

We have seen that the central question of the book of Leviticus is
“who may ascend the hill of the LORD”?

Who can enter the Holy of Holies?

The Sabbath is not just a weekly principle.

It is a principle that structures all time.

In Leviticus 25 the Sabbath is applied not only to weeks,

but also to years, and indeed to weeks of years.

The seventh day is the weekly day of rest.

The seventh month is the annual month of rest.

The seventh year is sabbatical year of rest.

But the 49th year is NOT the Jubilee.

The Jubilee is the 50th year—the year *after* the seventh seven.

In other words, the Jubilee is the ultimate Sabbath,

but it occurs on an eighth year—the first year of the new creation.

The seventh day, month, and year is about endings.

The end of the week, the end of the harvest, the cycle of harvests.

But the Jubilee—the 50th year—is about new beginnings.

1. The Sabbath of the Land: the Seventh Year (v1-7)

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^[a] shall provide food for you, for yourself and for your male and female slaves^[b] 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.

Verses 1-7 set forth the principle of the Sabbatical year.

The point of the sabbatical year is so that the land may have its rest (verse 2).

For six years Israel was to sow and reap; prune and gather.

But in the seventh year, Israel was commanded to give the land its rest.

God promised that if Israel would leave the land alone on the seventh year
then it would produce sufficient food for them.

The sabbatical year thus provides bounty without labor.

It is a picture of Eden,

where man governed creation without toil and sweat.

But the sabbatical year is part of a six and one pattern.
For six years they toil and sweat,
and on the seventh they rest and enjoy the fruits of the land.
But Israel was not known for obedience.
2 Chronicles 36:21 says that God gave Judah over to the Babylonians
at least in part in order to give the land its Sabbaths, which Israel had denied it.

It's worth noting that the exile came in 587 B.C. –
and lasted for 70 years.

If we take it literally, then 70 years of sabbath years would mean that for 490 years
Israel had not observed the sabbath year –
which would take us back to the time of the Judges!

In other words, Israel had *never* really observed the sabbath year!

The sabbath year is especially given to Israel – so it is not binding on modern nations.
But the principle behind the sabbath year is important.
The land needs rest.

The LORD refers to the sabbath year as “a Sabbath of solemn rest for the land.”

What happens if the land cannot rest?

When we bought this property, the soil was utterly destroyed.
Nothing grew but a handful of weeds.
After decades of over-farming,
the only way this dirt could produce crops
was by juicing it with fertilizer.

Now, 25 years later, the land has recovered – mostly.

The principle of rotating crops and pasturing flocks and herds is important
for sustainable farming!
But at the heart of sustainable farming is the idea that the *land* belongs to God.
We are stewards – not masters.
When we forget this, we become plunderers of the land,
rather than stewards of the land.

The rest of the chapter focuses on the Jubilee.

Verses 8-22 gives us a summary of the three basic principles of the Jubilee year.

2. The Jubilee: the Fiftieth Year (v8-22)

a. The Year of Liberty (v8-12)

⁸ “You shall count seven weeks^[c] 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.

First, the time of the Jubilee was the year *after* the seventh Sabbatical year.

Israel had just completed a sabbatical year.

But the fiftieth year would also be a sabbatical.

They would refrain from sowing and reaping for two whole years.

The Jubilee year began on the Day of Atonement,

when the trumpet would sound

and liberty would be proclaimed to all the inhabitants of the land.

If the sabbatical year was a year of rest, the jubilee year was a year of redemption.

The sabbath year, like the sabbath day, was a rest from ordinary labor.

The jubilee had an eschatological character that went far beyond the sabbath year.

Indeed, as soon as you see the eighth-day aspect of the Jubilee,

you immediately expect that there is an eschatological point to this.

And of course, the Jubilee is all about redemption.

That's why God says that the jubilee year "shall be holy to you."

Just as God's holiness impels him to draw near to his people

so also, we are to be holy as he is holy!

We are to draw near to him – and to one another.

b. The Return of Everyone to His Property (v13-17)

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.*

Second, v13-17 makes it clear that the point of the jubilee was the return of each man to his land

Since the property would revert to the original owner at the Jubilee,

there could be no permanent alienation of property.

Therefore the price for the land would be based upon the number of years

until the Jubilee.

(Verse 16)

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.*

Any transfer of property is temporary.

You are not transferring *land* – you are transferring *crops*.

You can sell the right to plant and harvest crops –
but you cannot alienate the property permanently.

c. God’s Promise of Provision (v18-22)

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?’

The third principle is the promise that God would provide during the jubilee.

If Israel obeyed God, then God would ensure that the produce of the 48th year
would be sufficient for three years.

(Verses 21-22)

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.

Will you trust God to provide?

In our day we do not have the same economic rules –
but we are still called to trust God for his provision.

So let’s think about the “equity” of these rules.

What are the principles of justice and fairness that God lays out for Moses?

d. “The Land Is Mine” – The Necessity of Redemption (v23-24)

²³ “The land shall not be sold in perpetuity, for the land is mine. For you are strangers and sojourners with me. ²⁴ And in all the country you possess, you shall allow a redemption of the land.

The first thing we need to see is that the Land belongs to God.

The earth is the LORD’s and the fullness thereof (Ps 24:1).

Everything belongs to God!

This is what lies behind Jesus’s words,

“render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar’s,
and to God the things that are God’s.

His point is that *everything* belongs to God!!

If the jubilee year is *holy* to God (v12),

then everything that grows in the jubilee year is holy to God.

But if it is holy – then why can anyone eat of it?

Because – as we saw in chapter 23 –
the priests profane the sabbath day and are guiltless.

When do the priests enter their service?
on the 8th day of their consecration.
When do Israelite boys enter the community?
on the 8th day after their birth.
When do all Israelites get to eat holy food?
In the 50th year (the ultimate 8th)

And this is why redemption is so important to the Year of Jubilee.
Because the 8th day is the beginning of something new.
The 50th day (7x7 plus 1) is the coming of the new creation.

e. Redemption and the Year of Jubilee (v25-28)

²⁵ “If your brother becomes poor and sells part of his property, then his nearest redeemer shall come and redeem what his brother has sold. ²⁶ If a man has no one to redeem it and then himself becomes prosperous and finds sufficient means to redeem it, ²⁷ 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. ²⁸ 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.

Redemption means to buy something back.

And particularly, in the ancient world, this was the task of the redeemer –
what is sometimes called the “kinsman-redeemer” –
though it’s all one word – the “gaal.”

In Exodus 6, the LORD had declared that he would “redeem” Israel
with an outstretched arm and great acts of judgment.

And in the song of Moses in Ex 15, Moses praised God for redeeming his people –
but it is really here in Leviticus 25 that we get to see what redemption means.

1) Redemption of Property (23-34)

Israel was not allowed to alienate property.
Why?

Because the land belonged to God.
God had given the land to each tribe and clan,
they were to possess the land – but they could not alienate it.

The LORD retained the title.

“You are strangers and sojourners with me.”
We often think of Israel as having a land of their own,
but in the NT Christians are aliens and strangers.

That was not how God wanted Israel to think.
God wanted Israel to think of themselves as strangers and sojourners in the land.

Here's how it worked.

If a brother became poor, and had to sell his land,
then the nearest redeemer would redeem it,
or, if none would redeem it, he himself could redeem it before the Jubilee.
But if no one redeemed the property,
he would still be restored to it at the Jubilee.

As we'll see in a moment, houses in walled cities were a special case.
(Except for the Levites, who had no other inheritance).
It did not matter who lived in the cities, but it did matter who lived on the land.
Land and Seed go together.
And both the Land and the Seed belong to God.

This is a particularly interesting principle.
On the ultimate eighth year—the fiftieth year—
the land would be restored to the seed.
Whatever mistakes you may have made,
all is forgiven.
You have a fresh start—a new beginning.
The old is wiped away.

What is the economic effect of this?

If this Jubilee principle was carried out as written,
then there would never be a permanent underclass of landless poor.
There would always be a temporary underclass –
since stuff happens – and when it does, the ability to sell your land temporarily
would enable you to get your act together and start over in the Jubilee.

But when you sell your land, you are really just selling the crops for a period of years,
until the next Jubilee.

Meanwhile, your neighbor, who buys your property, is able to improve his condition,
through the “rental” of your land.

But that also is temporary.
He cannot permanently enrich himself at your expense.

To put it simply, where this law was enforced,
there would never be any super-wealthy people;
and there would never be any super-poor people.
It is designed explicitly for that purpose.
And as such, it raises some good questions

about how to design more equitable economic systems in the present.

But first, let's make sure we understand the special cases in v29-34

f. Special Cases: City Houses and the Levites (v29-34)

²⁹ "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. ³⁰ 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. ³¹ 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. ³² As for the cities of the Levites, the Levites may redeem at any time the houses in the cities they possess. ³³ And if one of the Levites exercises his right of redemption, then the house that was sold in a 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. ³⁴ But the fields of pastureland belonging to their cities may not be sold, for that is their possession forever.

It's important to understand the distinction between houses in a walled city vs. land.

In the ancient world a house in a walled city is valuable in many ways –
but it is not essential for producing wealth.

Wealth is produced by land.

City houses may indicate status and influence –
but they have no particular function in generating wealth.

You can't pasture an ox in your back yard –
oh wait, ancient city houses didn't have a back yard!

Walled cities are tiny.

There is no "yard"!

It's just four walls and a roof.

You open your front door, and you are liable to be run over by a donkey
carrying a load up the street –
or dumping a load on the street!

So city houses could be redeemed (bought back) for a year –
but after that year, the jubilee would not apply.

Except for the Levites.

The Levites have no inheritance among the tribes of Israel
except for the Levitical cities and their pasturelands,
so Levites may always redeem their city houses,
and should always receive them back in the Jubilee.

So what do we do with this?!

It doesn't translate easily into the modern world.

In the ancient world, give a man a piece of land and a donkey,
and pretty soon, he will have a fair chance of sustaining himself and his family.

But the basic idea of the Jubilee year was that the means of production
should be equitably redistributed every 50 years.

This is a very different sort of redistribution of *wealth* than what we hear about today!
Moses does not take cash (or crops or animals) from the one who bought the land.
Rather, he takes the land itself and returns it to the original heir.

The idea is that in the Jubilee, the family gets to try again.
No one will ever become permanently dispossessed.
There is always a way out of poverty.
If you can't afford to redeem the land now,
you can just wait until the Jubilee.

The system prevents massive accumulation of wealth over generations.
Because every 50 years you are back to your original land grant.

We know from the prophets that Israel did not do well at following this.
Isaiah speaks of people adding field to field (Isaiah 5:8)
and warns that such actions are bringing judgment upon Israel.

Ezekiel 46:17 makes reference to the “year of liberty.”
The year of Jubilee was remembered (even if not practiced) throughout Israel's history.
Indeed, Jesus proclaims the year of jubilee in Luke 4:18-19,
as he quotes from Isaiah 61:1-2.
Jesus comes to establish the year of liberty, the year of the Lord's favor.

We cannot merely “spiritualize” this and ignore the economic implications of the Jubilee.
After all, our Lord came to bring healing to soul *and* body.

One of the best examples I've heard of is a program called Build Up in Birmingham AL
that provides a high school education as well as training in the trades,
and at the end of the six-year program,
the student has a house (with a mortgage), a job, and is part-owner of a business.

These students come from families that have lost everything.
(In some cases, they may have lost everything 250 years ago in slavery)
In other cases it is more recent.

But there is something still missing:
the Jubilee principle had an effect on the one who *bought* the land!

He had to return it!

While it's not a perfect system,
I would suggest that the inheritance tax plays a key role here.
The federal inheritance tax only kicks in with estates over \$12 million
so it is safe to say that the federal inheritance tax
only affects those who have profited from the misfortunes of others.

Remember, the Law of Moses permits you to profit from the misfortunes of others –
just not *permanently!* –
since you are actually *helping the needy* by buying them out,
enabling them to survive the crisis.

But God doesn't want you perpetuating the misfortune of others!
And so at the Jubilee, you need to return the land.
The inheritance tax may not be a perfect model of this –
but I use it as an example of how modern American law
has a lot of equitable roots in Moses.

But having insisted that we not “merely” spiritualize the Jubilee –
we need to see that the spiritual principle of the Jubilee is the heart of the Law!

Redemption from sin is intimately connected with our redemption from misery.
Jesus brings us into an inheritance
that is far greater than any inheritance that this world has to offer!

Because Jesus unites us to God himself!
The great Jubilee of the New Creation has dawned in Jesus!