

Deuteronomy 23:22

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

But if thou shalt forbear to vow, it shall be no sin in thee.

Analysis

But if thou shalt forbear to vow, it shall be no sin in thee.

This verse establishes that vows are entirely voluntary—no obligation exists to make them. The Hebrew techdal lindor (תְּחִילַת לִנְדוּר, 'forbear to vow') means abstaining from making vows altogether. The assurance 'it shall be no sin' liberates believers from feeling obligated to make special promises to God beyond Torah's requirements. This counters religious cultures that pressure adherents into vows, pledges, or commitments as demonstrations of piety or securing divine favor.

This freedom reflects crucial theological truths:

1. God's relationship with His people rests on His initiative and covenant faithfulness, not human promises
2. ordinary obedience to revealed law is sufficient—extraordinary vows aren't required
3. God values integrity over impressive but unfulfilled commitments.

The verse's placement immediately after warning about unfulfilled vows (v. 21) provides wise counsel: better to make no vow than to vow and break it, risking sin through failure.

For Christians, this principle finds fuller expression in the New Covenant. Jesus cautioned against oath-making (Matthew 5:33-37), teaching that simple yes and no should suffice because God's children should be consistently truthful. James 5:12 echoes this teaching. While vows aren't forbidden, they're unnecessary for

maintaining relationship with God, which rests on Christ's perfect obedience and sacrifice, not our promises. This liberates believers from religious manipulation that equates faithfulness with multiplying vows, pledges, and commitments. Faithful covenant living—ordinary, daily obedience motivated by grace—pleases God more than spectacular but potentially unfulfillable vows.

Historical Context

Ancient Near Eastern religious practice often included elaborate vow systems where worshipers felt obligated to promise offerings, service, or abstinence to secure divine favor. Temple priesthoods sometimes encouraged vows, knowing that fulfillment enriched sanctuaries. This created psychological pressure to make increasingly extravagant commitments, particularly during crises when individuals desperately sought divine intervention. Archaeological evidence reveals extensive votive offerings at ancient temples, suggesting active promotion of vow-making.

Israel's clarification that vows were optional protected against such manipulation. God required obedience to His revealed law but didn't demand additional voluntary commitments as prerequisites for relationship or blessing. This distinguished Yahweh worship from pagan systems where securing divine favor often required bargaining through vows and promises. The law's balance—permitting vows but emphasizing they're optional—gave freedom for sincere expressions of devotion while preventing the legalism that developed in later Judaism.

Historical evidence from Second Temple Judaism shows how this balance was lost. Pharisaic tradition developed complex vow casuistry, including problematic practices like qorban vows that dedicated resources to God to avoid family obligations (Mark 7:9-13). Jesus condemned such abuse, where vow-making circumvented moral duties. The early church generally avoided elaborate vow systems, though Nazirite vows continued (Acts 18:18, 21:23-24). Church history demonstrates recurring tendency toward vow-making that can become manipulative or substitute for genuine obedience, validating this law's wisdom in declaring vows entirely optional while demanding fulfillment if voluntarily undertaken.

Related Passages

Romans 1:17 — The righteous shall live by faith

James 2:17 — Faith and works

1 John 4:8 — God is love

1 Corinthians 13:4 — Characteristics of love

Study Questions

1. How does this freedom from obligatory vows challenge religious cultures that pressure believers into making commitments?
2. What does this verse teach about the sufficiency of ordinary obedience versus extraordinary vows or pledges?
3. How should Christians evaluate modern equivalents of vows, such as ministry commitments, pledges, or faith promises?

Interlinear Text

מִתְּנִזְנֵן	לֹא	לִנְדֵד	רַ	בְּגַם	מְטָא:
H3588	But if thou shalt forbear	H5087	H3808	H1961	H0
H2308					H2399

From KJV Study • kjvstudy.org