

Deuteronomy 15: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 00] Deuteronomy chapter 15 At the end of every seven years you shall grant a release, and this is the manner of the release. Every creditor shall release what he has lent to his neighbour.

He shall not exact it of his neighbour, his brother, because the Lord's release has been proclaimed. Of a foreigner you may exact it, but whatever of yours is with your brother, your hand shall release. But there will be no poor among you, for the Lord your God will bless you in the land that the Lord your God is giving you for an inheritance to possess. If only you will strictly obey the voice of the Lord your God, being careful to do all this commandment that I command you today.

For the Lord your God will bless you, as he promised you, and you shall lend to many nations, but you shall not borrow, and you shall rule over many nations, but they shall not rule over you.

If among you one of your brothers should become poor, in any of your towns within your land that the Lord your God is giving you, you shall not harden your heart, or shut your hand against your poor brother, but you shall open your hand to him, and lend him sufficient for his need, whatever it may be.

[1 : 07] Take care lest there be an unworthy thought in your heart, and you say, The seventh year, the year of release is near. And your eye looked grudgingly on your poor brother, and you give him nothing, and he cried to the Lord against you, and you be guilty of sin.

You shall give to him freely, and your heart shall not be grudging when you give to him, because for this the Lord your God will bless you in all your work, and in all that you undertake.

For there will never cease to be poor in the land. Therefore I command you, you shall open wide your hand to your brother, to the needy, and to the poor in your land. If your brother, a Hebrew man or a Hebrew woman, is sold to you, he shall serve you six years, and in the seventh year you shall let him go free from you.

And when you let him go free from you, you shall not let him go empty-handed. You shall furnish him liberally out of your flock, out of your threshing floor, and out of your winepress. As the Lord your God has blessed you, you shall give to him.

You shall remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the Lord your God redeemed you. Therefore I command you this today. But if he says to you, I will not go out from you, because he loves you and your household, since he is well off with you, then you shall take an awl and put it through his ear into the door, and he shall be your slave forever.

[2 : 27] And to your female slave you shall do the same. It shall not seem hard to you when you let him go free from you, for at half the cost of a hired worker he has served you six years.

So the Lord your God will bless you in all that you do. All the firstborn males that are born of your herd and flock, you shall dedicate to the Lord your God. You shall do no work with the firstborn of your herd, nor shear the firstborn of your flock.

You shall eat it, you and your household, before the Lord your God, year by year, at the place that the Lord will choose. But if it has any blemish, if it is lame or blind, or has any serious blemish whatever, you shall not sacrifice it to the Lord your God.

You shall eat it within your towns. The unclean and the clean alike may eat it, as though it were a gazelle or a deer. Only you shall not eat its blood, you shall pour it out on the ground like water.

Going through the book of Deuteronomy, we have observed the pattern of the Ten Commandments being fleshed out in verses 6 to 26. What we see is in each part, the core principle of the commandment refracted in many different situations, revealing secondary principles, and these serve to illumine the deeper reality.

[3 : 44] In the relationship between the exposition and the condensed principle, we develop an understanding of the unity, the coherence, and the integrity of the law as a body of material.

In chapter 15, we continue looking at the fourth commandment, the law concerning the Sabbath day. At the end of chapter 14, it was themes of rejoicing and charity that came to the surface. And now it's themes of liberation and the concern for the poor. In such material, we gain a better understanding of what the purpose of the Sabbath law actually is. Without such passages, we probably wouldn't think enough about the Sabbath law as deeply concerned with liberation and provision for the poor.

Likewise, in considering the connection between the tithe laws and Sabbath, the facets of the Sabbath connected with joy are emphasised. In Exodus, the Sabbath is the great sign of the covenant.

Exodus chapter 31, verses 12 to 18 reads, And the Lord said to Moses, You are to speak to the people of Israel and say, Above all, you shall keep my Sabbaths, for this is a sign between me and you throughout your generations, that you may know that I, the Lord, sanctify you.

[4 : 55] You shall keep the Sabbath because it is holy for you. Everyone who profanes it shall be put to death. Whoever does any work on it, that soul shall be cut off from among his people. Six days shall work be done, but the seventh day is a Sabbath of solemn rest, holy to the Lord.

Whoever does any work on the Sabbath day shall be put to death. Therefore the people of Israel shall keep the Sabbath, observing the Sabbath throughout their generations, as a covenant forever. It is a sign forever between me and the people of Israel that in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, and on the seventh day he rested and was refreshed. And he gave to Moses when he had finished speaking with him on Mount Sinai the two tablets of the testimony, tablets of stone, written with the finger of God.

Now in Deuteronomy chapter 5, the law of the Sabbath day is connected not with the original creation and God resting on the seventh day, but with the event of the Exodus.

And here we see that being fleshed out further. The Sabbath is refracted into a much larger set of Sabbath-related times. It isn't just the seventh day. It's connected with seven weeks at Pentecost.

[6 : 06] It's connected with the seventh month at the Feast of Trumpets, with the seventh year as the Sabbath year, and seven weeks of years in the year of the Jubilee. The Lord is the Lord of Israel's time, and he has delivered them from slavery, and now that principle of liberation and release is to be written all over their calendar.

This institutes the fact of the Exodus into Israel's life. The historical event becomes an enduring reality of life. It also becomes a principle to be extended further. Israel must enjoy its liberation, but it also must extend that liberation to others.

Jonathan Sachs helpfully discusses the way that this chapter reveals an approach to justice.

Justice is not merely restricted to retributive justice, but also includes distributive justice.

Distributive justice has often been misused and misapplied, but it remains exceedingly important.

Distributive justice ensures that no one is stripped of a stake in society, and that society abandons its stake in no one.

The Sabbath year and the year of Jubilee are concerned to ensure that no one gets stripped of their inheritance, of their stake in the land. Mere retributive justice could allow for people to get dispossessed, impoverished, and marginalised.

[7 : 21] Huge divides could arise between rich and poor. The Lord repeatedly declares his concern for such persons and institutes principles, practices, and provisions to ensure that they are not abandoned.

This is not an individualistic society of absolute private property. It is a covenantal society where the poor had a claim upon the divinely granted inheritance of the land that had to be honoured.

This, it should be stressed, is not just about charity. If you failed to leave grain for gleaning in your fields, for instance, you were robbing the poor. They had a right to grain from your fields.

This was seen as a matter of justice. In the land that the Lord gave to his people, everyone must be able to enjoy the benefits of the inheritance. Everyone should be able to make a living for themselves.

The year of Jubilee and the Sabbath year ensured that disparities between rich and poor could never grow too large. This chapter has three separate principles that it discusses.

[8 : 18] First of all, there's the remission of debts, that in the seventh year debts would be released, and so people could not be destroyed by crushing debt. It's a principle not too dissimilar from our principle of bankruptcy.

It allows for some sort of relief from debt that would otherwise crush people. Following this, there's a complication that arises. The complication is that people would not want to lend to the poor and people in need if they saw that the Sabbath year was approaching.

And God deals with this very directly, calling his people to engage in charitable lending. They should not be calculating, trying to avoid lending money to people that they fear they might not get back.

The final principle places limits upon indentured servitude and encourages a practice of indentured servitude that is benign and gracious. The Lord lays an obligation of charity upon his people in this chapter, an obligation that he himself will enforce.

They must not be calculating in their dealings with one another, each trying to secure his personal advantage over against the other. Israel is to enjoy loving fellowship with each other in the land.

[9 : 26] They should pursue a common good, a way that they can all prosper together rather than each at the expense of others. This would inform the way that they did business with each other. It would limit the degree to which parties in business transactions would be separated from each other.

The ideal would be both parties prospering together or if they did not prosper, that one party wouldn't take advantage of the other but both would bear the loss. Israelites had an obligation upon them to assist the poor in their midst, to try and get the poor back on their feet again, not just as a matter of voluntary choice but as a duty placed upon them by the Lord who gave them the land.

But the obligation isn't the same as coercion. The Lord's intent is that they would do this joyfully and willingly. Much attention is given to the appropriate posture of heart to the person in need.

In verses 9-10, take care lest there be an unworthy thought in your heart and you say, The seventh year, the year of release is near, and your eye looked grudgingly on your poor brother and you give him nothing and he cried to the Lord against you and you be guilty of sin.

You shall give to him freely and your heart shall not be grudging when you give to him. And then in verse 18, It shall not seem hard to you when you let him go free from you for at half the cost of a hired worker he has served you six years.

[10 : 43] The Lord cares what's in the heart of his people when they're engaged in these acts. He wants them to do it willingly, not as a matter of coercion, but as an obligation that they're fulfilling from the heart.

The law of the book of Deuteronomy is not regular law, merely enforced upon people from without by magistrates and civil authorities. It's ethical instruction. It's designed to be internalised, to be lived from the heart.

How you feel about fulfilling the law really matters. And there's teaching within this law that simply couldn't be enforced. The idea of the duty to give a charitable loan is enforced by the Lord himself. Indentured servitude was supposed to function as a means of security for the destitute and the indebted. Here it's presented as something that should be ordered towards manumission. The intent of slavery is to give someone the means by which they can live as a free person.

The slave should be provided for. The slave should be set free in the Sabbath year and liberally given both training and resources to get himself started in independent life for himself.

[11 : 48] The story of Jacob might be in the background here. Jacob who was not treated righteously by his uncle Laban. Israelites should remember their own liberation from slavery. They have been in the position of the servant and they must treat their servants in the way that they would like to be treated.

Such indentured servitude was supposed to be so benign that a desire to remain in the state on the part of slaves on account of their love for their generous and good masters was supposed to be common enough that there would need to be a law made about it.

Much of the logic of this chapter depends upon beliefs concerning the Lord. The Lord is the guarantor of all debts and so you should be generous. You should give freely knowing that the Lord will repay.

The one who gives to the poor lends to the Lord. If you minister to those in need the Lord will bless you in your labors. That's the message of this chapter. The Lord has entrusted his people with great gifts in order that they might share in his giving.

He has blessed them so that they might bless others. And all of this is fleshing out some of the meaning of the Sabbath commandment. The meaning of the Sabbath commandment is not just that you must take rest.

[12 : 58] It's that you are now put in the position as one who has been liberated from slavery to give liberation to others. To give release and rest to the people who work for you.

to the people in your own household. The chapter concludes with instructions to dedicate the firstborn males of the herds and the flocks to the Lord. Israel is God's firstborn son and the exodus is the birth event.

In the dedication of the firstborn males their minds were always being brought back to their liberation event their deliverance from slavery that they should be in turn a people who liberate others.

There are however changes that have occurred in the law here changes from the law that's given in Exodus. No longer are animals to be sacrificed just on the eighth day but they will be brought on one of the pilgrim festivals to the central sanctuary.

Now that there aren't many different altars and they will live at a distance from the central sanctuary the firstborn males will be offered on specific occasions rather than just on the eighth day after their birth.

[13 : 58] A question to consider what are some of the principles that we could learn from this chapter that would teach us how better to relate to our own property?