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JUN 19 47

THE SOUTHERN PRESBYTERIAN JOURNAL

*A Presbyterian semi-monthly magazine devoted to the
statement, defense and propagation of the
Gospel, the faith which was once for
all delivered unto the saints.*

"Entered as second-class matter May 15, 1942, at the Postoffice at Weaverville, N. C., Act of March 1, 1879."

Number VI — Number 4

JUNE 16, 1947

Yearly Subscription \$1.50

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Univ of N Carolina

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God Hath Sworn

By Rev. J. B. Green, D.D.

Being the sermon of the retiring moderator of the eighty-sixth General Assembly and delivered at the opening session of the eighty-seventh session of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church, U. S., in Anderson Auditorium, Montreat, N. C., Thursday evening, May 29, 1947, at 7:30 o'clock. Dr. Green has just retired as Professor of Doctrinal Theology at Columbia Theological Seminary, Decatur, Ga. However, he has not retired from active service to the Seminary and the Church, as he has consented to act as full-time Professor of Homiletics until his successor in this chair may be procured.

(Texts: Ps. 110:4; Ps. 132:11.)

Last July it was my privilege to preach to the women of our Church in conference here at Montreat. My text then was, "God Hath Spoken." It is now my privilege to preach to you, ministers and elders representing our whole Church, and my text is, "God Hath Sworn." If I had another opportunity to speak to a representative assembly in this place, and I am not suggesting, I should like to use as my text, "God Hath Done It." "God Hath Spoken," "God Hath Sworn," "God Hath Done It"; what texts these are for a trilogy of messages of incomparable significance and scope. "God hath spoken," that is affirmation; "God hath sworn," that is confirmation; "God hath done it," that is execution. What He said and what He swore, He hath performed.

The words, "God Hath Spoken," occur repeatedly in the sacred record, and so do the words, "God Hath Sworn." Yet, I have never heard or seen a sermon on either of these texts. In Genesis, in Exodus, in Deuteronomy, in I Samuel, in Psalms, in Isaiah, in Jeremiah, in Amos, in Acts, and in Hebrews, it is written that the Lord hath sworn. If the words, "God Hath Spoken," should arrest and command instant attention, how much more the words, "God Hath Sworn!" For surely the oath of the Eternal is ultimate for emphasis and authority. I shall present the subject of God's oath under four heads.

I. To Whom God Hath Sworn. Noah was the first man to whom God made promise with an oath. It is not said in the Genesis narrative that God confirmed His promise to that patriarch with an oath. But that He did so is inferred from Isaiah 54:9, where the Lord says: "I have sworn that the waters of Noah shall no more go over the earth." The time of the oath was the time of the covenant transaction with that second father of the human race.

Abraham is the first man of whom it is definitely said that God swore to him. That solemn assertion was made on Mount Moriah, and is recorded in Genesis, twenty-second chapter, the climactic chapter of that book, the chapter of trial and triumph, of obedience and oblation. The angel of the Lord called unto Abraham out of heaven, and said: "I have sworn that in blessing I will bless thee."

The second man to be thus honored, the third if we reckon from Noah, was David. "I have made a

covenant with my chosen, I have sworn unto David my servant." Ps. 99:3. "Jehovah hath sworn unto David in truth; he will not turn from it." Ps. 132:11. The fourth in the list of distinguished names concerning whom God has sworn is the mysterious Partner of Jehovah's throne, who is called David's Lord in the famous 110th Psalm. The reference of course is to great David's Greater Son. At the fourth verse is this peculiarly solemn asseveration: "Jehovah hath sworn, and will not repent; thou art a priest forever after the order of Melchizedek."

These are the great personages to whom God has confirmed His Word with an oath. They were epochal men. To Jerusalem also, to Zion, to His people Israel God has been pleased to bind Himself with an oath. He hath sworn **not only in His goodness but also in His wrath.** Twenty or more passages record or refer to the oaths of the Lord, oaths of patient love or punitive judgment.

II. By What God Hath Sworn. The author of Hebrews says: "Men swear by the greater." But when God made promise to Abraham, since He could swear by none greater, He swore by Himself. Heb. 6:13,16. "By myself have I sworn," is the language of Gen. 22:15. At Jer. 44:26, Jehovah says: "Behold, I have sworn by my great name." To swear by His name is the same as to swear by Himself. For His name stands for Himself, for all that He has manifested Himself to be. In Ps. 89:35, the Lord says: "Once have I sworn by my holiness." Swearing by His holiness is not different from swearing by His name. For holiness is His name, because holiness is His nature. Sings the Psalmist: "He hath sent redemption unto his people; he hath commanded his covenant forever: holy and reverend is his name." Ps. 111:9. The refrain of Ps. 99, thrice repeated is "Holy is He," suggesting the trisagion of the seraphim in the prophet's vision: "Holy, holy, holy, is Jehovah of hosts." So when God swears by His holiness it is as if He swore by His name or by Himself.

At Is. 62:8 is this powerful oath: "Jehovah hath sworn by his right hand, and by the arm of his strength." The finger of the Lord is a feeble symbol of His strength; His right hand is a stronger symbol, and the arm of His strength is the mightiest symbol of His power. It is a favorite metaphor of the poets and prophets: the arm of His strength; the arm that redeems; the holy arm; the glorious arm; the bared arm of God. Who among us has not longed and prayed for the vision of His arm

bared and upraised in almighty and irresistible action in these days of triumphant wickedness? To swear by His right hand or arm of His strength is to swear by the plentitude of His power, is to pledge to the performance of His word all the resources of omnipotence. But since His sovereign might is the resultant of all that He is, swearing by His right hand or the arm of His strength is not different from swearing by His name or by Himself.

The most frequent form of the divine oath is: "**As I live, saith Jehovah.**" He thus swears by His life. If His word should fail of fulfilment His life would be forfeit. "As certainly as I live, as I continue to live, the thing that I say shall be done."

So in answer to the question, By What Hath God Sworn, you may say: **By Himself, His name, His holiness, His power, His life—by all that constitutes His being,** and goes forth in His action, by His infinite, inalienable, and eternal Godhood. Would anything less have been worthy of God or been sufficient for the end in view? No, He might have sworn by the hills and the mountains, or by the heavens, and the earth; but that would not have been enough for Him or for us men who outlive the hills and the heavens. Immortal man needs a better guarantee than these material standards of stability and permanence. They had a beginning and they shall have an end. So in order to lay a ground of assurance absolute, to make security infinitely secure, He swore by Himself, thus putting beneath His word Reality, uncreated, original, absolute, and final Reality. Even to such length has the Lord our God gone to accommodate Himself to our necessities.

III. What God Hath Sworn. An inquiry of peculiar interest and importance. The answer can easily be ascertained by examining the contents of His oaths. Jehovah's earliest oath—that to Noah—included two great promises: 1. The uniformity of nature, that is, the regularity of the seasons. In Gen. 8:22 is this assurance: "While the earth remaineth, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, and day and night, shall not cease." 2. Exemption from repetition of the flood. "And God said . . . the waters shall no more become a flood to destroy all flesh." Gen. 9:12,15.

This covenant with Noah was fundamental to the later covenant with Abraham. For without the uniformity of nature and the preservation of the world and of the race God's purpose of grace would have lacked conditions for its unfolding, which required generations of men and centuries of time.

Jehovah's promise to Abraham in Gen. twelfth chapter includes three articles: a land, a seed, and a blessing through the seed to all families of the earth. His oath to that patriarch recorded in Gen. twenty-second chapter has reference to the second and third of these articles, namely, the seed and the blessing through the seed. "In blessing I will bless thee, and in multiplying I will multiply thy seed as the stars of the heavens, and as the sand upon the seashore . . . and in thy seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed." Vs. 17,18.

The Lord's oath to David was in the interest of the oath-supported promise to Abraham. Just what was the divine oath to David? "I have sworn unto David my servant: Thy seed will I establish for-

ever, and build up thy throne to all generations." Ps. 89:3-4. The promise to Abraham and the promise to David are virtually the same. For the seed of Abraham and the son of David are one and the same person. This promise, repeatedly given and sworn to, God has kept and is still keeping.

In multiplying He has multiplied the seed of Abraham, until for number they are as the stars and as the sand. For 2,000 years ago, Abraham's seed became David's son, and from that day to this the kingdom has been upon His shoulder. Of the increase of His government and of peace there shall be no end. To Him God has said and is saying: "Ask of me, and I will give thee the heathen for thine inheritance, and the uttermost parts of the earth for thy possession." Ps. 2:8. One of the motives and one of the aims of foreign missions is to share the blessings of Abraham's seed, David's son, with all mankind. The great assurance at Gen. 22:18 is of one spirit and scope with the Great Commission in Matt. 28:19.

Have you considered that foreign missions has the backing of God's oath? Will the missionary enterprise ever fail? It is as certain to succeed as God's oath is of fulfilment. God hath sworn—let the nations hear it, and let the Church remember it—God hath sworn to give the blessings of the gospel to all the families of the earth. And despite the indifference and opposition of men in any given generation His zeal will perform this. If any be faithless, God abideth faithful; He cannot deny Himself.

These are the principal examples of God's swearing: the oath to Noah that the earth should be uniform and regular in its seasons and processes; to Abraham that he should become the father of many nations; to David that his son under the double title of Priest-King, should redeem and rule the world forever. Not one of these oaths has failed; they are in process of fulfilment now.

There are other oaths subordinate and ancillary to the principal ones. One glorious for spirit and scope is found at Isa. 45:22-23: "Look unto me, and be ye saved, all the ends of the earth . . . By myself have I sworn, the word has gone forth from my mouth in righteousness, and shall not return, that unto me every knee shall bow, every tongue shall swear." Another is Isa. 54:9-10: "As I have sworn that the waters of Noah shall no more go over the earth, so have I sworn that I will not be wroth with thee, nor rebuke thee. For the mountains may depart, and the hills be removed; but my lovingkindness shall not depart from thee, neither shall my covenant of peace be removed, saith Jehovah that hath mercy on thee." Both these oaths have reference to the gathering and security of God's people. How safe is the Church of the Living God? How secure is the salvation of saints? As safe and secure as the oath of the God of truth and might can make them!

There are two other oaths that are aimed at the party of the opposition. At Isa. 14:24-27 is an oath of extraordinary fulness and finality. "Jehovah of hosts hath sworn, saying, Surely, as I have thought, so shall it come to pass; and as I have purposed, so shall it stand: that I will break the Assyrian in my land, and upon my mountains tread him under foot . . . This is the purpose that is purposed upon the whole earth; and this is the hand that is stretched out upon all the nations.

For Jehovah of hosts has purposed, and who shall annul it?" This oath is against the open enemies of God's people, past, present, and future.

There is one in Num. 14 and in Psalm 95 which is directed against the false friends of God and religion, those who having professed faith and loyalty fall away in unbelief and transgression: "As I live, and as the earth shall be filled with the glory of Jehovah because all these men that have seen my glory, and my signs, which I did in Egypt and in the wilderness, yet have tempted me these ten times, and have not hearkened to my voice; surely they shall not see the land which I swear unto their fathers." Vs. 21-23. "Wherefore I swear in my wrath, that they should not enter into my rest." Ps. 95:11.

O you of the contrary part, are you here? Think you to bring to nought the counsel and oath of God? Or to escape the sentence of His wrath? You shall not succeed in your opposition, nor escape the penalty of your disobedience. The oath of the All-faithful is against you. Except you repent, you shall be excluded from His peace, and included under His wrath. And you who prophesy evil of the Church, saying that it has had its day, and is on the way out; you who misread the signs of the times need to re-read and read aright the word of Him who said of His chosen Servant: "He will not fail nor be discouraged, till he have set justice in the earth; and the isles shall wait for his law." Isa. 42:3. "God is not a man, that he should lie . . . Hath he said, and will he not do it? Or hath he spoken, and will he not make it good?" Num. 23:19.

IV. What was the Design and Intended Effect of the Divine Oath? The answer is found in Heb. 6:13-18. This is the classic passage on the oath of God. It states the fact of the oath and the intended effect of the oath. Why did God swear to Abraham? to David? Two words in Hebrews answers the question. One is "confirmation." "Men swear by the greater and in every dispute of theirs the oath is final for confirmation." That is, the oath is the last resource, and should put an end to all gainsaying, to all contention. "Wherein," that is, this being the case among men, "God being minded to show more abundantly unto the heirs of the promise the immutability of his counsel or purpose, interposed with an oath." Here are the heirs of the promise and there is God affirming, and here is God intervening, mediating between Himself and men with an oath; as if He affirming were less than Himself swearing. The point is this: As with men, so with God, the oath is final for confirmation. If that does not inspire confidence, produce assurance, then assurance cannot be given, confidence cannot be created.

The other word which expresses the intended effect of the oath is encouragement, "strong encouragement" is the phrase: "That by two immutable things, in which it is impossible for God to lie, we may have strong encouragement." As in the phrase, "more abundantly," so in the phrase, "strong encouragement," more is meant than is expressed: encouragement in superlative degree, the highest degree possible from God to man.

To this end God employs two immutables, in which it is impossible for God to lie. What are the two immutables? His word of affirmation, and His oath of confirmation. In the preceding verse is

named another immutable — the immutability of His counsel or purpose. Have we not here three immutables: His immutable promise, His immutable purpose, His immutable oath, one above another? His immutable promise rests on His immutable purpose, these two immutables being buttressed and established by His immutable oath: a foundation for hope and comfort threefold in its depth, solidity, and permanence.

God has done His best to create confidence in His Word, to beget assurance of salvation. Is His best not good enough for us? "What more can he say than to you he hath said, You who unto Jesus for refuge have fled?"

My brethren, when tempted to doubt, to be discouraged, remember the immutables, three of them, each alone sufficient to sustain the full weight of our immortal interests; what shall we say of the sufficiency of the three combined? Remember the immutables, then remember and cherish the grand "impossible," namely, that God should lie. Let us go forward with this business of preaching the Gospel, of extending the borders of the kingdom of righteousness and peace, ever co-working with Him of whom it is written, that He will not fail nor be discouraged till He have set justice in the earth. Until God is defeated or discouraged, we need not be. The battle is His. "This day the noise of battle, the next the victor's song."

In closing, I pass on to you Jehovah's charge to Joshua: "Be strong and of good courage; for thou shalt cause this people to inherit the land which I swear unto their fathers to give them. Only be strong and very courageous, to observe to do all the law (that is, the whole will of God). This book of the law—of the will of God—shall not depart out of thy mouth, but thou shalt meditate therein day and night, that thou mayest observe to do according to all that is written therein; for then thou shalt make thy way prosperous, and then thou shalt have good success. Have not I commanded thee? Be strong and of good courage . . . for Jehovah thy God is with thee whithersoever thou goest."

"God hath spoken." "God hath sworn." Do we not yet believe that He will keep His word and perform His oath? Are we still of doubtful mind? The Lord forgive our unbelief, the Lord increase our faith. Amen.

THE TWO ALS

By Robert F. Gribble, D.D.

There have been many requests for reprints of the article appearing under the above title in the April 1st issue of The Journal. We are happy to announce that this has been done, and these reprints are available at one dollar per hundred postpaid. If the alcohol question is a live one in your community you will do well to order a supply of this folder for distribution. Postage stamps are acceptable. Order from The Southern Presbyterian Journal Company, Weaverville, N. C.