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Release and Redemption Leviticus 25:23-55

Intro: We are looking at the final section of Leviticus (25-27). The general focus of this section is concerned with the importance of Israel being faithful to observe the Sabbath principle, not only while they are traveling through the wilderness but especially when they enter the Promised Land. Again, the information contained in this section was delivered to Moses on top of Mt. Sinai, months before the rest of the laws in Leviticus were delivered to him in the tent of meeting. The reason for this shift in chronology is the Lord's way of reminding Israel if they are faithful in their observance of the Sabbath principle, it will signify their covenant faithfulness to all the laws in the Book of Leviticus.

The Sabbath principle was introduced to Israel back in Ex 20 as part of the original 10 Commandments. But, here in ch25, the Sabbath principle is not limited to a day of rest on every 7th day of the week but is extended to also include a year of rest every 7th year that Israel was in the land. On top of this, a super-Sabbath year was to be observed immediately following the observance of the 7th Sabbath year. This 50th year was known as the Year of Jubilee and it had a special significance for all of Israel. Of course, it required a great deal of faith for the Israelites to celebrate this special year because throughout the entirety of it, they would need to trust the Lord to provide for all their needs.

While it did require a great deal of faith, the Year of Jubilee was still a significant celebration for Israel. There were 4 elements that made this year special. 1) Release (10, 13). "Proclaim liberty throughout all the land unto all the inhabitants thereof" is what is inscribed on the Liberty Bell, which is on display in Independence Hall in Philadelphia, PA. It's a direct quote from v10 in the KJV. At the start of Jubilee, the Israelites were commanded to release all of their indentured servants so that they might return to their own ancestral lands and families. A Hebrew servant was only to serve for 6 years and then be set free (Ex 21:2) but if the Jubilee occurred in anytime during their servitude, they were to be released from it. How could Israel properly celebrate this special year if some of their people were still under bondage and separated from their loved ones and their land?

2) Rest (11-12). During the Jubilee, the people were forbidden to carry on their normal agricultural pursuits and were required to live on whatever the land produced of itself. This gave both the people and the land an extra year of rest since the previous year would have been a Sabbath year. By their faithful observance of the Jubilee, Israel would be required to rely on the Lord to keep His promises and supply sufficient food for almost 3 full years, since they would not be able to work the land until the 51st year and even then, they would have to wait for the harvest. This necessary rest was physically beneficial for the land and those who worked it but it was spiritually beneficial to Israel as it exercised their faith and allowed the Lord to be glorified before the other nations as He shed His grace upon them.

3) Restoration (13-17). Any property that was sold (leased) since the last Jubilee would revert back to its original owners, for the Lord wanted His land to remain with the tribes, clans and families to which it had been allotted. For parents to properly care for their families, they had to have land to cultivate and the private ownership of property gave stability to the national economy. The Lord owned the land and merely loaned it to His people. He wanted them to possess the land and work it with a sense of proprietorship and recognize that they had a responsibility to care for the Lord's property.

But, the 1st and the most important element of the Year of Jubilee was 4) Repentance (9). It's significant that the Year of Jubilee began with the Day of Atonement, a day when Israel was commanded to afflict your souls (16:31) and repent of their sins. They weren't to enter the Jubilee without the Lord first cleansing and forgiving them. This 1st step was necessary for the blessings of Jubilee to come to pass. Just think, if their hearts weren't right with God, how would they ever be able to trust Him to provide for them over the next 2+ years? And, if their hearts weren't right with God, how could they ever be in a frame of mind to willingly release their servants or return the land to the rightful owners? It's an often forgotten spiritual principle that our relationship with God determines how we treat others.

The rest of ch25 deals in greater detail with some of the specifics requirements of the Year of Jubilee. In particular, this section explains how redemption and Jubilee worked for those who had been forced to sell either their property or themselves as the result of poverty. V23-24 introduce this section and are followed by 4 main laws that describe what to do when a

fellow Israelite becomes poor.

23-24 – Typically, a foreigner (resident alien) didn't own land. This text applies solely to Israelites: they were servants on the estate of the divine King, who owned the land and entrusted it to their care. It wasn't ultimately theirs to own but to care for and use in a way that honored their King. The Lord was going to give land to each of the tribes, after they'd entered Canaan and possessed the Land. The danger here was that prospering tribes would buy up more and more land and cause economic disparity among God's people so He prohibits the permanent sale of the land (**23**). The Israelites were always to have the right to redeem the land at any time (**24**). If they could never afford to redeem it, the land would still return to its owner in the Jubilee (**28**), giving a fresh start to those who had suffered financially.

It's interesting that the Lord declares that the Israelites are strangers and sojourners. Normally, this status would not be considered enviable in any society but notice also, that the Lord adds the blessed preposition with Me, and that changes everything! Your status in this world: social or economic, low or high, small or great, is of little consequence. To be with the Lord is the only desirable status because it means that all things are ours and we have a far better citizenship and homeland. Here, the Lord is reminding Israel that their real home was in heaven with Him and they were only strangers and foreigners on this earth (**Heb 11:13**). Like their ancestor Abraham, they were to look beyond the Promise Land for a city...whose builder and maker is God (**Heb 11:10**). This is true of all Christians too (**I Ptr 2:11**).

25-28 – Here, the law of Jubilee redemption is applied to Israelites who become poor and sell some of their property. Poverty in Israel could be caused by oppression, laziness or natural causes such as crop failure, illness or old age. Of these 3, oppression is by far the main cause of poverty recognized in scripture. But, whatever the cause, poverty could force an Israelite to sell some of their property and when it happened, they had 3 options: 1) a near relative (brother, uncle or cousin) could redeem the property immediately; releasing it from control of a non-family member by buying out the remainder of the lease. Since land was the basis of wealth, this had the social benefit of keeping that wealth within the respective family groups.

If this wasn't an option, those who had become poor might redeem themselves if they acquired sufficient means to do so by gaining income from the rest of their land, selling possessions, hiring themselves out to work or by receiving an inheritance. If neither option was possible, the Lord Himself would act as their Redeemer by means of this law and the land would be returned in the Jubilee. It is a characteristic of the Lord to redeem people: he had redeemed Israel from slavery in Egypt to be His people and now, by this law, He redeems them from their debts.

29-31 – Of course, for every law there are some exceptions. The property laws described in the previous verses did not apply to urban property. These laws applied mainly to rural land where most Israelites lived. For them, the land was more than a place to live; it was a place to earn one's livelihood. Inside walled cities, property was usually just a place to live and as such, it fell outside the jurisdiction of inherited, family-owned property and thus was not critical for the economic survival of the family. The seller had the right of redemption for 1 year, after that, the sale was final.

32-34 – The Levites were the other exception. The non-priestly members of this tribe had been set apart by the Lord to assist those priests that ministered in the tabernacle. Their inheritance wasn't large tracts of land within Canaan but 48 individual cities and the houses within them. So, if a Levite ever sold his house, although it was in a city, it was still part of his tribal and thus, his right of redemption was always in effect and if he was unable to redeem his house, it would be returned to his possession during the Jubilee. The fields, or pasture land surrounding the Levite cities could never be sold because it didn't belong to any individual Levite but to all the Levites that resided in that city.

35-38 – This applies the law of redemption to an Israelite who becomes poor and sells all their property. The idea here is that not only have they become poor, having faltered financially among their brethren, but they are now homeless too. This unfortunate individual has sold all his property but it wasn't enough to cover his debts so he could now be retained as a servant by his Israelite creditors. If this happened, they must treat their new Israelite servant at least as well as a resident alien worker; they were not to oppress their fellow Israelites.

Instead, creditors were to provide their destitute brother with loans, whether of food staples so they could eat or money so they could buy seed, grow crops and make a living (35b, 36b). It's thought that the creditors would allow them to work the land as tenant farmers, paying back their debt with the crops and making a little extra to support themselves. Creditors were strictly forbidden from taking advantage of debtors by charging usury (interest) on these loans. They're to show the same merciful love to their debtors as the Lord had shown to them (38).

David Guzik tells us that in medieval Europe, "Christians" often refused to loan money at interest because of these Biblical laws against usury. Motivated by their hatred of the Jews, "Christians" often pushed the Jewish people into occupations that were thought of as low and inferior: collecting taxes and rents, and money-lending. The "Christians" considered these occupations as necessary evils and thought to make the Jews bear the evil of these necessities. Yet because of this, Jewish people in medieval Europe dominated many aspects of banking and financial business – which often had the unfortunate result of making them even more envied and resented by European "Christians." But, that's exactly what bad doctrine does: it leads to bad actions which are accompanied by bad consequences.

39-46 – When an Israelite with with significant debt has sold all their property, their last resort was to sell themselves, either to a fellow Israelite or to a resident alien. If he sells himself to a fellow Israelite, he was not to be treated as a permanent servant but as a hired resident alien worker who would work for an agreed amount of time. In this case, the period of work ended in the Jubilee, unless they were redeemed by a near-kinsman or were able to buy their own freedom. This law effectively abolished permanent servitude among the Israelites, unless they chose it (Ex 21:5-6).

There were 2 important rules to be followed in this situation. 1) Hebrew servants couldn't be sold as a permanent servants (slaves) to others (42b). They were already permanent servants of the Lord Who brought them out of Egypt to be their King and they to be His people. 2) They were not to rule over these Hebrew servant ruthlessly (with rigor) (43). This describes the ways in which the Egyptians had made the Israelites lives bitter with hard labor (Ex 1:13-14). Naturally, Israelites were never to repeat such wickedness, especially because these servants belonged to their heavenly King.

The rest of the text answers 2 questions for the Israelites: 1) Can they have permanent servants? 2) Will they also go free automatically in the Jubilee? The answers are: 1) Yes, but they must come from the nations surrounding Israel or from foreign nationals living among them and 2) No, these servant may serve for life but this law doesn't require it. In fact, it wasn't uncommon for permanent servants (slaves) to gain their freedom in the Ancient Near East. They could be adopted as family by their master or their freedom could be purchased by themselves or by another. The fact that their treatment is not addressed here doesn't mean the Israelites could mistreat these foreign servants.

The word slave and their designation as property in our text has troubled many a modern reader, but it shouldn't. For starters, while the Hebrew word translated as slave (‘ebed) can refer to the morally bankrupt forms of servitude, like Israel in Egypt, slave in the Greco-Roman world or the American brand of slavery; it also refers to morally legitimate forms of servitude. At least 4 types can be identified in Scripture: King's servant (Ex 8:3, I Sam 19:4); God's servant (Gen 50:17; Deut 32:43); Indentured servant (Ex 21:2, 5); Permanent servant (44-46). it's the last 2 categories that are sometimes translated as slave, which is misleading. Our modern concept of a slave is one who is legal property of another and is bound to absolute obedience. According to this definition, a slave has no rights and the owners can assume they are free to do with them as they like.

But this type of slavery was forbidden in Israel. To begin with, servants had legal rights in Israel. The law stipulated that if their masters abused them, they were to go free (Ex 21:26-27) and they had the right to rest on the Sabbath. Plus, Israelite masters were commanded to treat their servants with compassion (Deut 15:12-15; 16:11-12). Thus, servants in Israel could not be treated as slaves were normally in the Greco-Roman world, at least not legally.

As far as the property language is concerned, we regularly use commercial terminology to describe people when the context is commercial. Professional athletes are traded (as you would trade a stock) and employees are transferred to another location (as you would transfer money). Employing these terms doesn't mean we see the people involved as less than human; as commodities. We use these terms because they

accurately describe the circumstances of a person in a given commercial context. At the beginning of the season, Shohei Ohtani was traded by the Anaheim Angels to the Los Angeles Dodgers for a 10 year, \$700 million contract. If someone was going to pay me that much money for 10 years worth of work, they could treat me however they wanted to!

Of course, although the servitude described in the text had no resemblance to the depiction of slavery we're familiar with, it still was not an ideal situation. The ideal is described by the prophets ([Mic 4:4](#)) as a day when everyone shall sit under his [own] vine and under his [own] fig tree. But, while it wasn't an ideal situation, servitude in Israel was far better than the alternative (starvation) and it could, in fact, be ideal enough that some would choose to enter lifelong servitude willingly (bond servant). Still, even when the Ideal world comes, servitude will not stop. In that world, all the Lord's people will be permanent servants of the heavenly King and will consider it the greatest blessing! It was the duty of the Israelite master to imitate his heavenly Master so closely that he gave his servants a foretaste of that day.

47-55 – If a resident alien (foreigner) became wealthy and an Israelite became indebted to him and were eventually forced to sell themselves to the resident alien, the Israelites' right of redemption was always retained and could be exercised by a relative or the Israelite themselves, if they came into a financial windfall. The price for redemption was to be calculated by subtracting the value of the years worked by the original purchase price.

If they were unable to be redeemed, they would be released from servitude in the Year of Jubilee. Just as a redemption payment released an Israelite from debt servitude, so the Lord's redemption of Israel released His people from ruthless servitude in Egypt. No one else could own an Israelite permanently because they were already permanent servants of their gracious redeemer and King.

It was mentioned last time that the Sabbath year and the Year of Jubilee provided Israel with a brief escape from the curse of the land, eating the produce of the land without expending the toil and sweat that was necessary to make the land productive. And, by doing this the Lord was also providing Israel with a taste of life in the Garden of Eden. The Year of Jubilee looked backwards to Eden but it also looked forward to a much greater rest that was to come – the rest brought about by and through the

work of Jesus Christ.

In fact, Jesus took the principles of Jubilee and He applied them to His mission and ministry. This is especially clear in [Luke 4:18-19](#), where He reads from [Isa 61](#), a text that uses Jubilee language to describe a future restoration of the people of God. In [Lk 4:21](#), Jesus says this passage finds its fulfillment in Him, a fulfillment that revealed itself in 2 ways. The first was in His common ethical practice. In keeping with the principles of Jubilee, Jesus always showed great concern for the poor and downtrodden ([Lk 7:20-23; 14:13](#)) and chastised those who did not ([Lk 16:19-31](#)). He taught His disciples to follow His example of care and expected them to and this is exactly what early Christians did ([Acts 2:44-47; 4:34](#)).

But Jesus didn't stop there; He also fulfilled the Jubilee principles on an entirely new level, by releasing people from the bondage of physical sickness, demon oppression, and above all, the debt of their sins, providing them with both a present peace and a future hope that they were full members of God's royal family. Jesus started this deeper level of fulfillment with His earthly ministry. He symbolically fulfilled the Day of Atonement by His baptism but then fulfilled it in reality, and permanently, when He offered Himself as a sacrifice for sin on the cross. He will fulfill the principles of Jubilee completely when He returns to this earth in glory. It's for this very reason that His people cry, "Amen! Even so come, Lord Jesus!"

Like the announcement of the Year of Jubilee, the gospel is good news to the poor because their debts have been paid and are completely forgiven. All they need to do is receive the Savior and rejoice in a new beginning. Just as the debtors and slaves were set free to enjoy the Jubilee, so sinners are set free when they trust in the Lord to save them. Salvation through faith in Jesus Christ is a Jubilee experience because it breaks families and restores lost blessings and brings times of refreshing from the Lord!

Don't settle for a taste of Eden, Jesus offers the full spiritual benefit of Jubilee today in His eternal salvation and then the complete fulfillment when He returns to establish His millennial reign on earth. Instead of merely a taste of Eden, won't you taste and see that the Lord is good and experience the true freedom that only He can provide? 😊