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## Rest and Restoration

### Leviticus 25:1-22

**Intro:** As we turn to ch25, we are entering into the last section of Leviticus (25-27). But, right away, we should notice that these chapters are actually not in chronological order. V1 tells us that Moses received the following instructions from the Lord when he was on top of Mt Sinai while all of the rest of the book was received from the Lord by Moses as He spoke to him from the tabernacle of meeting (1:1) which only occurred later after Moses had descended from the mountain and the tabernacle was constructed. So, why do these chapters show up at the end of Leviticus? They are placed here because they are a fitting conclusion to the covenant laws recorded in Leviticus and because they are a good transition to the book of Numbers.

They're a fitting conclusion to Leviticus for 2 reasons. 1) The Lord concludes His discussion of covenant laws in Exodus 20-31 by focusing on the covenant sign: the Sabbath (Ex 31:12-17). It was His way of saying, "Here's how you show covenant faithfulness to My Law – you keep the Sabbath!" Likewise, this final section (25-27) comes at the end of an extended discussion of covenant laws in Leviticus (1-24) and focuses on the Sabbath year and the super-Sabbath year, the Year of Jubilee. It's as if the Lord is saying again, "Keep the laws in this section as a sign of your covenant faithfulness to all the laws in this book!" 2) These chapters belong at the end of the book, ch26 in particular, because it contains blessings and curses, the same elements that most, if not all covenant made in the Ancient Near East ended with. This is what happens if the covenant is upheld and followed; this is what happens if the covenant is rejected or even neglected. There were separate consequences that followed faithfulness or faithlessness.

These chapters are also a natural transition to the book of Numbers, where Israel eventually marches out from Sinai and heads towards the Promise Land. These 3 chapters deal with issues concerning how Israel is supposed to live in the land, whether that is observing the Sabbath and Jubilee years, acting obediently in general, or keeping the various laws that relate to ritual and corporate life. The clear intent of this section is that the Israelites are to be in that land very soon! Placing these chapters at the end of Leviticus merely whets our appetite for the ultimate fulfillment of the long-awaited

covenant promise: the land ([Gen 15:16](#)). The covenant law has now been given and the Israelites can march boldly into Canaan – provided, of course, that they maintain faith in their covenant King and carry out His covenant mission of filling the earth with His righteous and holy kingdom.

The primary focus of this passage is the land – it's referred to some 39 times in [ch 25-26](#). If the Israelites were to possess and enjoy their promised homeland, they had to recognize and respect some basic facts, the first of which was that God owned the land ([2, 23](#)) and had every right to direct its use as He saw fit. Consequently, God also owned the people of Israel ([55](#)) because He had redeemed them from bondage of slavery in Egypt. Because they belonged to Him, all Israelites were to treat one another as brothers and sisters and not take advantage of each other when it came to personal debts or property claims. The Israelites were expected to labor in their fields for their necessary provisions but it was God who gave the increase ([21](#)) and supplied them with sunshine, rain and harvest.

In all reality, Israel's covenant King was also their benevolent landlord. When the Lord distributes the land to the tribes and clans of Israel near the end of the Book of Joshua, He is actually partitioning the land to a nation of tenants. The Israelites, who had been servants of Pharaoh, were now servants of Yahweh and they enter the land of Canaan, they would be tenants whose responsibility would be to work and keep Yahweh's land for Him. Yet, at the same time, they were tenants who were empowered by the Lord to be, in some respects, owners of the land; not as private individuals but as members of tribes, clans and extended households (Caleb). In effect, they were given land grants from their King with the specific stipulation to not let the land pass into possession of another tribe, clan or household. Our text addresses how to ensure this mandate from the King.

We can derive from this passage that it was of fundamental importance to the Lord that Israelites remained in close relationships with their families, had ownership of the land and faithfully observed the Sabbath principle. Close family relationships were important because the Lord had established the family as the foundation of society. The personal and social benefits of strong families have been documented repeatedly by modern studies. The Lord wanted these benefits to be woven into the very fabric of Israelite society, both to bless Israel and to model to the nations what a godly, successful society was to look like. Ownership of the land was important

because it was tied to economic well-being. Land enabled people to provide for their needs by growing crops and keeping herds and flocks. Observing the Sabbath principle was important not only because it protected the people and the land from being overworked, but also because obedience to it was the fundamental sign of covenant loyalty.

The purpose of ch25 is to ensure that all 3 realities continued in Israel. Close family relationships and land ownership were both threatened by debt, which could force Israelites to sell their land and move away from their immediate relatives. Israel was primarily an agrarian society and as all farmers know, farming is not only hard work, it's also fraught with risk. There are any number of reasons why crops can fail: lack of rain, too much rain, adverse weather, disease, locust. A farmer getting ready for planting season may need to buy seed for the planting on credit. If the harvest fails that year, he would probably be unable to pay his debt; plus, he would need to buy seed again on credit for the next planting season. If this cycle repeats too many times, he may be forced to consider selling off some of his land just to survive. (Texas farmers)

The laws of redemption and Jubilee provided for the clearance or cancellation of debt, enabling people to go back to their own tribe (family) and to the property of their inheritance that was given to their ancestors by the Lord. These laws also had the added benefit of maintaining a level of social equity, since the Jubilee year meant that about once a generation all Israelites had the opportunity of a fresh start on their own land. This was intended to prevent the creation of a feudal system in which increasing numbers of poor serfs served a small minority of rich land owners. It also prevented the very kind of thing that happened in [Gen 47:13-26](#), where all the inhabitants of Egypt, on account of the severe famine, were forced to sell their land to Pharaoh and were reduced to servitude.

As for the Sabbath principle, it was extended to include entire years, whether it was every 7<sup>th</sup> year (Sabbath year) or every 50th year (Jubilee). This gave people, animals and the land itself an extended time of rest and refreshment, allowing them to briefly escape the curse of the ground and to enjoy a period of rest in the Lord that foreshadowed a far greater experience of rest in Him that was yet to come. What is the curse of the ground? It's the curse placed on all mankind because of Adam's sin: [Gen 3:17-19](#). If this was the curse, what was the original reality? [Gen 2:15-16](#)! Man was placed

in the Garden of Eden to tend it and keep it; but there was no toil or sweat involved, Adam picked the self-producing fruit when he was hungry and spent his time walking around with the Lord in the cool of the day. What a concept – that’s good work if you can get it! The Lord was granting Israel the opportunity to experience just a taste of that every 7 years and a heaping helping of it in the 50<sup>th</sup>.

We see the benefits of these laws but were they followed? There’s no clear mention of their observance anywhere in Scripture but, neither is there any historical record of the Day of Atonement being observed either. Silence in the biblical narrative proves almost nothing. We do see things in later OT passages that imply that these laws were not followed in the waning years of Israel’s history, a sin that, though it did not itself directly lead to the Babylonian exile, it did contribute directly to the length of that exile (**II Chron 36:21**, until the land had enjoyed her Sabbaths. As long as she lay desolate she kept Sabbath, to fulfill 70 years.)

Whether this unfaithfulness was true earlier in Israel’s history is impossible to prove. But, any failure on the Israelites’ part to adhere to these laws does not mean these laws were impractical. Rather, it reveals that as time went by, the Israelites increasingly lost sight of, which means they lost faith in, the Lord’s provision for them and their priorities were out of step with the Lord’s vision for His people and for the world. This utter failure on Israel’s part should not come as a surprise to us; we disobey the Lord to this very day for the very same reasons.

**1-7** – When Israel took possession of the Promised Land, they were to let it observe a Sabbath year every 7 years so that it could rest. Not only was the land given a rest but the people and the farm animals were also rested. Certainly, they were able to take care of the routine tasks that kept their homes from deteriorating but they were not to engage in any of the normal activities of an agrarian society like plowing, sowing and harvesting. This prohibition was also extended to all servants or hired resident alien workers. They are included because the Lord’s love extend to all people, Israelite or not. It also included the draft animals because they are part of the Lord’s creation and as such, they are also the objects of His love. All of these were given a year of rest from their normal duties.

Of course, although they couldn’t do any normal farming work during the

year, they were still able to pick and eat any produce that the land grew naturally but full scale harvesting was prohibited. Of course, anything the land produced without human aid was considered to be the property of all. The people were to obtain food wherever they could find it, just as the Israelites did during their 40 year wilderness wandering. This Sabbath year also put every Israelite in the same place as the poor of the land, who were required to simply trust that God would provide for their needs in the worst of circumstances. This would give the common Israelite a proper compassion for the poor, who had to live this way every year.

The Sabbath year paralleled the Sabbath day in 2 significant ways. 1<sup>St</sup>, it benefited workers and animals by providing rest from back-breaking field work and it even went a step further by providing free food! 2<sup>Nd</sup>, it also was a sign of keeping the covenant and would therefore be met with strict justice if violated. The Sabbath year was also the occasion for a “Bible conference” in Israel where the priests read and explained the Book of Deuteronomy to all the people ([Deut 31:9-13](#)). This was done during the annual Feast of Tabernacles, which would usher in the new year. It would take a great deal of faith for the people to trust the Lord for their daily food all during that 7<sup>th</sup> year but “faith comes by hearing and hearing by the Word of God” ([Rom 10:17](#)) and the Lord had promised to protect them and provide for them throughout the year, if only they would trust and obey.

The Lord, as Creator of all things, is King over all things and He shows His loving care to all things, whether it's the land, the animals that dwell on it, the foreigners who work in it or the Israelites whom He calls to tend it. The Lord's care is not limited to just humans and certainly not to just Israelites; it is as broad as the creation itself, and the Israelites, as His covenant people, are to show this same care for everything in their Father's world. One way they could do this was to let the land rest every 7 years. This would be like someone today giving up their paycheck for a year and just trusting the Lord to provide but only more so for Israel, since there was no natural guarantee that the harvest of the 8<sup>th</sup> year would be good. But the Israelites could do this, knowing that the Lord had promised to provide. Letting the land rest would therefore be a bold proclamation of faith that the Lord would care for the needs of those who follow Him.

**8-17** – The number 7 has special significance in Leviticus. It's associated with the Sabbath and also signifies a complete amount. Not surprisingly, the



50<sup>th</sup> year-the year coming after 7 periods of 7 years-was especially significant in Israel, a crowning Sabbath year with special benefits for the people. This year began on the Day of Atonement, which was a fitting day for many reasons: it occurred in the 7<sup>th</sup> month, it was itself a day of Sabbath rest and it was the day in which both the people and the tabernacle were cleansed, making it an appropriate start to a holy year.

The start of Jubilee had 2 practical results. The first is liberty or the release of people from debts that have caused them to sell either their property or themselves. In either case, release meant that all Israelites would have a fresh start, returning to their own property, surrounded by their closest relatives. The 2<sup>nd</sup> result was that the people were forbidden from full-scale agricultural work, although they could eat whatever grew naturally in the field. This would constitute as 2<sup>nd</sup> consecutive year of rest for the land, a super-sabbatical rest, both for the land and those who worked it.

Again, severe financial hardship could force Israelites to sell their land; more specifically, they sold leases for the use of the land. The land itself couldn't be sold since it belonged to the Lord. Since all these leases ended in the Year of Jubilee, their prices were calculated according to the number of years left for harvesting crops until the next Jubilee. This would, no doubt, take into account the Sabbath years where no crops would be harvested.

The main focus of this text is a warning from the Lord for the Israelites not to take advantage of each other in these business deals, either by paying less than the land's value or by charging more. It would be easy for either party to take advantage of the other, depending on if it was a buyer's market – or a seller's, especially if either party was desperate to do business. The command to fear God is appropriate here: it's a healthy reminder to those with power that there is a far greater authority to whom they must give an account.

**18-22** – This section concludes with an exhortation to obedience and an assurance that the Lord will provide. The Lord promises to provide for the needs that are basic to abundant human life: you will dwell...in safety (**18c**) and you will eat your fill (**19b**). What more could a person expect? Well, as Americans, we can expect a whole lot more and not be satisfied until we received it and then squandered it. But notice, this promise was only made to those who embraced the covenant from the heart (**18a-b**). All of this is

imagery that takes us back to Eden: people living securely in God's garden, having all their needs met and walking in intimate, obedient fellowship with the Lord. This has always been the Lord's intent for humanity, and now Israel is privileged with showing the nations this vision of Eden and inviting them to experience it for themselves.

The question in v20 isn't presumptuous or faithless, it's rational and realistic. Inquiring minds want to know! The Lord's gracious answer assures Israel that they are to have no worries, even if the Jubilee is preceded by the Sabbath year. The Lord promises to send enough blessing in the 6<sup>th</sup> year to cover the need for the next 3 years. While there would be no sowing or reaping for just 2 years, they will still need enough provisions for the year after Jubilee until the harvest comes in in the Fall. The Israelites can boldly obey the Lord's command because they know He will provide for their needs.

As previously mentioned, Israel eventually failed to observe the Sabbath years but the Lord made sure the land received its proper rest. It's a basic spiritual principle of life that whatever you rob from God, you can never keep or enjoy for yourself. You will end up losing it and more, one way or another. By disobeying the law of the Sabbath year, Israel robbed themselves not only of spiritual blessings but also of the strength of the land, of their servants and of their draft animals. By working the same land, year after year, they got their harvests but they lost the renewal that comes from allowing the land to lie fallow and workers to rest. They also lost the blessings that come from trusting the Lord, from sharing with the needy and they robbed the Lord of the glory He would have received as other nations saw how much He blessed His special people. It was a costly mistake on their part and they paid for it dearly.

How does this apply to modern NT Christians? The closest parallel to Israel's necessary trust in the Lord would be in our Christian giving. I rarely speak on giving because in our area, so many people have become burnt out on church, and more specifically – giving to church, because of the strong-arm tactics of certain denominations, and not a few non-denominations in our vicinity.

I serviced a retirement home in NOLA recently and one of the workers there heard that I was a pastor. Her first question to me was if I preached from the

Bible. Boy, do I! She was a bit surprised at our regular approach to God's Word. Her next 3 questions were all about giving: Do you require your people to tithe? I said I believe tithing is good but I don't require it. What do you think about "Pastor Love" giving? I wasn't familiar with the concept but apparently, in her church, the congregation is required to contribute to a fund specifically for the Pastor. I told her the Bible doesn't say anything about it so, at best, it's certainly not required; at worst, it's unbiblical. Her last question was: How do you feel about having an ATM in the church? What! I was shocked, and told her as much.

Sadly, this is the level of spiritual abuse that passes for "Christian responsibility" in too many churches today. Biblical Christian giving has less to do with the needs of the church and more to do with the need of believers to put themselves into positions where they honestly have to trust the Lord to make up the difference. Tithing isn't a rule, it's merely an example. I think churches have done their congregations a great disservice by setting 10% as the standard. Why limit your ability to trust the Lord?

Missionaries are a prime example of this because they generally cannot work in the foreign land they are serving in so they have to trust the Lord to meet their many needs. We've heard Bro Alan Blackmon recount how the Lord has come through for him and his family time and time again in ways he could never have arranged or even imagined. Of course, the Lord hasn't called all of us to be foreign missionaries but He has called on us to trust Him for all of our needs just as Israel was called to do. Our obedience in trusting Him daily will produce positive spiritual results in our lives but by refusing to obey or by obeying only in half measures, we will sell ourselves short of spiritual maturity and we will miss out on many of the blessings that the Lord has sent aside for each of us. Without faith, it is impossible to please Him. 😊