal declaration invoking God (or a god, or other object of reverence) as witness to the truth of a statement, or to the binding nature of a promise or undertaking; an act of making such a declaration."²

In our text, we are reminded that God himself has on occasion made an oath. If making of oaths is an evil thing to do, then what can we say about that?

Evil comes when we make rash oaths or false oaths.

The idea of God's oath is big in our passage, which gives us the title for our message:

God Swore an Oath

We saw last week how God swore an oath to Abraham, making the promise of blessing and multiplication. This oath came from Gen 22.16-17.

Our point last week was that Abraham patiently waited, and in that long-suffering wait, obtained the promise in the figure of Isaac coming back from the brink of death.

¹ Frederick C. Mish, ed., *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary*, 11th ed. (Springfield, Mass.: Merriam-Webster, Inc., 2003).

² Oxford English Dictionary, s.v. "oath (n.), sense 1.a," July 2023, <https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/5226302914>.

The next thing the writer of Hebrews does is give us a long sentence from v. 16 to v. 20 (the end of the chapter), discussing God’s oath.

In Heb 6.13, he pointed out that God “swore by himself.”

Then he goes on to explain why God’s oath is such a powerful encouragement, especially when believers are down and depressed and thinking of giving up.

Read Heb 6.13-18, text 16-18

Proposition: When we are beleaguered by trials of any kind, flee to the cross, and hang on.

I. The point of human oaths (16)

A. Men swear by something higher

1. Man’s word alone can be questioned
 - a. Some may over promise, then fail
 - b. Some may over promise deceptively
 - c. All men at times may be beset by weakness — “something came up” — making word-keeping difficult or impossible
2. To reinforce one’s commitment to reliability, one might swear on something higher and more reliable than himself
 - a. “‘As (surely as) Yahweh lives’ was the supreme oath in Israel.”³
 - b. Modern: “I am telling the truth so help me God.”⁴

In a courtroom, words uttered under oath carry with them strong urgency — if you lie under oath, you can go to jail.

B. Men mean to end any questioning of their statements

1. The point of the oath is that the word is reliable

³ F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, Rev. ed., The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 154–154.

⁴ Tom Constable, *Tom Constable’s Expository Notes on the Bible* (Galaxie Software, 2003), Heb 6.16.

- 2. The oath-taker means for his hearers to
 - a. Stop questioning him
 - b. Trust what he is saying

This does not mean that men are always true, even when they utter oaths. The author is showing what men mean when they utter oaths.

C. Sidebar: God’s sober regulation of human oaths

- 1. Proper oath taking (Dt 6.13, 10.20)

Dt 6.13 “You shall fear *only* the LORD your God; and you shall worship Him and swear by His name.

Dt 10.20 “You shall fear the LORD your God; you shall serve Him and cling to Him, and you shall swear by His name.

- 2. Condemnation of oath takers (Zech 5.3-4)

Zech 5.3-4 Then he said to me, “This is the curse that is going forth over the face of the whole land; surely everyone who steals will be purged away according to the writing on one side, and everyone who swears will be purged away according to the writing on the other side. ⁴ “I will make it go forth,” declares the LORD of hosts, “and it will enter the house of the thief and the house of the one who swears falsely by My name; and it will spend the night within that house and consume it with its timber and stones.”

- 3. Focus of oath violations (Ex 20.7, Dt 5.11)

Ex 20.7 ¶ “You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain, for the LORD will not leave him unpunished who takes His name in vain.

Dt 5.11 ¶ ‘You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain, for the LORD will not leave him unpunished who takes His name in vain.

4. Warning of Jesus: against hypocritical oath-taking (Mt 23.16-17)

Mt 23.16-17 ¶ “Woe to you, blind guides, who say, ‘Whoever swears by the temple, *that* is nothing; but whoever swears by the gold of the temple is obligated.’¹⁷ “You fools and blind men! Which is more important, the gold or the temple that sanctified the gold?

“The author is contrasting the inviolability of oaths by men and God by using an argument from the lesser to the greater.”⁵

II. The interposition of God’s oath (17)

A. God’s oath given in the same manner as a human oath

- 1. Disputation (questioning ends)
- 2. Believability intensified

God is always true, everything he says is true. But we saw in Genesis 22 that God added an oath to give “extra” reliability to his word.

Gn 22.16-17 and said, “By Myself I have sworn, declares the LORD, because you have done this thing and have not withheld your son, your only son,¹⁷ indeed I will greatly bless you, and I will greatly multiply your seed as the stars of the heavens and as the sand which is on the seashore; and your seed shall possess the gate of their enemies.

Just like a human oath

B. The reason: God desired to “show” the “unchangeableness of his purpose”

- 1. Showing
 - a. “to demonstrate that someth. is true, *demonstrate, show*”⁶

⁵ David Allen, *Hebrews*, The New American Commentary 35 (Nashville, Tenn: B & H Publ. Group, 2010), 399.

⁶ “ἐπιδείκνυμι” in Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, ed. Frederick W. Danker, 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000).

b. To put on display

- 2. Unchangeable: the permanent quality of God’s promise
- 3. The oath puts on display the unchangeableness

God puts himself on the line to literally fulfill his promise to Abraham, in the illustration of vv. 13-15.

C. The ones reassured by the oath: “the heirs of the promise”

- 1. First, Abraham inherited the promise
- 2. Second, Israel (nation) inherited the promise
- 3. Finally, all those looking back to the cross inherited the promise

“The immediate application is (ἐχέμεν) to the generation of believers represented by the Hebrews who had need of the assurance.”⁷

D. For them, God “interposed”

- 1. The idea of the word is “inserting oneself as a mediator or umpire”
- 2. There is a trust problem between two parties

Gk. literature describes a problem between the cities of Ephesus and Sardis – Pergamum stepped in as mediator/umpire

- a. God gave his word
- b. Man, in his feebleness, wonders about God’s word (as if!)
- c. God interposed with an oath to mediate

God’s oath is for man, not for himself; to encourage the wavering, not to boast of his truth.

We have been thinking about the oath to Abraham, but shortly the author will remind us of the oath to the Son:

Heb 7.20-21 ¶ And inasmuch as *it was* not without an oath ²¹ ¶ (for they indeed became priests without an oath, but He with an oath through the One who said to Him, “THE LORD HAS SWORN AND WILL NOT CHANGE HIS MIND, ‘YOU ARE A PRIEST FOREVER’”);

III. The strong encouragement for faltering hands (18)

- A. We have two things wherein it is impossible for God to lie
1. His word (his promise)
 2. His oath (he stakes his character, his very being, on fulfilling his word)

“St Clement of Rome says ‘*Nothing* is impossible to God, except to lie’ (*Ep. ad Cor.* 27). ...”⁸

Tit 1.2 in the hope of eternal life, which God, who cannot lie, promised long ages ago,

Num 23.19 “God is not a man, that He should lie, Nor a son of man, that He should repent; Has He said, and will He not do it? Or has He spoken, and will He not make it good?”

- B. The purpose of this assurance
1. For “we who have taken refuge”

- a. In OT, this word refers to those who flee the manslayer, by going to the city of refuge
- b. In Gk literature, refers to anyone fleeing or resorting to anyone for help

Imagine those dreams where you have a sense of dread, someone pursuing you, you are searching for a secure place to hide, and the footsteps behind seem to be gaining...

- c. Image: Christians are fugitives from the power of sin and death
2. What is God’s will for us? Grab hold of the strong word which sets out our hope
 - a. In the OT, the “horns of the altar” were a place of refuge. It did not protect the guilty, like Joab.
 - b. In the NT, the thing to grasp, to take hold of, is God’s promise: the hope set before us

⁸ Farrar, *Hebrews*, 89.

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Conclusion:

Proposition: When we are beleaguered by trials of any kind, flee to the cross, and hang on.

The world is no friend of Christians: it seeks to overthrow our faith every way it can.

Our solution is to flee to God’s word, take hold of it with both hands, and rely on everything God says.