

Further Sabbatical Instructions

Leviticus 25:1-55

I. Introduction

- A. Instructions were previously given concerning the importance of faithful Sabbath observance in chapter 23. For a detailed theology of the Sabbath, see notes on 23:2.
- B. There is a close association between Sabbath rest and the land of Canaan: “The biblical concept of rest is used throughout Scripture to portray the promised rest that would in the end restore what was lost by the fall. In anticipation of that time the promise of rest was repeatedly connected with the promised land, as if that good land was a replica of the garden of Eden from whence the first sinners were expelled and the foretaste of things to come” (Ross, 400).
- C. In chapter 25, that connection is brought even closer through instructions given concerning a special Sabbatical year in which not only the people but the land itself would enjoy rest.
- D. Additionally, the end of a cycle of seven Sabbatical years was marked by a Jubilee year in which property returned to its original owners, debts were forgiven, and slaves were released.
- E. Both of these events were meant to underscore God’s sovereignty over the land and the people and engender Israel’s trust in his gracious provision and a compassionate concern for the needs of others.

II. Exposition

A. The Sabbatical Year (25:1-7)

- 1. Every seventh year the land was to lay fallow.
- 2. The people could work and tend the land for six years, but on the seventh year, the land was granted rest and no commercial processes were permitted.
- 3. People and animals were allowed to gather the produce of the land which grew naturally.

“All agricultural processes were intermitted and the land lay fallow. The whole country became one vast common, open to all people and animals, which was especially appreciated by the poor and the stranger. Those who owned land not only ceased cultivating it but also had no exclusive right to its spontaneous produce” (Ross, 451).
- 4. Additionally, Hebrew slaves were given the option of discontinuing their service (although debate involves whether this pertains specifically to the Sabbatical year or to a general 7-year time of slavery; cf. Exod 21:2).
- 5. Debts incurred by Israelites were released by their creditors (once again, debate revolves around whether the debt was released in full on the seventh year, or the

debtor was released from payments on the seventh year; cf. Deut 15:1). Foreigners were not included in this release, only Israelites.

6. Finally, at the close of the Sabbatical year, during the Feast of Booths, the entire Law of Moses was read publically (Deut 31:10-13).
7. The Sabbatical year taught Israel several important spiritual lessons:
 - a) Israel's land ultimately belonged to God (Lev 25:23; Isa 14:25; Jer 2:7; Ezek 36:20). They possessed as tenants, not as landowners in their own right. In particular, the rich were reminded that the land was not exclusively their own: "Rich landowners had no advantage over the servant; and the poor ate as well as the rich" (Ross, 453).
 - b) Israel learned to rely on God for their daily provisions. Without the security of a cultivated crop, they had to trust that God would give them what they needed through the natural production of the land.
8. Sadly, the biblical narrative suggests that the Sabbatical year was an ideal which Israel frequently dismissed and neglected.

"It the people truly desired to be a holy nation, they would set aside the seventh year to God; if they truly accepted that the land belonged to God, they would relinquish their rights to it in the Sabbath Year. There is, however, little evidence that the Sabbath Year was observed. We have a hint that it was followed in the time of Hezekiah (not the language of 2 Kings 19:29; see Isa. 37:30). But 2 Chron. 36:21 says that the people were exiled to Babylon so that the land could enjoy its Sabbaths, seventy years of rest. This suggests that the people had not been keeping the Sabbath Year, at least not often enough, and so God was exacting them" (Ross, 454).

B. The Jubilee Year (25:8-55)

1. Timing (25:8-12)
 - a) After seven cycles of Sabbatical years (49 years) was the Jubilee Year, which occurred every 50 years (25:8).
 - (1) The traditional understanding of the Jubilee Year is that it was held every 50 years. This would mean that two consecutive sabbatical years would transpire.
 - (2) Some have suggested that the Jubilee is actually the same year as the seventh sabbatical year. Thus, it occurred every 49 years, which relieves the tension of the land having to provide three years of produce on the 48th year. However, it requires that 50 years be understood as a round number for 49.
 - (3) Wenham posits that that the Jubilee year is actually a shorter period of time which occurred every 49 years and was used to resync the civil and cultic calendar, much like the common function of a leap year. This also alleviates the need for a three-year bumper crop in the 48th year, but raises other issues of its own.

Further Sabbatical Instructions

- b) On the Day of Atonement, after the offerings had been given, a ram's horn was blown announcing the start of the Jubilee (25:9).
 - c) The Jubilee year was very similar to the Sabbatical year—the land was left fallow, with no cultivating or harvesting permitted (25:11-12).
 - d) The blast of the ram's horn was to “proclaim liberty” (25:10), it's central feature and most prominent principle.
2. Fairness (25:13-17)
- a) The Jubilee Year was a proclamation of “liberty” for the inhabitants of the land (25:10) and specifically involved the transfer of land back to its original family allotment.
 - b) Individuals who had fallen on hard times could sell their land in order to pay off debt or gain monetary provisions.
 - c) The price for land was based on the value of the crops produced by the land over the period of time from the purchase to the next Jubilee Year.
 - d) The buyer understood that he was not purchasing the land permanently. He was, in essence, renting the land.
 - e) If the original owner raised sufficient funds to buy the land back, he could do so for a price prorated based on the time remaining until the next Jubilee Year.
 - f) In this way, land prices were kept fair and no one was placed in a position so as to take advantage of a fellow Israelite (25:17).
3. Provision (25:18-22)
- a) Naturally, the question of provision would arise when one considered going for two full years without harvesting the land.
 - b) God promised that the 6th year (the 48th year before the Jubilee) would produce a bumper crop sufficient to sustain the people through the Sabbatical year.
 - c) The people had to trust that God would provide and would sustain them through these years.
4. Details (25:23-55)
- a) Redemption of Property (25:23-38)
 - (1) When someone purchased land from another Israelite, they understood that their possession of the land was temporary. No land sales were permanent (25:23).
 - (2) The reason for this was that the people did not own the land—Yahweh did. He granted them possession of it as tenants and caretakers.
 - (3) Land sales were a legitimate means of alleviating financial hardship.

- (4) Responsibility fell to close relatives to come to the individuals aid if financially possible in order to redeem the land and thus allow it to remain in the possession of the original owner (25:25).
 - (5) Likewise, if the original owner later found sufficient means to redeem the land, then the current occupant was compelled to accept the money and release the land back to the original owner (25:26-27).
 - (6) The Jubilee Year guaranteed that all property would eventually return to its original owner. It was a last resort, to be utilized if all other options for redemption fell through.
 - (7) Exceptions to the redemption laws involved houses within walled cities, which could be redeemed within the first year of sale, after which time belonged permanently to the new owner (25:29-30).
 - (8) Houses in villages (communities without walls) came under the same legislation as land. They could not be permanently sold (25:31).
 - (9) The “exception to the exception” involved houses in Levitical cities. These houses could be redeemed by their original owners at any time, and the pastureland surrounding these cities could not be sold (25:32-34), since the Levites were not given any kind of land allotment.
- b) Redemption of Slaves (25:39-55)
- (1) In times of extreme hardship, an individual could indenture himself to a debtor in order to pay off his debt.
 - (2) The remaining laws of chapter 25 are concerned with ensuring that the poor are not oppressed by the wealthy.
 - (3) “Every society has had difficulty in knowing how to deal with poverty and debt; God’s provision was that those in debt serve the one they owed until it was paid in full. However, the Jubilee Year kept it from being hopeless. They were not doomed to a life of debt and servitude. Without the hope of release the poor become despondent” (Ross, 464).
 - (4) Creditors were not allowed to exact usury from their fellow Israelites (25:35-38), which was taking advantage of the poor and showed a lack of year of Yahweh, who had freed them from bondage in Egypt.
 - (5) Israelites were not allowed to treat the fellow citizens who became indentured to them as slaves. Instead, they were to work as hired laborers until the debt was paid off or until the Jubilee Year, after which time they were free (25:39-42).
 - (6) Likewise, Israelites were not permitted to deal harshly with individuals indebted to them. They needed to recall their time in Egypt under harsh slavery and recognize the liberty they received from Yahweh (25:43).

Further Sabbatical Instructions

- (7) Slavery was permitted when dealing with foreigners, but never for fellow Israelite citizens (25:44-46).
- (8) The laws that covered the redemption of an indentured Israelite applied equally in cases where the creditor was a foreigner. The Israelite could be redeemed by a close relative, or by himself if he regained the means, or could be released in the Jubilee Year (25:47-52).
- (9) The foreigner was not permitted to treat the Israelite as a slave or deal harshly with him, and fellow Israelites were responsible for ensuring that the foreigner obeyed these laws (25:53-54).
- (10) The underlying principle regarding indentured Israelites is the same as indentured property—Israelites belonged solely to Yahweh, who had redeemed them. They were *his* people, and so could never be owned by any other party (25:55).

III. Leviticus 25 and the NT

- A. Ross summarizes the main theological thrust of this chapter well: “The main motif of this passage concerns the hope of release from debts, slavery, and bondage. Related to this is the idea of justice that safeguarded balance in society. The wealthy were not being punished but knew that their possessions were for a season. The poor were overjoyed to know that they could have a fresh start. And everyone was reminded that this was God’s land” (Ross, 457).
- B. As NT believers, we are reminded that everything we have belongs to God. We are stewards of what he gives us, but our possessions are temporary.
- C. We are called to care for what God has entrusted to us, ensuring that it remains productive for God.
- D. We are called to be generous with others who are in need, especially fellow believers (Gal 6:10).
- E. We must also recognize that the Jubilee anticipated a greater liberation—an emancipation from spiritual slavery to sin and death.
 1. Just as the ram’s horn proclaimed “liberty” (Lev 25:10), so Yahweh’s Servant would “proclaim liberty to the captives” (Isa 61:1), identical terminology. Jesus quoted this passage in reference to his ministry and purpose (Luke 4:18-19).
 2. Speaking to the Jews, Jesus identified them as slaves to sin who could be freed by means of the truth (John 8:30-36).
 3. The apostle Paul described creation as subject to futility and groaning under the weight of the fall and awaiting the time when it is set free from its bondage (Rom 8:18-25).
 4. “It seems quite likely, therefore, that the prophetic description of the ‘acceptable year of the Lord’ was partly inspired by the idea of the jubilee year. The messianic age brings liberty to the oppressed and release to the captives. This age was inaugurated

with Christ's first coming (Luke 4:2). It will be completed by his second coming (Jas. 5:1-8; cf. Luke 16:19-31). The jubilee, then, not only looks back to God's first redemption of his people from Egypt (Lev 25:38, 55), but forward to the 'restitution of all things,' 'for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells' (Acts 3:21; 2 Pet. 3:13)" (Wenham, 324).

5. But even more than that, the liberty brought through the Jubilee is intimately connected with atonement:

"The Jubilee Year forms a marvelous climax to the sacred calendar of the Hebrews. Both Jubilee (looking to release) and Sabbath (looking to rest) are types of the rest and release brought in by Christ and brought to fruition in the kingdom. Both are consequent upon atonement. In ancient Israel it was not until the blood was shed and the living goat led away into the wilderness, bearing the sins of the people into oblivion, that the trumpets pealed their exultant notes, proclaiming liberty and rest, restitution and rectitude for the people. So too it is because of the death of Jesus Christ that (1) Christianity has come to sinful humankind with all its tidings of good and wealth of salvation (John 1:29; Eph. 1:6); (2) spiritual blessings are inherited by the believer (Rom. 5:11); (3) the church will enjoy the sabbatic glory of rest and release in the world to come (Rev. 21:1-4); and (4) the eternal jubilee will make all things new, especially a completely new social order of freedom and bliss (Rev 21:23-22:5). What is the old social order that is removed. The evils remedied by the Jubilee Year were debt, slavery, destitution, and exhausting toil" (Ross, 463).