

Better Oathbreakers

A paladin's life and duties are defined by her oath. She practices its tenets even before swearing to them formally at 3rd level. Tension between a paladin and her oath can create dramatic moments for the game, moments that are lost when the consequence of oathbreaking lacks nuance. The paladin's sacred vows therefore deserve greater attention than they get in the official rules. This article fills the gap with specific measures for breaking, repairing, and replacing oaths, as well as a new Foresworn subclass available to paladins who leave their oaths behind.



Breaking Oaths

Each paladin oath is comprised of several tenets. These are vague, meaning their exact wording is nearly impossible to enforce; the paladin should instead be held to the spirit of each one.

Because any two players can interpret these vague tenants differently, a paladin *player* should get a warning when a decision might violate a tenet; a surprise penalty is unfair. This warning manifests as a sense of unease felt by the paladin, a sense that goes away if the act is avoided, but one that lingers for several months if the paladin goes through with it.

Example. *Knight Isabeau is a paladin sworn to a tenet of “honesty,” which only requires that she “not lie or cheat.” She transgresses by purposefully omitting facts from a report to her superiors in the military order she is part of. The intentional deception violates the spirit of the “honesty” tenet, though no lies were written. It haunts Isabeau’s conscience until she decides to pay a penance.*

This system addresses transgressions in stages of severity, each with its own penalties and requirements for atonement. The three degrees of transgression—lesser, greater, and severing—are detailed below.

LESSER TRANSGRESSIONS

Lesser transgressions are minor in nature or impact. These prick the paladin's conscience but are generally harmless and selfless.

Example. *Knight Isabeau's report omitted a young recruit's cowardice in battle. The paladin hopes to spare the feelings of the recruit's family, and since the recruit died anyway, an official reprimand could not have any beneficial effect on his future behavior. The deception is harmless and selfless, making it a lesser transgression.*

There are no mystical penalties for a lesser transgression, though the feeling of unease follows the paladin for three months or until the paladin atones. Social consequences are subtle but can have far-reaching effects. Being known as someone who doesn't care about oaths can draw scorn or distrust from peers, including members of the paladin's order or priests of the same faith—whatever group administered the paladin's oath.

Atonement at this stage is as simple as undergoing a *ceremony* spell. A paladin with no peers to administer the spell—or one who cannot afford the material component—may instead spend 5 days in contrition, performing religious vigils or laboring without compensation.

Upgraded Transgressions

A paladin who has accumulated several transgressions of a particular severity—and seems to have no plan or intention to atone for them—may find future transgressions of that type automatically upgraded to the next degree of severity. A lot of small cobblestones can make a long road.

GREATER TRANSGRESSIONS

Greater transgressions benefit the paladin or cause tangible harm. Alternately, they are serious, unambiguously offensive to the values of the oath.

Example. *Knight Isabeau was trusted with a sack of gold to buy horses for her militant order. Her report omits the discount she received from the drover, allowing her to pocket the difference in gold. This constitutes a greater transgression because the deception was for a benefit.*

At this stage, the character cannot gain more levels in the paladin class until she atones. When it's time to add a level to the character sheet, the player can choose a level of another class or can forego gaining a level until the violation is cured. If the violation is public, the paladin can also expect censure from her order or temple. A court martial or religious trial might try to compel atonement. Refusal to comply means losing some privileges of membership in that group or being expelled from it.

For a *ceremony* spell to cure a greater transgression, it must be cast at 3rd-level with a material component valued at 250 gp. A quest or acts of contrition may substitute, but these require 25 total days of the paladin's time. If this contrition is public, it cures the social consequences too, except among the paladin's most ardent political detractors.

SEVERING TRANSGRESSIONS

Severing transgressions are deep betrayals of a tenet. They show a fundamental incompatibility between the paladin and her oath. The consequences of these violations are far-reaching.

Example. *Amidst war, Knight Isabeau's scouting report omits movement of enemy troops in the nearby forest. The paladin doesn't want her superiors warned in time to stop the flanking maneuver and protect the kingdom's ruler. Because the outcome is terrible and far-reaching, the paladin commits a severing transgression.*

The mystical consequences prevent the character from taking more paladin levels. Moreover, she cannot use any of her paladin subclass features. Socially, the paladin becomes a pariah when this treachery is discovered, not just expelled from her group but likely hunted or politically condemned.

The *ceremony* spell and simple acts of contrition are of no use for this violation. The paladin can only hope to redeem herself through a heroic quest, a mission so dangerous and arduous that the paladin's conscience is restored and her peers are forced to rethink their low opinion of her.

Changing Direction

After any stage of oathbreaking, a paladin can choose not to atone, but rather to select a new way forward, one that better matches her new outlook on life. For example, a paladin of Devotion who can no longer abide compassion might channel her newfound rage into the Oath of Conquest.

Swearing a new oath usually requires finding another order or temple to administer new vows. Taking a new subclass cures the mystical consequences of oathbreaking—the paladin can gain more levels and freely use the features of her new subclass. However, betraying old political or religious alliances is likely to exacerbate the social consequences.

There are two notable exceptions to seeking out another oath. These cure the mystical consequence of oathbreaking without swearing a new set of tenets.

- ✦ A paladin who breaks her vows “to pursue some dark ambition or serve an evil power” can replace her subclass with the Oathbreaker, described in the *Dungeon Master's Guide*. This is a very specific path to walk, one bent on instilling hatred and fear.
- ✦ A paladin can take the new Foresworn subclass described below, a path of self-reliance. As a neutral alternative, the paladin doesn't burn any mystical bridges, leaving open the possibility of future atonement. A contrite Foresworn might eventually return to her original oath.

Foresworn

This subclass replaces the Sacred Oath a paladin previously swore. It might be a temporary condition; perhaps the paladin has abandoned an oath and will swear another after soul searching or atonement. However, the features of the Foresworn make a character's paladin levels viable, even for a character who will never assume the bonds of another oath.

A paladin can select the Foresworn subclass upon reaching 3rd level. Perhaps the paladin had questions or doubts and didn't go through the swearing ceremony at the culmination of her oath's training. Alternately, a paladin can replace an existing oath because of events that occur in the game. In this case, the paladin replaces the features specific to her Sacred Oath with Foresworn features, a set of effects focused on personal protection and martial prowess.

OATH SPELLS

Foresworn do not have a special list of always-prepared spells. Instead, this energy becomes generalized and diffused. The paladin still gets additional spells but these are the type all paladins can choose from.

Starting at 3rd level, you can prepare a number of bonus paladin spells indicated on the Foresworn Spells table. These spells are additional to those provided by your Spellcasting feature.

Foresworn Spells	
PALADIN LEVEL	BONUS PREPARED SPELLS
3rd	1 spell of 1st level
5th	2 spells of 2nd level or lower
9th	3 spells of 3rd level or lower
13th	4 spells of 4th level or lower
17th	5 spells of 5th level or lower

CHANNEL DIVINITY

Absent the focus of an oath, you can only channel this feature's magical energy into yourself. You can use the following Channel Divinity feature.

Fortified Body. You can use this power as a bonus action. You regain 2d6 hit points. Half of any healing that exceeds your hit point maximum is applied to you as temporary hit points.

This healing increases by 1d6 when you reach 5th level (3d6), 11th level (4d6), and 17th level (5d6).

AURA OF SURETY

Standing apart from a prior oath takes a conscious focus or a strength of will that manifests palpably on the battlefield. At 7th level, you constantly emanate an aura of surety while you're not incapacitated. The aura extends 10 feet from you in every direction (but not through total cover). It grants benefits to you and each ally in range.

An affected creature can use a reaction to reduce by 5 points the bludgeoning, piercing, or slashing damage it takes from a nonmagical weapon. Further, affected creatures have advantage on checks or saving throws to resist effects that would move them bodily or knock them prone.

At 18th level, the range of this aura increases to 30 feet.

SUPERNATURAL RESISTANCE

At 15th level, you become more resistant to harm. You gain resistance to bludgeoning, piercing, and slashing damage from nonmagical weapons.

CERTAIN PURPOSE

At 20th level, you become a paragon of independence and self-assurance. You're unconstrained by doubts, comfortable judging the righteousness of any course without the guidance of formulaic oaths.

As an action, you can magically fortify yourself, gaining the following benefits for 1 minute:

- ★ You are immune to the paralyzed and restrained conditions. Additionally, your movement is unhampered by climbing, swimming, crossing difficult terrain, or passing through magical entanglements.
- ★ You are immune to the *confusion* spell and other effects that would randomly dictate your actions each round.
- ★ When you take the Attack action on your turn, you roll those attacks with advantage
- ★ When your melee weapon attacks score a critical hit, you inflict an additional 2d8 damage

Once you use this feature, you can't use it again until you finish a long rest.

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