

Doctrine of the Vow

1. Introduction

1.1 Psalm 116, though a Psalm of David is a Psalm describing Christ's humiliation and is often quoted in the New Testament. It has a primary application for Israel. It also has secondary application for the Church. Psa 116:3-17

Psa 116:3 The cords of death entangled me, the anguish of the grave came upon me; I was overcome by trouble and sorrow.

Psa 116:4 Then I called on the name of the LORD: "O LORD, save me!"

Psa 116:5 The LORD is gracious and righteous; our God is full of compassion.

Psa 116:6 The LORD protects the simplehearted; when I was in great need, he saved me.

Psa 116:7 Be at rest once more, O my soul, for the LORD has been good to you.

Psa 116:8 For you, O LORD, have delivered my soul from death, my eyes from tears, my feet from stumbling,

Psa 116:9 that I may walk before the LORD in the land of the living.

Psa 116:10 I believed; therefore I said, "I am greatly afflicted."

Psa 116:11 And in my dismay I said, "All men are liars."

Psa 116:12 How can I repay the LORD for all his goodness to me?

Psa 116:13 I will lift up the cup of salvation and call on the name of the LORD.

Psa 116:14 I will fulfill my **vows** to the LORD in the presence of all his people.

Psa 116:15 Precious in the sight of the LORD is the death of his saints.

Psa 116:16 O LORD, truly I am your servant; I am your servant, the son of your maidservant; you have freed me from my chains.

Psa 116:17 I will sacrifice a thank offering to you and call on the name of the LORD.

1.2 This hymn of thanksgiving is strikingly personal from beginning to end. Its use in connection with the major feasts probably indicates that it was associated with the payment of individual vows especially in the light of verse 14.

2. Doctrine

2.1 Vows were quite common and are even mentioned twice in the New Testament. The word vow has three different grammatical usages: it is used of a transitive verb, an intransitive verb and a noun. The word communicates a verbal promise made generally to God, but not exclusively so.

2.1.1 In the Old Testament there are three Hebrew words used. One is the verb **Nadar**. Another is the noun **Neder** derived from this verb. The third is **Iissar**, a noun describing a vow of abstinence. The New Testament noun **Eucho** appears only twice, where it is translated "a vow."

2.2 Old Testament vows seem to take three basic forms: bargain type, acts of selfless devotion, and those for the purpose of abstaining.

2.3 Bargains were made with God in the form of vows to insure His presence, protection, provision, etc. The promises made under these circumstances were always conditional.

Jacob--A safe return

Gen 28:20 And Jacob vowed a vow, saying, If God will be with me, and will keep me in this way that I go, and will give me bread to eat, and raiment to put on,

Gen 28:21 So that I come again to my father's house in peace; then shall the LORD be my God:

Gen 28:22 And this stone, which I have set for a pillar, shall be God's house: and of all that thou shalt give me I will surely give the tenth unto thee.

Jephthah--A victory over the Ammonites

Jdg 11:30 And Jephthah vowed a vow unto the LORD, and said, If thou shalt without fail deliver the children of Ammon into mine hands,

Jdg 11:31 Then it shall be, that whatsoever cometh forth of the doors of my house to meet me, when I return in peace from the children of Ammon, shall surely be the LORD'S, and I will offer it up for a burnt offering.

Hannah--To give her son to God

1Sa 1:11 And she vowed a vow, and said, O LORD of hosts, if thou wilt indeed look on the affliction of thine handmaid, and remember me, and not forget thine handmaid, but wilt give unto thine handmaid a man child, then I will give him unto the LORD all the days of his life, and there shall no razor come upon his head.

Absalom--To worship God

2Sa 15:6 And on this manner did Absalom to all Israel that came to the king for judgment: so Absalom stole the hearts of the men of Israel.

2Sa 15:7 And it came to pass after forty years, that Absalom said unto the king, I pray thee, let me go and pay my vow, which I have vowed unto the LORD, in Hebron.

2Sa 15:8 For thy servant vowed a vow while I abode at Geshur in Syria, saying, If the LORD shall bring me again indeed to Jerusalem, then I will serve the LORD.

3. Vows, as acts of selfless devotion, can best be illustrated by David's vow not to rest until the ark was returned to Jerusalem.

Psa 132:2 How he swore unto the LORD, and vowed unto the mighty God of Jacob;
Psa 132:3 Surely I will not come into the tabernacle of my house, nor go up into my bed;
Psa 132:4 I will not give sleep to mine eyes, or slumber to mine eyelids,
Psa 132:5 Until I find out a place for the LORD, an habitation for the mighty God of Jacob.

4. Vows of abstinence were a sort of bargain, but rather than "do this for that," it was "refrain from this for that."

Num 21:1 And when king Arad the Canaanite, which dwelt in the south, heard tell that Israel came by the way of the spies; then he fought against Israel, and took some of them prisoners.

Num 21:2 And Israel vowed a vow unto the LORD, and said, If thou wilt indeed deliver this people into my hand, then I will utterly destroy their cities.

Num 21:3 And the LORD hearkened to the voice of Israel, and delivered up the Canaanites; and they utterly destroyed them and their cities: and he called the name of the place Hormah.

5. Certain laws in the Old Testament governed vows. The scope of these laws indicates how vital vows were to Jewish life. For example:

Lev 7:16 "If, however, his offering is the result of a vow or is a freewill offering, the sacrifice shall be eaten on the day he offers it, but anything left over may be eaten on the next day.

Lev 7:17 Any meat of the sacrifice left over till the third day must be burned up.

Lev 22:17-25--all sacrifices were to be without blemish.

Lev 22:18 "Speak to Aaron and his sons and to all the Israelites and say to them: 'If any of you -- either an Israelite or an alien living in Israel -- presents a gift for a burnt offering to the LORD, either to fulfill a vow or as a freewill offering,

Lev 22:19 you must present a male without defect from the cattle, sheep or goats in order that it may be accepted on your behalf.

6. Moses in Leviticus and Numbers speaks to the use of vows in combination with the various feast days.

Lev 23:37 ("These are the LORD'S appointed feasts, which you are to proclaim as sacred assemblies for bringing offerings made to the LORD by fire -- the burnt offerings and grain offerings, sacrifices and drink offerings required for each day.

Lev 23:38 These offerings are in addition to those for the LORD'S Sabbaths and in addition to your gifts and whatever you have vowed and all the freewill offerings you give to the LORD.)

Num 29:38 Include one male goat as a sin offering, in addition to the regular burnt offering with its grain offering and drink offering.

Num 29:39 "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."

7. Eli, the husband of Hannah, traveled to the Temple to fulfill his vows at the same time he offered his annual sacrifice.

1Sa 1:21 When the man Elkanah went up with all his family to offer the annual sacrifice to the LORD and to fulfill his vow,

1Sa 1:22 Hannah did not go. She said to her husband, "After the boy is weaned, I will take him and present him before the LORD, and he will live there always."

8. Job vowed not to entertain thoughts of fornication in Job 31:1.

Job 31:1 I made a covenant with mine eyes; why then should I think upon a maid?

Job 31:2 For what portion of God is there from above? and what inheritance of the Almighty from on high?

9. Ordinarily the vow was made voluntarily, but occasionally the parents made the dedication for the child for life, as in the cases

of Samson,

Jdg 13:1 Again the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the LORD, so the LORD delivered them into the hands of the Philistines for forty years.

Jdg 13:2 A certain man of Zorah, named Manoah, from the clan of the Danites, had a wife who was sterile and remained childless.

Jdg 13:3 The angel of the LORD appeared to her and said, "You are sterile and childless, but you are going to conceive and have a son.

Jdg 13:4 Now see to it that you drink no wine or other fermented drink and that you do not eat anything unclean,

Jdg 13:5 because you will conceive and give birth to a son. No razor may be used on his head, because the boy is to be a Nazarite, set apart to God from birth, and he will begin the deliverance of Israel from the hands of the Philistines."

of Samuel,

1Sa 1:9 Once when they had finished eating and drinking in Shiloh, Hannah stood up. Now Eli the priest was sitting on a chair by the doorpost of the LORD'S temple.

1Sa 1:10 In bitterness of soul Hannah wept much and prayed to the LORD.

1Sa 1:11 And she made a vow, saying, "O LORD Almighty, if you will only look upon your servant's misery and remember me, and not forget your servant but give her a son, then I will give him to the LORD for all the days of his life, and no razor will ever be used on his head."

10. In summary, three important observations should be made concerning Old Testament vows.

- Making a vow represented a sacred and a binding duty. A vow was as binding as an oath, but only when actually spoken.
- The vow could be redeemed with money, the amount to be set by the priest.
- Vows arose from mixed motives, and therefore should not be considered as always being based on piety.

11. In the New Testament the term "vow" appears only twice as such.

Acts 18:18 Paul stayed on in Corinth for some time. Then he left the brothers and sailed for Syria, accompanied by Priscilla and Aquila. Before he sailed, he had his hair cut off at Cenchrea because of a vow he had taken.

Acts 21:22 What shall we do? They will certainly hear that you have come,

Acts 21:23 so do what we tell you. There are four men with us who have made a vow.

Acts 21:24 Take these men, join in their purification rites and pay their expenses, so that they can have their heads shaved. Then everybody will know there is no truth in these reports about you, but that you yourself are living in obedience to the law.

12. Vows were quite common and are even mentioned twice in the New Testament and prove beyond a doubt that Paul never quite got over "being a Jew." Let me review this concept for a moment.

Act 18:18 And Paul after this tarried there yet a good while, and then took his leave of the brethren, and sailed thence into Syria, and with him Priscilla and Aquila; having shorn his head in Cenchrea (a seaport on the east side of the Isthmus): for he had a vow.

13. Paul stayed in Corinth an indefinite period of time (many days), beyond a year and a half.

14. Before leaving Corinth, he assumed a Nazarite vow.

15. During the period of the vow, a Nazarite allowed his hair to grow uncut, and at the end of the period he would cut his hair.

15.1 During the period of the vow he did not have sex, drink wine or eat grapes, defile himself with the dead, nor cut his hair.

16. It is significant that while Paul steadfastly refused to permit the Mosaic law to be imposed on Gentiles, he himself, as a Jew, continued to practice many of its demands.

16.1 Paul was at times as stubborn and *reversionistic* as some of his Jewish adversaries. Jesus recalled said "the law and the prophets were until John but now the Kingdom of God is preached and every man pressed unto it.

17. James and the Jerusalem elders realized that Paul permitted Jewish believers as Jews to continue in the Law. But they felt that something must be done to show the Jewish Christians that he did not advocate the abolishment of the law.

17.1 It was suggested Paul identify himself with four Nazarites who were soon to appear in the Temple to ceremonially purify themselves. It would be nice said James for Paul to pay the expenses related to their purification.

17.2 This thought James would prove to the Jewish church that Paul himself accepted the Jewish customs. Paul did this dastardly deed and as a result received from the Lord severe the discipline of being incarcerated for some four years (c. 58-62).

17.3 There seems to have been serious misuse of vows in the days of Jesus. The practice regarding "**Corban**," or money dedicated to temple use rather than given to aid aged parents, was denounced by Jesus in Mat 15:3-6 and Mar 7:9-11.

Mat 15:3 Jesus replied, "And why do you break the command of God for the sake of your tradition?"

Mat 15:4 For God said, 'Honor your father and mother' and 'Anyone who curses his father or mother must be put to death.'

Mat 15:5 But you say that if a man says to his father or mother, 'Whatever help you might otherwise have received from me is a gift devoted to God,'

Mat 15:6 he is not to 'honor his father' with it. Thus you nullify the word of God for the sake of your tradition.

Mar 7:9 And he said to them: "You have a fine way of setting aside the commands of God in order to observe your own traditions!"

Mar 7:10 For Moses said, 'Honor your father and your mother,' and, 'Anyone who curses his father or mother must be put to death.'

Mar 7:11 But you say that if a man says to his father or mother: 'Whatever help you might otherwise have received from me is **Corban**' (that is, a gift devoted to God),

18. Certain Jews of Judah vowed to kill Paul and thus Paul was sent to Caesarea Syria.

Acts 23:12 And when it was day, certain of the Jews banded together, and bound themselves under a curse, saying that they would neither eat nor drink till they had killed Paul.

Acts 23:13 And they were more than forty which had made this conspiracy.

Acts 23:14 And they came to the chief priests and elders, and said, We have bound ourselves under a great curse, that we will eat nothing until we have slain Paul.

Acts 23:15 Now therefore ye with the council signify to the chief captain that he bring him down unto you tomorrow, as though ye would enquire something more perfectly concerning him: and we, or ever he come near, are ready to kill him.

19. John the Baptist was from all indication dedicated by his parents as a Nazarite.

Luk 1:13 But the angel said to him: "Do not be afraid, Zechariah; your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to give him the name John.

Luk 1:14 He will be a joy and delight to you, and many will rejoice because of his birth,

Luk 1:15 for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He is never to take wine or other fermented drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit even from birth.

20. The Lord modified the requirements of the law regarding vows as follows:

Mat 5:33 "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.'

Mat 5:34 But I tell you, Do not swear at all: either by heaven, for it is God's throne;

Mat 5:35 or by the earth, for it is his footstool; or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the Great King.

Mat 5:36 And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make even one hair white or black.

Mat 5:37 Simply let your 'Yes' be 'Yes,' and your 'No,' 'No'; anything beyond this comes from the evil one.

21. It would certainly seem in the Church Age, given the fact we are no longer under the Mosaic law, we should never be involved with making religious vows.

22. The law and the prophets ceased with the coming of John the Baptist.

Luk 16:16 The law and the prophets were until John: since that time the kingdom of God is preached, and every man presseth into it.

22.1 Christ offered Israel something new to replace the Mosaic law: the Kingdom teachings, but Israel rejected His offering and thus the Church Age was intercalated.

22.2 After the rejection of the Kingdom and the insertion of the Church Age, Paul makes clear we are no longer under the law.

Gal 3:23 But before faith came, we were kept under the law, shut up unto the faith which should afterwards be revealed.

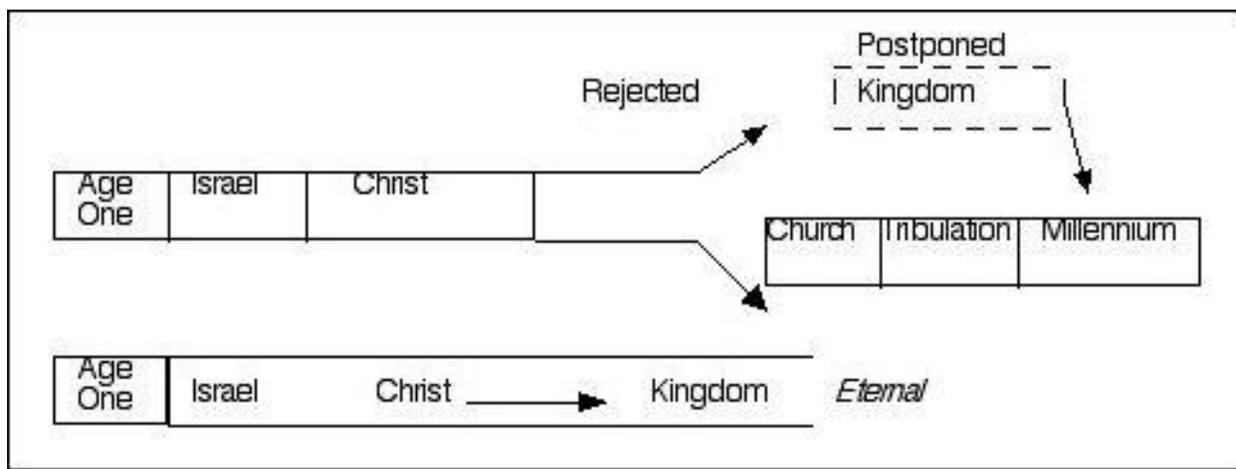
Gal 3:24 Wherefore the law was our schoolmaster to bring us unto Christ, that we might be justified by faith.

Gal 3:25 But after that faith is come, we are no longer under a schoolmaster.

Gal 3:26 For ye are all the children of God by faith in Christ Jesus.

Gal 3:27 For as many of you as have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ.

Gal 3:28 There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus.



Gal 3:4 But when the fulness of the time was come, God sent forth his Son, made of a woman, made under the law,

Gal 3:5 To redeem them that were under the law, that we might receive the adoption of sons.

Gal 3:6 And because ye are sons, God hath sent forth the Spirit of his Son into your hearts, crying, Abba, Father.

Gal 3:7 Wherefore thou art no more a servant, but a son; and if a son, then an heir of God through Christ.

Gal 3:8 Howbeit then, when ye knew not God, ye did service unto them which by nature are no gods.

Gal 3:9 But now, after that ye have known God, or rather are known of God, how turn ye again to the weak and beggarly elements, whereunto ye desire again to be in bondage?

Gal 3:10 Ye observe days, and months, and times, and years.

Gal 3:11 I am afraid of you, lest I have bestowed upon you labour in vain.

23. There is nothing in Scripture to prevent Christians from taking an oath before testifying in court. It is perhaps best for us to remember that everything we say is before God and should be influenced by metabolized doctrine in our souls.

