

LEVITICUS

Lesson 37 - Chapter 25

If there is a single word that defines what we're about to read and examine, it is "Jubilee". This is the place in the Torah where we receive instruction on that somewhat mysterious "year of Jubilee" that most of us have heard about; and usually don't quite understand what its purpose is. Yet, we have to know that while "Jubilee" is the formal name for a special one-year time period that comes every 50 years, from the Torah standpoint it is not a year of celebration and festivity and plenty like the name would imply, it is somewhat somber. For some folks it is a most welcomed time, for others it is a severe interruption in their lives that carries with it not just a little discomfort and inconvenience, but some loss of personal prosperity as well.

This 25th chapter of Leviticus contains much civil law regarding property, particularly when that property is either land or slaves. This is important for us to understand for a couple of reasons: 1) it is important that we can understand the backdrop of the times, and 2) it contains principles and patterns that not only give us direction on how we should think and behave as concerns property, but also on certain functions and purposes of the Messiah.

This is a rather long chapter and gets pretty detailed in its legal definitions. So what I prefer to do is to read it all in order that we get it all tied together, and then we'll re-read some sections as we discuss them more thoroughly.

READ LEV. 25 all

Pretty complex, is it not?

Let's begin by trying to assess it from an overall standpoint. The focal points of Jubilee are restoration and mercy, in a supreme divine demonstration of God's grace towards His people. Of course this involves parallel acts of restoration and mercy BY His people. In other words in the Jubilee God has made an ordinance that demonstrates His attributes of perfect and ideal justice, fairness, equality, mercy, and redemption BUT (as are all of His laws) this law of Jubilee is not to simply float around in the ether AS an ideal for us to contemplate and feel all warm and fuzzy about. Rather this law is to be PHYSICALLY observed; it is to be manifested, lived out and carried out by His people for the benefit OF His people. Truly the law of Jubilee is one of the best examples of the foundation that under girds each of God's 613 laws: **you shall love Yehoveh your God with all your mind, soul, and strength, and you shall love your neighbor as yourself.**

One of the primary ways this restoration and mercy are carried out is by means of the

regulations and ordinances concerning real property rights that are established here in Leviticus 25, both from the standpoint of what is best for a clan or a family collectively (that is, as a total family unit), but still protecting an individual.

Another primary purpose of these Jubilee laws was to assure that any reasonably diligent man who found himself and/or his family in poverty for any number of reasons could get a new start (a new lease on life) from time to time. That opportunity for a new start came on the God-established Jubilee, once every 50 years.

The usual reason a person was in debt was due to poverty. And, for the Hebrew, the usual reason many wound up in indentured servitude to another Hebrew was due to a debt he could not repay. Those among us who have experienced the seemingly unbreakable cycle of borrowing, getting into debt, only to discover that we can not pay the debt; so then we borrow more to pay the previous debts only under even more onerous conditions and terms (which we also cannot repay), understand this bottomless pit. There seems to be no way out and thus we live our lives under the crushing burden of debt and often eventually become bankrupt. In our American society most debt is either in the form of what is called unsecured debt.....credit cards...or secured debt....usually our homes or our cars. If we default on our home mortgage, we lose our home, if we default on our car loan it is repossessed. All debt in the Hebrew system was secured debt; and almost always the means of collateral was land since it was an agricultural-based society. Lose the land and you not only lose your home, you also lose your food supply and you lose the ability to generate income in order to buy other things you need. The other kind of security for debt in the Bible era was yourself or a family member; thus the concept of indebted servitude. A human being became the collateral for the loan (more correctly it was the work that human could perform for you that was the point of it). The year of Jubilee was partly designed to deal with this everyday reality for the people of Israel.

We possibly have some folks in here who have come from farming backgrounds and so it is probably a little easier for them to understand the preeminent place the possession of land by a family holds in an agricultural society. Israel, throughout their entire history, was an agricultural society. So we see the chapter open with Yehoveh speaking to Moses concerning the land He was giving (or better had already given) to them; the Land of Canaan.

Now I've often used the analogy that as we learn Torah it's organized in a way much like the maturing process of a human; we begin life learning general and rather simplistic rules and facts about a variety of topics; as we absorb those, and then as our minds are able, more information is added and a finer point is put onto each matter. Soon we see certain subtle connections and commonalties between what at first seemed to be totally separate issues; and then the layers of the onion are peeled back even further to reveal deeper intricacies of the world around us. Later in life lots of things that we thought we knew everything there was to know about them start to make sense on a deeper level and we gain what the Bible calls wisdom (as opposed to simply knowledge of a lot of facts).

We were introduced to the basics of God's Laws in Exodus; next the initial parts of Leviticus gave us more information about those Laws of Exodus so that Yehoveh's intent behind each of those commands and laws was better grasped. Later in Leviticus specific topics of which we

had already been introduced are again addressed, and nuances are put into certain God-principles. As we get into Numbers and Deuteronomy we'll get even more instructions that connects the dots in order to form a more complete picture for those who have slogged their way through the first 3 books of Torah.

Here in Leviticus 25, we're like a student in their senior year in college; and now that we have established a solid base of knowledge and terms have been defined certain matters of special importance to God are going to be discussed in more detail. And one of those details is this: while it is true that God gave the Land of Canaan to Abraham, it was not an outright **transfer of ownership** like we might think. Rather God has retained ownership of Canaan and instead given Abraham's seed (Israel) a long-term lease; a "forever" lease actually, although temporary eviction for breaking the lease terms is also part of the deal.

As in verse 2 of our current chapter where it says, "When you enter this land I am **giving** you.....", let's look at the Hebrew word used for giving; that word is **nathan**.... yes, **nathan** just like the name of the prophet who served King David. And the sense of the word is something like this: bestowed, given, added to you, apportioned to you, a gift, something assigned to you or set apart for you. In other words **nathan** doesn't so much indicate a transfer of ownership as something being given to you to **use** as THOUGH it were yours. It's like being President of the United States: you don't OWN the presidency; that belongs to the people. Rather each president is but holding the office for a time. This is why I make the analogy of the land being given to Abraham as a lease, not as a sale. Yehoveh retained ownership but Israel got the use of it.

Now as undergraduate students studying Torah it is important that we understand this critical Bible principle of land tenure; that is. possessing something that is not necessarily yours to own. What Israel held in Joshua's day and holds today, is NOT perpetual **ownership** of the Land of Israel; rather they have a perpetual **lease**.

In Hebrew, this key principle is called '**achuzzah**, which means "holding". And Yehoveh tells Israel that since you do NOT own the land, you just have leasehold so you may not sell the property. Any of us who have ever leased a building or house perfectly understand that. We can use the property without interference from the owner as long as we honor the terms set forth in the contract; but the one thing we cannot ever do is to sell the place because we've never owned it!

Further one of the key terms of the leasehold agreement (expressed in the covenants of Abraham and Moses) that Yehoveh has with Israel concerning the land they're going to possess is that Israel is only to make the land itself work and produce 6 out of every 7 years. Just as Yehoveh "worked" for 6 days when He created our Universe, and then ceased on the 7th day, so the Israelites must ask the land to work for 6 years and then allow it to cease working on the 7th. This Shabbat was NOT for the Israelites per se, but rather for the land itself....it was so the land could rest.

RE-READ Lev. 25:1-7

So for 6 years the Israelites are to till the land, sow it and care for it, and harvest it's produce; they're to prune the grape vines and partake of its sweet fruit. But in the 7th year (called the Sabbatical Year) Israel was to do nothing with the land. They could not sow new grain crops; they could not even prune their vineyards. Pruning was key for maintaining the health and productivity of their grapevines; in fact there were two pruning's per year, one in the summer and the other in the winter. None of that was to occur in the Sabbath year.

Even though the 50-year Jubilee cycle is the ultimate subject of Leviticus 25, first a foundation for understanding it and connecting it with God's Sabbath pattern is established; therefore the concept of the Sabbath year is discussed. Verses 5-7 are a bit difficult to understand: for its seems on the one hand to say that during that 7th year Sabbath one must NOT harvest and eat what grows up naturally from the untended fields, and then on the other it says you CAN harvest whatever the land produces by itself. We must seek-out the ancient sages to give us good answers to this conundrum.

And they tell us that these are two different situations: it was common for grain to have seeds fall off when it ripened, and then for those seeds to germinate on their own and produce new grain stalks. But it was also common to cut the grain stalks and then have them send up new shoots from their roots and thereby produce more grain stalks. In the first instance this was NEW grain because it came from seeds; in the 2nd instance this was OLD grain because it came from already existing plants. This situation was so common and understood that names were given to the 2nd growth and even a fairly usual 3rd growth from the same plant. The 2nd growth was called, in Hebrew, *safiach*.....and the 3rd growth *shachis*.

The rule of Leviticus 25 is that in the Sabbatical Year one could NOT harvest and eat plants that spring up from SEEDS left from the previous crop. But one **could** harvest and eat the 2nd and 3rd growths that shot up from the previous crop's root system. However other than to go and gather the grain the Israelites could do nothing more in the way of tending the fields.

Verse 7 again brings to the fore the principle that in the land of Israel there are no second class citizens; whether foreigners staying among the Hebrews, slaves purchased by the Hebrews, or indentured servants it didn't matter; all who lived as Israel shared and shared alike in whatever the land produced on its own in the Sabbatical Year.

Now one point we should be aware of: I said that the Shabbat year was for the benefit of the land, not the Hebrews. While true the other idea here was that in the Sabbatical Year the Hebrews were now fully dependent on Yehoveh to provide. What was being demonstrated to the Israelites was that, in the end, it was not their work that brought forth food from the ground, but it was simply a gift from God. Israel was again almost as nomads during this 7th year, such as they were for 40 years in the Wilderness fully dependent on the Lord for their sustenance. If God did not provide, they didn't eat. So a great deal of faith was required on the part of the Hebrews as the Sabbatical Year rolled around; and of course since God **did** provide it served to build trust in Him just as the promised manna, which had come each day without fail, slowly but surely built faith in God for the Exodus generation.

RE-READ LEV.25:8-13

Verses 1 – 7 were reminders of the requirement for a 7th year complete rest for the land. Now that the Sabbath year principle is established the so-called Jubilee is ordered. A rather standard Bible term is used to explain the time frame for the Jubilee: it is to be 7 Sabbaths of years, or seven weeks of years (7 X 7), meaning 49 years; then begins the Jubilee year, the 50th year. The mark of the start of this special 50th year is Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, the 10th day of Tishri, which by the Hebrew religious event calendar is the 7th month of the year.

This may seem a little odd because we have the beginning of the 50th year being delayed by 10 days from when it would seem logical for it to start. The 1st day of Tishri is Rosh Hashanah, Jewish New Year; yet because the actual Hebrew word for Jubilee is “yobel”, which means Rams horn, and the Rams horn is associated with Yom Kippur, then the year of Jubilee begins on the 10th day of the month of Tishri, which is Yom Kippur. Not all Jews agree with this but that is the rationale behind it.

And this 50th year Jubilee is to be a Sabbatical Year just as each 7th year is to be a Sabbatical Year. Now watch as the prophetic meaning of the Jubilee starts to unfold. The 50th year of course connects with the 50th day of Pentecost (Shavuot). The Lord told Israel that if they did not observe the 50th year Jubilee that they would be exiled from their land and foreigners (gentiles) would enjoy what the Lord had intended for His people, Israel. And of course that happened on more than one occasion.

This dovetails perfectly with Pentecost, the seven weeks of days, plus 1, 50 days. On the 50th day the Holy Spirit descended not just for Jews, but also for gentiles. Foreigners who had never been part of Israel could suddenly know God’s saving provision: Yah-shua. God’s provision would be for all who believed, including those who were NOT part of physical Israel. Those who did NOT observe the provisions of the 50 year Sabbath cycle (the Jubilee) however would be cut off from their land; those who did not observe the provisions of Pentecost.....acceptance of the Holy Spirit who came on the 50th day.....would be cut off from the Kingdom of God.

Now the 50 year Jubilee brought with it challenges as well as blessings; one would have to rest from all their work and count only on the provisions of God. Same with Pentecost; we are to lay all our own works aside and depend on the blood of Yeshua to provide. But the challenge was that on the 50 year Jubilee those who had riches, those who owned land once owned by others, had to return it to the original owner. On Pentecost, we find that we must return all that we have to the original owner; Yehoveh. All that we have becomes His. We become spiritual paupers.

Let me point out something that may not yet have occurred to you: the way this plan for the Jubilee year is laid out, there would have been two Sabbatical Years IN A ROW every 50 years. The 49th year itself was a Sabbath year (the final year of each 7 year period was a Sabbath year), and then the 50th year (the Jubilee year) was ANOTHER Sabbath year; so we

have two Sabbath years in a row.

There has been a lot of controversy over this issue. It has been suggested by Rabbis and Sages that the way the 50 years was to be counted was that the Jubilee year itself was to be counted as year one of the 50 year cycle. Therefore the first year of the first 7-year period following a Jubilee was actually the 2nd year of the 50-year Jubilee cycle. By suggesting that formula then that last year of the 7th seven-year cycle was the Jubilee. That made the 7th year Sabbath coincide with the 50-year Jubilee. Why this suggestion? Because these Sages just didn't see how it was possible for God to require the people to survive without planting and harvesting crops for 2 consecutive years, resulting from 2 consecutive Sabbath years.....the 49th year Sabbath year, immediately followed by the 50th year Jubilee Sabbath year. However the wording of the Torah is quite plain and that idea is simply not supported; indeed there WAS to be 2 consecutive Sabbath years. OK just tuck that away in your memory banks for a little while.

Let's now turn our attention to verse 10. There is this short statement that flies right by us that in reality is the heart of the matter of Jubilee; it says: ".....you are to consecrate the 50th year proclaiming freedom throughout the land..." In other versions it will say, "proclaim liberty throughout the land", and a couple of versions will say, "proclaim RELEASE throughout the land". The word we want to look at is the one that is translated as **freedom, or liberty, or release**. And, the Hebrew word is **deror**.

This word, **deror**, is important because it is the nucleus of the entire purpose of Jubilee; because it is DECLARING for us just exactly what Jubilee is about. Up until very recently it has been generally agreed by Jewish and Christian scholar alike that "freedom and liberty" were acceptable translations for **deror**. But with the current better understanding of what is called the Hebrew cognates that are found in the Akkadian language we have arrived at a more precise meaning of the term. By way of reminder, Akkadian is now known to be the precursor language to Biblical Hebrew; in other words Biblical Hebrew grew out of the Akkadian language. And we have vast amounts of ancient records written in Akkadian that act as a kind of Rosetta Stone to help us translate Biblical Hebrew into modern day words. Let me also remind you that though similar, Biblical Hebrew is not entirely the same as Modern Hebrew. So we have many Hebrew words in the Bible that are no longer in use in modern spoken Hebrew. We also have some Hebrew words whose use is so rare in the Bible that the meaning of that word is fuzzy and difficult to translate. **Deror** is one of those words but now, within the last few years, the meaning is much more precise and understood; and the meaning is "release".

Deror comes from the Akkadian word **anduraru**; it was a legal term and usually employed when a new king would come into power and declare forgiveness of debts and the release of indentured servants from their masters. A form of that word was also used that meant, "to move about freely".

So freedom and liberty kind of miss the point; **deror** more corresponds to the concept of RELEASE; specifically as being released from bondage and from debts.

So far we have a picture of Jubilee, then, that it is 1) the 2nd Sabbatical year in a row for the

Israelites that happens twice per century, in which they are prohibited from sowing, planting, or harvesting **new** grain, and from tending their grape vines or in any way maintaining their fields or trees.....including their all-important Olive trees. 2) Jubilee is to be a year of RELEASE from debts and from indentured servitude. 3) The only food that could be eaten.....whether by animals or men..... was that which was stored away in preparation for this difficult 2-year span during which no new produce can be grown. The only OTHER food that can be eaten is that which comes up from the ground on its own, without man's hand in planting, tending, or pruning.

Now we get another phrase whose meaning comes into better focus, as we understand the "release" aspect of Jubilee. Verse 13 ends with the words, ".....every one of you is to return to the land he owns." Or a better translation, which most Bibles have, is, "the land of your possession" (as long as we understand that possession does NOT mean ownership, it more precisely means "holding", as in "leasehold"). I hope you are following this because these are NOT trivial matters or unimportant details. They set the stage for so much of what we will eventually be told in the N.T.

The idea of "every man returning to his land" is that at some point the reason a man was NOT on the land he owned is that it had been sold to someone else or it had been forfeited to pay a debt. Most times that land was transferred from one person to another it was BECAUSE of an unpaid debt.

So let me be very clear: the Hebrew principle of '**achuzzah**' was that NOBODY owned the land.....they just leased it for a time. God was the owner of all land, and even in the covenant with Abraham it was not a transfer of ownership from Yehoveh to Abraham it was but the execution of a lease; and the term of that lease was "forever". That same principle is, of course, moved on down the food chain whereby a "land owner" doesn't really "own" the land he "holds" the land, with the idea being that he "holds" it as long as the owner allows him to hold it. And who is the owner? Yehoveh. If the holder of the land uses the land as collateral on a debt, but cannot pay the debt, then the land holding is transferred to the one who was holding the debt. BUT.....that person didn't OWN the land; he was just holding the land.

The obvious question comes, then just how LONG does that person who now holds land, get to hold it? And the answer is, only until the Jubilee year arrives. Upon the year of Jubilee a man who obtained a piece of land by foreclosure had to GIVE that land back to the original owner....OR,....if the original owner had died, the new owner had to give it back to original owner's family or clan! The original owner was not required to pay a thing to get it back, under this arrangement of Jubilee.

Verses 14 –22 explain a little further just how this deal was to work.

RE-READ LEV. 25:14 – 22

OK. Get the picture: the foundational principle that property ownership operates under in the system of Law that God is giving to the Hebrews through Moses is that the maximum amount

of time anyone who holds land can LOSE it by ANY means to another person, is 49 years. If that person or family has lost their land to another, or “sold it” so to speak, they get it back on the Jubilee year.

This is so vastly different than the American system of property rights that it can be hard to comprehend. In America property ownership is considered a sacred right. It’s not just “held”, it’s yours. It’s yours to own as long as you want. However if you have debt on it (a mortgage), and the debt holder forecloses on it and you cannot quickly make good the debt.....you LOSE that property forever. It now belongs to the NEW owner for as long as he chooses to keep it. You retain no rights whatsoever to that property. The new owner can sell it to someone else, he can keep it and can will it to the next generation, and it becomes theirs.....not just to USE.....but to OWN. This is NOT the way the Biblical system operated. I’m not condemning our system I’m just trying to show you the differences.

Therefore under the system we’re reading about here in the Torah, what a person PAID to acquire a piece of land from someone was based on two things: 1) how many years he would have possession of it until the Jubilee year arrived (and then was forced to return the land to its original holder); and 2) what the value of the crops that could be grown on that land would amount to over that period of time.

Just to be clear: if a person acquired a piece of land the first year after a Jubilee year, then he could hold it for the maximum possible amount of time.....49 years...until the beginning of the NEXT Jubilee. Therefore if it was calculated that he would receive 49 years of crops off of it (really it could be only 42 years because there would be 7 Sabbatical years included in that time in which he could not plant nor harvest) , and each of those 49 years of crops was worth \$100, then he would pay the former holder \$4900 for the right to hold the land. On the 50th year the land automatically reverted to the former owner and STAYED his unless he again lost it.

On the other hand if several years had passed since the last Jubilee, and the NEXT Jubilee would arrive in, say 14 years, and a person wanted to obtain that same plot of land, then calculating the value of each years crops at \$100, he would only pay \$1400 for the land because he’d be giving it back much sooner, and thereby gaining less use of the land than in our first case.

For the poor and those in debt Jubilee was a great thing...something they looked forward to. For the wealthy and the fortunate it was not something that they particularly welcomed. The Jubilee year for them was loss..... loss of much of their wealth.

But the thing both rich and poor shared in common was that for a 2-year period, fresh produce was hard to come by, and its quality was generally much poorer than normal because it consisted of the inferior 2nd and 3rd cuttings of the last harvest before the onset of the 2 consecutive Sabbath years. As you can imagine the wealthier solved this simply by purchasing produce from foreign merchants, who brought food grown from OUTSIDE of Israel.

Now verse 18 represents a sudden interruption in the series of ordinances. Abruptly God says

this: “you shall observe My Laws and keep them faithfully THAT YOU MAY LIVE UPON THE LAND IN SECURITY. Verse 19 continues the same thought with, “the land will yield its fruit and you shall eat your fill, and you shall live upon it in security”.

History proves the completely and astonishingly accurate playing out of this statement. During the days Israel at least made an attempt to walk in the ways of Yehoveh the land was miraculously productive. During the days Israel was in the land in Bible times, it was the breadbasket of the Middle East. Its produce was renowned for its quality and quantity. Babylonian, Persian, and Roman records show how much these conquerors desired to have the benefit of the fabulous fruits and grains and vegetables produced in the Holy Lands.

Yet every time the Israelites were exiled, the land stopped producing. When the Assyrians emptied the Northern Kingdom of Ephraim-Israel and replaced them with foreigners, immediately the land went into distress. Nearly 2 centuries later we read of the Jews returning from their captivity in Babylon to ruined fields, untended vineyards, and a destroyed Jerusalem.

Over the centuries, after the destruction of the Temple by the Romans in 70 A.D. and the expulsion of the bulk of the Jewish people the land began a steady decline that corresponded with greater foreign presence and control, and lesser Hebrew presence and control. Eventually Israel became a very lightly populated place because the land had become waste.

History books are full of descriptions of visitors to the Holy Lands in the 18th, 19th, and early 20th centuries where, after traveling the land from one end to the other, they were shocked that anyone could survive in such a place. During an 1867 visit to Palestine Mark Twain observed: **“Of all the lands there are for dismal scenery Palestine must be the prince. The hills barren and dull, the valleys unsightly deserts [inhabited by] swarms of beggars with ghastly sores and malformations. Palestine sits in sackcloth and ashes...”**

To this he added that the Holy Lands were now a **'Desolate country whose soil is rich enough but is given over wholly to weeds—a silent mournful expanse...A desolation is here that not even imagination can grace with the pomp of life and action. We reached Tabor safely... We never saw a human being on the whole route...'**

'There was hardly a tree or a shrub anywhere. Even the olive and the cactus, those fast friends of a worthless soil, had almost deserted the country...'

George Adam Smith, a geographer who visited Palestine in 1830 before the changes made by European Immigrants, described the country as a mixture of barren, treeless land, and malarial weed-grown swamps.

He says, **Jews who bought this worthless land were called 'children of death' because many of them did not survive.**

When Israel is not in the land, the land responds by going fallow.

We'll continue this next week.