

Leviticus Bible Study #30

For lay leaders and deacons to conduct after the Sunday service, or during a midweek Bible study session.

Leviticus 25:1-22

1 The Lord spoke to Moses on Mount Sinai, saying, **2** “Speak to the people of Israel and say to them, When you come into the land that I give you, the land shall keep a Sabbath to the Lord. **3** For six years you shall sow your field, and for six years you shall prune your vineyard and gather in its fruits, **4** but in the seventh year there shall be a Sabbath of solemn rest for the land, a Sabbath to the Lord. You shall not sow your field or prune your vineyard. **5** You shall not reap what grows of itself in your harvest, or gather the grapes of your undressed vine. It shall be a year of solemn rest for the land. **6** 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, **7** and for your cattle and for the wild animals that are in your land: all its yield shall be for food.

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. **9** 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. **10** 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. **11** 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. **12** For it is a jubilee. It shall be holy to you. You may eat the produce of the field.

13 “In this year of jubilee each of you shall return to his property. **14** And if you make a sale to your neighbor or buy from your neighbor, you shall not wrong one another. **15** You shall pay your neighbor according to the number of years after the jubilee, and he shall sell to you according to the number of years for crops. **16** 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. **17** You shall not wrong one another, but you shall fear your God, for I am the Lord your God.

18 “Therefore you shall do my statutes and keep my rules and perform them, and then you will dwell in the land securely. **19** The land will yield its fruit, and you will eat your fill and dwell in it securely. **20** And if you say, ‘What shall we eat in the seventh year, if we may not sow or gather in our crop?’ **21** I will command my blessing on you in the sixth year, so that it will produce a crop sufficient for three years. **22** 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.

Introduction

As Leviticus is being written, the Israelites are a people in transit. They are walking through the wilderness on their way to the Promised Land, wherein they will receive a blessed prosperity in the land of milk and honey.¹ In order for it to *stay* the land of milk and honey though, the land must rest lest soil depletion render it uninhabitable. Thus the Sabbath Year is instituted as a means of caring for the environment and maintaining its life-sustaining qualities. Yet in addition to this land husbandry, the Israelites are called here to entrust themselves to the Lord's provision for the duration of these yearlong rests, and an opportunity for restoration when the Jubilee year arrives. As the command had been stated earlier in Exodus,² Moses is given this further elucidation as a means of instructing the people toward

¹ Promised in multiple places in Scripture, but repeated in Leviticus 20:24

² Exodus 23:10-11

piety and wisdom. To let the land rest was an act of faith; to save their crops for these years was an act of wisdom.

Tragically, the Israelites did not demonstrate that faith for several hundred years. They refused to obey the commands to observe the Sabbath and Jubilee years. In fact, Jeremiah prophesies against their stubborn denial of the land's rest, and the Chronicler notes that the Exile lasted long enough to make up for the missing Sabbath years.³ This sin persisted under good rulers like David and bad rulers like Ahab, which gives the us the context for the frequent famines found throughout Israel's history.⁴ While these are rightly explained in terms of Divine punishment against the nation's sins, the unstable nature of depleted soil made it the easiest vector by which our Lord could demonstrate His displeasure at the peoples' misbehavior. The failure to observe the Jubilee years served as punishment in and of itself, since it meant the people never took care of their land holdings in a way that would restore the *people*; for this reason, refusal to return lost lands or redeem slaves created a permanent underclass which was another factor in the prophetic complaints that would come later.⁵

Vs.1-7

1 The Lord spoke to Moses on Mount Sinai, saying, **2** “Speak to the people of Israel and say to them, When you come into the land that I give you, the land shall keep a Sabbath to the Lord. **3** For six years you shall sow your field, and for six years you shall prune your vineyard and gather in its fruits, **4** but in the seventh year there shall be a Sabbath of solemn rest for the land, a Sabbath to the Lord. You shall not sow your field or prune your vineyard. **5** You shall not reap what grows of itself in your harvest, or gather the grapes of your undressed vine. It shall be a year of solemn rest for the land. **6** 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, **7** and for your cattle and for the wild animals that are in your land: all its yield shall be for food.

The seventh year marks a time of rest for the land the same way the seventh day is for humans and animals to rest. One must note here that it is not designated as a year of rest for the people. The priests are still working by way of sacrifice, the people must still buy and sell, soldiers must still fight, etc. But as agriculture is effectively frozen for the duration of the Sabbath year, the labor of the population was intended to *shift*. This time would be ripe for building projects, devotional movements, educating children and more. In other words, though God speaks to Moses and says that this is for renewing the *land*, it is on behalf of men who can use that time to “catch up” with other pursuits. Christ's words, saying “the Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath” apply to this occasional period of land-rest.⁶

During this time, the people were forbidden from reaping, meaning no blade could touch a plant and nor could the Israelites pluck fruit from their trees. However, the land itself would still feed them as they ate whatever dropped to the floor. This means that whatever impoverished families were gleaning before the Sabbath year began could continue to feed themselves the same way. While the typical laborers would subsist on food stored up from the previous year, they may also glean alongside their poorer neighbors, giving them an opportunity to relate to and assist those less fortunate than themselves.

Vs.8-12

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. **9** Then you shall sound the loud trumpet on the tenth day of the seventh month.

³ Jeremiah 34:13-14, 2 Chronicles 36:20-21

⁴ Ruth 1:1, 1 Kings 17-18

⁵ One example among many is found in Isaiah 3:13-15, which includes a direct reference to the impoverished Israelites not having their land.

⁶ Mark 2:27

On the Day of Atonement you shall sound the trumpet throughout all your land. **10** 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. **11** 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. **12** For it is a jubilee. It shall be holy to you. You may eat the produce of the field.

The Jubilee year begins on the day of Atonement to show people what being atoned for truly means. The liberty to be proclaimed on this day meant liberty from servitude, the restoration of lands to the families they were allotted to, and debts were cleared. So not only was an Israelite guaranteed to have his self-determination restored, he would have familial wealth restored as well so as to ensure that he would not simply fall back into poverty. The trumpets blast throughout the land on the Day of Atonement to signal that the call to liberty has prevailed.

This is typological in nature, just as every festival on the liturgical calendar is. Christ dying for us means a clearing of the debts heaped up by our sins, and restores us to freedom from the bondage of the Law. Just as a poor man does not merit the restoration of his land and title in ancient Israel, so too are believers saved without having any merit of their own by which such a restoration might be earned. Happening only once every fifty years or so,⁷ this was to be the single strongest Gospel proclamation a man could experience before Christ went to the Cross. That the Israelites never *had* a Jubilee year before the Exile goes a long way to explain why there is frequent apostasy in the Biblical histories. After all, faith comes by hearing,⁸ and never hearing the trumpet call of freedom and redemption leaves the Israelites with nothing but Law...which does not convert and cannot save.

Vs.13-17

13 “In this year of jubilee each of you shall return to his property. **14** And if you make a sale to your neighbor or buy from your neighbor, you shall not wrong one another. **15** You shall pay your neighbor according to the number of years after the jubilee, and he shall sell to you according to the number of years for crops. **16** 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. **17** You shall not wrong one another, but you shall fear your God, for I am the Lord your God.

Our Lord does not permit anyone to use the Jubilee year as a means of financial manipulation. These additional regulatory commands prevent someone from selling their family farm for an astronomically high price, only to receive it back whole on the Jubilee year. As it begins the next day While a property owner may sell at any time, the selling price is determined by the nearness of the Jubilee: the closer one is, the less a prospective buyer must pay. The logic is one of economics, since the buyer is purchasing a temporary lease on the land, and therefore has only so much time to turn a profit off of it. This way the central message of the year (that of liberty and redemption) is not inverted through human greed.

Vs.18-22

18 “Therefore you shall do my statutes and keep my rules and perform them, and then you will dwell in the land securely. **19** The land will yield its fruit, and you will eat your fill and dwell in it securely. **20** And if you say, ‘What shall we eat in the seventh year, if we may not sow or gather in our crop?’ **21** I will command my blessing on you in the sixth year, so that it will produce a crop sufficient for three years. **22** 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.

Here the Israelites are commanded to maintain piety and wisdom. Piety, in that they must

⁷ There are debates as to whether the Jubilee Year was the forty-ninth year which overlaps the seventh Sabbath Year, or if it is held directly after the forty-ninth year as an independent fiftieth.

⁸ Romans 10:17

actively exercise faith that God will bless them with a massive harvest on the sixth year. Wisdom, because they must save their excess crops to provide food for themselves during the Sabbath year and while waiting for new crops to grow after it had passed. So not only will these years provide rest for the land, they are also intended to *catechize* and *sanctify* the people as they observe it. They were to practice the faith while practicing wise monetary/grain saving, the latter principle later being made explicit in Proverbs.⁹ Since these matters are first presented as Law, it explains why King David was so enamored with it, teaching that our Lord's commandments make him wiser than his enemies;¹⁰ by obeying them as written, these commands *train* one for wisdom and righteousness together.

The children of Israel never observed these particular Sabbath years or Jubilees. Thus they did not engage in the pedagogical training that the Law presented them, making their slide into gross immorality and idolatry more easily predicted. One may imagine that the very first sixth-year harvest was large, and the Israelites saw an opportunity to continue planting and reaping during the Sabbath year to turn an even larger profit. During times of famine, perhaps they did not trust that God would provide for them so they kept working. Men who invested in farms that they purchased decided to not give them up, perhaps citing some perceived slight. After all, they were educated and investing in the continued prosperity of the farms: why should a poor man receive all that they worked for? And so on it went, until Israel and Judah went into Exile and the land finally received its God-ordained rest.

9 Proverbs 6:6-8, 10:5, 21:5

10 Psalm 119:98