

Leviticus 25: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Leviticus chapter 25. The Lord spoke to Moses on Mount Sinai, saying, It shall be a year of solemn rest for the land. The Sabbath of the land shall provide food for you, for yourself and for your male and female slaves, and for your hired worker and the sojourner who lives with you, and for your cattle and for the wild animals that are in your land. All its yield shall be for food. You shall count seven weeks of years, seven times seven years, so that the time of the seven weeks of years shall give you forty-nine years. Then you shall sound the loud trumpet on the tenth day of the seventh month. On the day of atonement you shall sound the trumpet throughout all your land, and you shall consecrate the fiftieth year, and proclaim liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants. It shall be a jubilee for you, when each of you shall return to his property, and each of you shall return to his clan. That fiftieth year shall be a jubilee for you. In it you shall neither sow nor reap what grows of itself, nor gather the grapes from the undressed vines, for it is a jubilee. It shall be holy to you. You may eat the produce of the field. In this year of jubilee each of you shall return to his property. And if you make a sale to your neighbour, or buy from your neighbour, you shall not wrong one another. You shall pay your neighbour according to the number of years after the jubilee, and he shall sell to you according to the number of years for crops.

If the years are many, you shall increase the price, and if the years are few, you shall reduce the price, for it is the number of the crops that he is selling to you. You shall not wrong one another, but you shall fear your God, for I am the Lord your God. Therefore you shall do my statutes, and keep my rules, and perform them, and then you will dwell in the land securely. The land will yield its fruit, and you will eat your fill, and dwell in it securely. And if you say, What shall we eat in the seventh year, if we may not sow or gather in our crop? I will command my blessing on you in the sixth year, so that it will produce a crop sufficient for three years. When you sow in the eighth year, you will be eating some of the old crop. You shall eat the old until the ninth year, when its crop arrives. The land shall not be sold in perpetuity, for the land is mine, for you are strangers and sojourners with me. And in all the country you possess, you shall allow a redemption of the land. If your brother becomes poor and sells part of his property, then his nearest redeemer shall come and redeem what his brother has sold. If a man has no one to redeem it, and then himself becomes prosperous and finds sufficient means to redeem it, let him calculate the years since he sold it, and pay back the balance to the man to whom he sold it, and then return to his property. But if he does not have sufficient means to recover it, then what he sold shall remain in the hand of the buyer until the year of jubilee. In the jubilee it shall be released, and he shall return to his property. If a man sells a dwelling house in a walled city, he may redeem it within a year of its sale. For a full year he shall have the right of redemption. If it is not redeemed within a full year, then the house in the walled city shall belong in perpetuity to the buyer throughout his generations. It shall not be released in the jubilee.

But the houses of the villages that have no wall around them shall be classified with the fields of the land. They may be redeemed, and they shall be released in the jubilee. As for the cities of the Levites, the Levites may redeem at any time the houses in the cities they possess. And if one of the Levites exercises his right of redemption, then the house that was sold in the city they possess shall be released in the jubilee. For the houses in the cities of the Levites are their possession among the people of Israel. But the fields of pasture land belonging to their cities may not be sold, for that is their possession forever. If your brother becomes poor and cannot maintain himself with you, you shall support him as though he were a stranger and a sojourner, and he shall live with you. Take no interest from him or profit, but fear your God, that your brother may live beside you.

You shall not lend him your money at interest, nor give him your food for profit. I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, to give you the land of Canaan, and to be your God.

If your brother becomes poor beside you, and sells himself to you, you shall not make him serve as a slave. He shall be with you as a hired worker, and as a sojourner. He shall serve with you until the year of the jubilee. Then he shall go out from you, he and his children with him, and go back to his own clan, and return to the possession of his fathers. For they are my servants, whom I brought out of the land of Egypt. They shall not be sold as slaves. You shall not rule over him ruthlessly, but shall fear your God. As for your male and female slaves, whom you may have, you may buy male and female slaves from among the nations that are around you. You may also buy from among the strangers who sojourn with you, and their clans that are with you, who have been born in your land, and they may be your property. You may bequeath them to your sons after you, to inherit as a possession forever. You may make slaves of them, but over your brothers the people of Israel, you shall not rule one over another ruthlessly. If a stranger or sojourner with you becomes rich, and your brother beside him becomes poor, and sells himself to the stranger or sojourner with you, or to a member of the stranger's clan, then after he is sold he may be redeemed. One of his brothers may redeem him, or his uncle or his cousin may redeem him, or a close relative from his clan may redeem him, or if he grows rich he may redeem himself. He shall calculate with his buyer from the year when he sold himself to him until the year of jubilee, and the price of his sale shall vary with the number of years. The time he was with his owner shall be rated as the time of a hired worker. If there are still many years left, he shall pay proportionately for his redemption some of his sale price. If there remain but a few years until the year of jubilee, he shall calculate and pay for his redemption in proportion to his years of service. He shall treat him as a worker hired year by year. He shall not rule ruthlessly over him in your sight, and if he is not redeemed by these means, then he and his children with him shall be released in the year of jubilee.

[6 : 23] For it is to me that the people of Israel are servants. They are my servants whom I brought out of the land of Egypt. I am the Lord your God. Leviticus chapter 24 concluded with a troubling episode about a man who cursed the Lord, who reading between some lines, likely did so because he was a half-Israelite sojourner who was not welcomed among the people. Chapter 25 concerns the protection of people's stake within the land, protection for the poor Israelite, and also has teaching concerning the treatment of sojourners. The first half of the chapter, verses 1 to 22, present us with the law of the Sabbath year and of the year of jubilee. The second half, verses 23 to 55, addresses various situations where a poor Israelite would need protection from disenfranchisement, impoverishment, and social marginalisation. It protects such persons from predatory treatment, secures their rights of redemption of their property, and places constraints upon the treatment to which the indebted person could be subject. Perhaps the most important statement in this chapter is found in verse 23. The land shall not be sold in perpetuity, for the land is mine, for you are strangers and sojourners with me. The laws and teachings of this chapter apply and develop that truth, teaching the

Israelites to recognise that they have the land as a gracious grant of the Lord, not as their absolute possession. Practices such as the Sabbath year and the year of jubilee place limits upon the claims that people can make upon the land, and the ways in which some parties can be dispossessed while others accumulate wealth. It ensures that people, even once they've been settled in the land, consider their position in the land in terms of trust in the Lord and in terms of the Lord's grace. In this chapter, we also see further refraction of the fourth commandment and its consequences for the people.

The law of the Sabbath has implications far beyond a mere weekly day of rest. It has implications for the way that they treat the land, its animals, their slaves, and the poor in their midst. In delivering his people from Egypt, the Lord had given rest to slaves, and that principle of rest is played out in things such as the festal calendar, which is built around that principle of seven. Israel memorialises the great works of the Lord, as the principle of the Sabbath is expressed throughout their entire year.

We see this in chapter 23, with two great seven-day festivals, with a great cluster of festivals in the seventh month, with seven weeks, seven times seven, following the Feast of Firstfruits to the Feast of Weeks, with seven feasts, and with seven holy convocations. The Sabbath principle was to be expressed in Israel's economic system and their social policy. In the first of the case laws in the book of Exodus, in Exodus chapter 21 verse 2, we read, When you buy a Hebrew slave, he shall serve six years, and in the seventh he shall go out free for nothing. Israel had been set free as slaves, and they should always be moving towards setting their own slaves free. In the law of the Sabbath year in this chapter, the Lord includes the land itself as the recipient of rest. As the land is described in the book of Leviticus, it is oppressed by injustice, by bloodshed, and also by overwork. The land will provide more than enough for the people's needs, and confidence in the goodness of the God who has given it is expressed in part in being willing to let it rest. During the Sabbath year, the people should neither sow nor reap of the land as they typically did. Rather, during this year, they should trust in the Lord's provision.

This principle is described in verses 20 to 22. Because the people are neither reaping as they would usually do, nor sowing during the seventh year. They might wonder about where the food is going to come from for both the seventh and the eighth year, and this question is dealt with in verses 20 to 22.

[10 : 04] The principle is similar to that that applied to the manna in the wilderness. In Exodus chapter 16 verses 26 to 30 we read, Six days you shall gather it, but on the seventh day, which is the Sabbath, there will be none. On the seventh day some of the people went out to gather, but they found none. And the Lord said to Moses, How long will you refuse to keep my commandments and my laws? See, the Lord has given you the Sabbath.

Therefore on the sixth day he gives you bread for two days. Remain each of you in his place. Let no one go out of his place on the seventh day. So the people rested on the seventh day. Verses 6 and 7 of Leviticus chapter 25 might suggest that the people are in the land during the Sabbath year, as the poor and sojourners are in the land for the rest of the years. They are neither reaping nor sowing, but can be like gleaners upon the Lord's land. This posture of trust and dependence goes hand in hand with a willingness to show grace towards others. Those who trust in the Lord will not feel the need to overwork either themselves, their animals, their servants, or their land. They take rest and they give rest to others, and the result is good. One can imagine such a repeated extended practice of trust would be deeply spiritually formative for the people. Where such a practice of trust did not exist, people would not only overwork themselves, but they would overwork and oppress others.

The Lord declares his judgment upon an unfaithful and oppressive people in the next chapter. In verses 32 to 35 of that chapter we read, And I myself will devastate the land, so that your enemies who settle in it shall be appalled at it.

And I will scatter you among the nations, and I will unsheathe the sword after you. And your land shall be a desolation, and your cities shall be a waste. Then the land shall enjoy its sabbaths as long as it lies desolate, while you are in your enemy's land. Then the land shall rest and enjoy its sabbaths. As long as it lies desolate it shall have rest, the rest that it did not have on your sabbaths when you were dwelling in it. The judgment upon Judah in its destruction by Babylon is described in such terms in 2 Chronicles chapter 36 verses 20 and 21.

He took into exile in Babylon those who had escaped from the sword, and they became servants to him and to his sons until the establishment of the kingdom of Persia, to fulfil the word of the Lord by the mouth of Jeremiah, until the land had enjoyed its sabbaths. All the days that it lay desolate it kept sabbath, to fulfil seventy years. The sabbath year squared was the year of jubilee, a year in which ancestral lands that had been sold were returned to their original owners. This served as a check upon long-term impoverishment, and prevented families from being alienated from the inheritance of Israel.

[12 : 43] We should observe a similarity between the feast of weeks and the year of jubilee. The feast of weeks is calculated as is described in Leviticus chapter 23 verses 15 and 16.

You shall count seven full weeks from the day after the sabbath, from the day that you brought the sheaf of the wave offering. You shall count fifty days to the day after the seventh sabbath. Then you shall present a grain offering of new grain to the Lord. And in Leviticus chapter 25 verse 8, you shall count seven weeks of years, seven times seven years, so that the time of the seven weeks of years shall give you forty-nine years. This counting, seven times seven, applies in both cases, and it helps us perhaps to see an analogy between these two things. What the feast of weeks is within the year, the year of jubilee is, on a much greater scale. In the context of the feast of weeks, there's a reminder of the people's possession of the land by the gracious gift of God, the importance of leaving produce in the land for gleaners, and the importance of celebrating the Lord's goodness in a manner that included everyone. Rabbi David Foreman observes the strong connection that has always been made between the feast of weeks, or Pentecost, and the giving of the law. The giving of the law at Sinai was the first great declaration of Israel's freedom, but that was blown up on a greater scale as they entered into the land. Foreman suggests that the year of jubilee provides a way of understanding the importance of what's taking place in the defeat of Jericho. In the defeat of Jericho, the first city in the promised land, we see a jubilee principle in the return of the land to the people whose rightful possession it will be. The year of jubilee began with the blowing of trumpets, and the conquest of the land began in a similar way, with an emphasis upon the number seven, and multiples of it, and the blowing of trumpets.

Joshua chapter 6 verses 3 to 5 reads, You shall march around the city, all the men of war going around the city once. Thus shall you do for six days. Seven priests shall bear seven trumpets of ram's horns before the ark. On the seventh day you shall march around the city seven times, and the priests shall blow the trumpets.

And when they make a long blast with the ram's horn, when you hear the sound of the trumpet, then all the people shall shout with a great shout, and the wall of the city will fall down flat, and the people shall go up, everyone straight before him. The principle of jubilee is found throughout Israel's history in subtle ways. We might think about the way that the prophet Isaiah speaks of the year of the Lord's favour, a passage taken up by our Lord as he speaks about his own ministry in Luke chapter 4. We might consider that the completion of the temple complex occurs exactly 500 years after the event of the exodus. Solomon brings the people into the fullness of rest, and that's a jubilee, as it were, times 10. In Daniel chapter 9, the prophet meditates upon the prophecy of Jeremiah concerning the 70 years of Babylon's dominance. He then receives a vision concerning 70 weeks of years, beginning with a seven week of year period. Seven weeks of years is a jubilee, and 70 weeks of years is a jubilee times 10. Daniel is told that these 70 weeks will finish the transgression, put an end to sin, and atone for iniquity, bringing in everlasting righteousness, sealing both vision and prophet, and anointing a most holy place. The year of jubilee began on the day of atonement, and Daniel's 70 weeks look forward to the provision of full atonement. As James

Bajon has argued, the year of jubilee is alluded to throughout the book of Ezekiel, in the dates, but also in the measurements and the numbers of his visionary temple. Within that temple, multiples of the numbers 25, half a jubilee, 49, 50, and 7 constantly appear. Ezekiel's temple is a sort of architectural jubilee.

[16 : 22] Similarly, throughout the book of Revelation, the number 7 and multiples thereof appear repeatedly. The Lord is bringing about his great Sabbath, his ultimate jubilee. In the rest of the chapter, the Lord presents several ways in which the poverty of his people must be mitigated.

In verses 25, 35, 39, and 47, we have the repeated expression, if your brother becomes poor. These verses present different scenarios, and how they ought to be addressed in a way that saved people from devastation, oppression, and ruin. First of all, the Lord prevents the land from being sold in perpetuity. Likewise, people cannot be sold in perpetuity. People might enter into a sort of slavery or hired state because of their debts, but they cannot remain in that state indefinitely.

Israel's behaviour towards the poor and dispossessed in the land must be informed by a recognition of their status before the Lord, that they are dependent upon him, that they are strangers within his land.

The Lord establishes a number of measures to protect the poor. Beyond the fact that the land cannot be sold in perpetuity and alienated from families, the Lord provides for the possibility of redemption of the land. The figure of the near kinsman is expected to act on behalf of his brother, to act as a redeemer in the same way as the Lord acted as a redeemer towards his people. Indebted persons could be allowed to remain as tenants upon their land, rather than dispossessed and uprooted entirely. No interest could be taken upon loans to such persons. The rich could not profit through predatory lending. We have a similar body of teaching in Deuteronomy chapter 15, verses 7 to 15.

If among you one of your brothers shall become poor in any of your towns within your land that the Lord your God has given 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.

[18:10] 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, 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. In this passage from Deuteronomy, we see similar principles at work. Not least, what you were once, this person is now, or what this person is in relationship to you, is similar to what you are in relationship to the Lord. Therefore treat him accordingly. The laws of this chapter protect Israelites from being reduced to a state of servitude once again. Masters are expected to treat their servants graciously. Elsewhere in the

Pentateuch, there's the expectation that many servants will want to remain with their masters in the long term and become part of their families. The master is thereby encouraged to play the part of the gracious and provident father figure towards his indigent servants, and or to move them to the point where they are no longer dependent and are able to provide for themselves. Remaining debts would be written off in the jubilee year, so debts could not hang over a family forever. Of the allowance that the Lord gave his people to own foreign slaves, Nobuyashi Kiyuchi writes, As commented by some exegetes, slaves in Israelite society would have enjoyed far more freedom than, say, the slaves of a galley ship. True, they were bought, but they were not ordinarily subjected to torture or harsh treatment, though to an extent this would depend entirely on their individual masters.

That slaves from surrounding countries or strangers became the property of the Israelites indicates that such slaves have a status similar to that of the inherited land. So, if bought from someone else, they returned to their homes in the year of jubilee. In other words, while purchased slaves are legally distinct from the Israelites, they indirectly inherit the promised land. From the viewpoint of the purchased slaves, their engrafting into an Israelite family would hold out the prospect of a promising future, in that they could expect to receive crumbs fallen from their master's table, which means there being recipients of forgiveness and patience, since it is assumed, at least in this chapter, the Israelites will observe all the Lord's commandments. The Lord's blessing on the Israelites belongs to these purchased slaves also. We should also bear in mind that man-stealing was a capital crime. In the New Testament, Jesus' ministry can be seen as a sort of great jubilee. He declares release for the captives and deliverance of those who have been bound. He declares a great release from debts and return for those who have been exiled. Regarding the ministry of Christ through the lens of jubilee will bring much into greater clarity. A question to consider. Released from their typical agricultural tasks, how do you imagine that the Israelites spent the Sabbath years and the year of jubilee?

What sort of things would they have been released to do?