

Christians talk a lot about “redemption.”

We are “redeemed” by the blood of the lamb!

But besides one reference in the blessing of Jacob in Genesis 48:16,
and two references in Exodus (6:6 and 15:13) to how God redeemed Israel from Egypt,
Leviticus 25 is where we learn what *redemption* means.

To redeem is to buy something back.

We still use the term to talk about buying something back.

You can “redeem” a coupon or a gift card – and investors use it in a variety of ways.

In Hebrew there are two words that are often translated “redeem.”

The other word is more closely related to the idea of “ransom” or “rescue.”

To redeem (*ga'al* in Hebrew) expresses not just a financial transaction,
but also a personal relation.

Redemption (*ge'ulla*) is properly done by a kinsman –
one who stands in close relation to you.

Think about Boaz redeeming Ruth (and really, Naomi).

Boaz became their redeemer.

Redemption is both an economic activity –
and a personal activity.

We saw this morning in Psalm 19, that the LORD is my rock and my *redeemer*.

And truly – with respect to our salvation –

the Lord Jesus Christ is the *only redeemer* of God's elect!

But just as Leviticus 25 speaks of “redemption” in more “earthly” ways,
so also today, we should not be afraid to use the term in an analogical way as well!

If Christ redeemed us from our sins with his precious blood –

then we should be willing to “redeem” others.

Obviously we cannot redeem them from sin!

But when they are in distress,

we can redeem them from lesser troubles.

In Leviticus 25, God shows us how to do this.

As we saw last time, 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.

The Jubilee begins in the 7th month – and in fact, on the Day of Atonement!
That means that the Jubilee begins when the High Priest enters the holy of holies –
and we saw in Leviticus 16, that entering the holy of holies
symbolically represented entering the age to come!
So in the 50th year – 7x7 plus 1 – the ultimate 8th year!
The year of new beginnings – the year of the new creation! –
in that year, all things are made new in the Israelite economy.

1. “If Your Brother Becomes Poor” – Do Not Profit Off the Misfortune of Your Brother (v35-38)

³⁵ “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. ³⁶ Take no interest from him or profit, but fear your God, that your brother may live beside you. ³⁷ You shall not lend him your money at interest, nor give him your food for profit. ³⁸ 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.

We start in verse 35 with a principle that we have seen before:

“you shall support” your brother who becomes poor and cannot maintain himself.
The point being that you should not profit off of your brother’s misfortune.

The principle is found in verse 38:

First, the LORD is a God who brought you out of Egypt (he redeemed you – could any of you have paid your way out of Egypt?!)
Second, the LORD didn’t do this simply for his own benefit:
he did this *for you* – “to give you the land of Canaan”;
the LORD is giving you an inheritance *that you did nothing to earn!*
And he did all this “to be your God.”

Think back to the promise to Abraham.

What are the three parts of the promise to Abraham?

The Land, and the Seed, and the Blessing to the Nations.

And what was the *heart* of the promise to Abraham:

“I will be your God – you shall be my people.”

And so you should treat one another the way your God has dealt with you!

Nowadays we talk about “relief” “rehabilitation” and “development.”

But you can see how those principles are rooted in the practices
that God outlines here!

Relief is where you stop the bleeding.

When you are engaged in relief – you don’t charge interest!

You don’t even expect them to pay you back!

You just take care of them!

(We’ll hear more about this in verse 39 –

v39 is where things go off the rails and he cannot do a thing for himself)

But rehabilitation is where they start taking ownership of the project.

That’s verse 36.

Do not profit from his distress.

If your brother “cannot maintain himself with you,”

“take no interest from him or profit, but fear your God,

that your brother may live beside you.”

Yahweh is the God who brought you out of Egypt.

Your fellow Israelite is your brother.

You may not oppress him by seeking to make money off of his distress.

The church has insisted that this principle is still in effect.

You may not charge interest to a brother who is in dire need.

The Reformers generally followed a simple set of principles:

For those poorest of the poor, give without expecting a return.

For those in need, lend without interest.

For business loans – what we would call “development” –
then moderate interest is acceptable.

Dt 15:1-6 adds the provision that all loans must be forgiven in the seventh year.

This is the basic principle behind modern bankruptcy laws.

We no longer connect it to the religious practice of the sabbatical year,
but bankruptcy is based upon the principle that

the new creation is more important than strict “justice.”

Bankruptcy laws can be used wickedly—as could the sabbatical and jubilee laws—
but the principle remains intact:

sometimes you need a fresh start.

There’s a big debate today about what to do with student loan debt.

The problem was that we created an unforgiveable debt.

If you create an unforgiveable debt, you are incentivizing bad lending practices!

“I can trap you – and you’re stuck!!”

There are lots of ways to solve the mess –
and I won’t pretend that Leviticus 25 gives the ‘obvious’ answer! –
but the principles in Lev 25 and Dt 15
would suggest that there should be a time when debts are wiped out,
and people are allowed to start over.

And, if you are tempted to say, “but they got themselves into that mess!”
Just remember that God has not treated *you* that way.
And his principles of justice and mercy are useful for *all humanity*!

Because that’s where we go in verses 39-46.

2. Slavery in the Land (v39-46)

a. Your Brothers Are My Servants (v39-43)

³⁹ “If your brother becomes poor beside you and sells himself to you, you shall not make him serve as a slave: ⁴⁰ he shall be with you as a hired worker and as a sojourner. He shall serve with you until the year of the jubilee. ⁴¹ 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. ⁴² For they are my servants,^[e] whom I brought out of the land of Egypt; they shall not be sold as slaves. ⁴³ You shall not rule over him ruthlessly but shall fear your God.

Because now, your poor brother has reached desperation stage –
he is ready to sell *himself* to you!

But God says, do not make him serve as a slave!
Slavery was the way that ancient societies handled debt.
If you can’t afford to feed your family, what do you do?
You can sell your property (that’s what we saw last time).
But what if that isn’t enough?
What if you sell your property – and you still can’t get by?

All you have left is yourself! (or your children)
What do you do when you can’t repay the loan?
You have to work it off.
And – as history has demonstrated over and over again –
when fallen human beings gain power over each other,
we want to keep it!

But as we saw last time,
God’s purpose for the new humanity is that *his people* would live in *his land*.
We need to realize that God does not teach “private property.”

He teaches *stewardship*.

The idea of “private property” is that “I can do whatever I want with my land.”

That’s not what Leviticus 25 is teaching.

In Leviticus 25, you cannot sell the land permanently – you can only lease it out.

And in the same way, you cannot permanently sell yourself.

Land and Seed go together.

God had promised Abraham that his seed would inherit the land.

Your inheritance is inalienable!

(This is actually at the heart of what John Locke meant when he said that our inalienable rights are life, liberty, and property.)

Into a world that was driven by its quest for power, pleasure, and possessions –

God establishes an economic system that limits the acquisitive impulse:

you may not permanently acquire your neighbor’s land;

you may not permanently enslave your brother.

And the reason is rooted in what God had said to Moses in Exodus 4:

“Israel is my son – my firstborn.”

God’s firstborn son cannot be a slave.

God’s son is supposed to inherit the whole earth.

And so no Israelite should be a slave.

In the Jubilee year – in the year of redemption and release –

Land and Seed are restored.

An Israelite was not allowed to take a fellow Israelite as a slave,

because God had redeemed them from slavery in Egypt.

Israel was God’s servant God’s slave – no one else could own them.

Therefore they could only serve as hired servants.

But at the Jubilee, he must be allowed to go free.

b. Sojourners and Strangers Can Become Slaves (v44-46)

⁴⁴ 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. ⁴⁵ 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. ⁴⁶ 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.

So then what do we do with verses 44-46?

Israel could have slaves from among the nations, but not from among their own people.

First, we need to understand what it means “they may be your property”? (v45)

The idea is clearly expressed in the following verse:
“You may bequeath them to your sons after you to inherit as a possession forever.”

Throughout the OT, a “possession” or “property” is something that is inheritable.
Now – it’s important to remember what we saw last week!
The land belongs to God –
and so you may not permanently alienate your inheritance.
The modern notion of “I can do whatever I want to my property”
didn't exist back then.

We are stewards of the land – stewards of our houses –
stewards, also, of those under our authority.
If I am in a position of authority,
I cannot do whatever I want with them.
I have to treat them the way that God says.

It’s also important to see that these verses use concessive language –
“you *may* do this.”
It is strictly forbidden to enslave Israelites –
but given that Israel lived in a world where slavery was a prominent part
of the economic system,
God permits them to buy and sell foreigners.

Since God’s purpose with Israel is to show the world a “new humanity” –
the economic system that God institutes in Israel
is designed to show the benefits of being part of his people.

If you are part of his people – any slavery that you have to endure will only be temporary.
(Think of how Paul says this in Galatians 3:28 –
“There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free,
there is no male and female –
for in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith.”)

Slavery is not a good thing – and should not be encouraged to continue.
Indeed, the focus on *redeeming* slaves at the end of chapter 25
demonstrates that God’s purpose is to bring the institution to an end.

3. Redeeming Slaves – My Servants (v47-55)

a. Redemption by a Relative (v47-49)

⁴⁷ “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,
⁴⁸ then after he is sold he may be redeemed. One of his brothers may redeem him, ⁴⁹ 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.

Because the way to end slavery is by redeeming the slaves.

Verses 47-49 starts by talking about *who* may redeem.

One of his brothers – or his uncle, or his cousin – or a “close relative” –
or, if he grows rich, he may redeem himself!

You might wonder – why would you sell yourself to a stranger?

To put it simply, if your crops fail – or if you are injured –

there are many reasons why you might prefer slavery to death!

And if the person who is able to provide for you happens to be a stranger,
well, thanks be to God there was someone!

But the stranger is still obligated to abide by the Law of God.

He must allow for his Israelite servant to be redeemed.

You might also wonder how a slave may “grow rich” (v49)?

It’s not as strange as it sounds.

Slaves often had considerable autonomy in their work.

So long as the slave was producing at the agreed upon rate –
any additional produce belonged to the slave.

b. The Price Calculated as the Time of a Hired Worker (v50-52)

⁵⁰ 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. ⁵¹ If there are still many years left, he shall pay proportionately for his redemption some of his sale price. ⁵² 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.

The price would be calculated by the number of years until the Jubilee.

You would take the wages of a hired worker,
and multiply that by the number of years until the Jubilee.

This would be the redemption price.

c. Treat Him as a Hired Worker (v53)

⁵³ He shall treat him as a worker hired year by year. He shall not rule ruthlessly over him in your sight.

And during his service, he must be treated as a hired worker – not as a slave.

God recognizes that when a man has complete control of another man,
the tendency is to “rule ruthlessly over him.”

But whoever “owns” an Israelite slave may not treat him as a slave.

Even if it is a stranger and sojourner who owns the Israelite slave,

the people of God are to make sure that their brothers are not mistreated.

(And given the regular exhortations to treat the sojourner well –
the implication is clear – “do unto others as you would have them to do to you”!)

The elders of each town are charged with making sure that people are not mistreated.

d. He and His Children Must Be Released in the Jubilee (v54-55)

⁵⁴ *And if he is not redeemed by these means, then he and his children with him shall be released in the year of jubilee.* ⁵⁵ *For it is to me that the people of Israel are servants. ^[U] They are my servants whom I brought out of the land of Egypt: I am the LORD your God.*

And then in the Jubilee he *must* be released – he and his children.

There is an interesting question regarding the relationship between Leviticus 25 and Ex 21.

In Exodus 21:1-6, and in Deuteronomy 15:12-13,
the Hebrew slave serves for six years and then goes free in the seventh.
But in Leviticus 25, the Hebrew slave serves until the Jubilee year.

How do we make sense of this?

I would suggest that Leviticus 25 assumes Exodus 21 as the backdrop.
In Exodus 21, God had said that the Hebrew servant goes free in the 7th year –
but God also said that if the Hebrew servant did not want to go free,
he could remain as a slave “forever.”

Now, in Leviticus 25, God is qualifying that “forever.”

In the 50th year, he *and his children* shall be released in the year of jubilee.

In the new humanity, man may have *no* permanent ownership of man.
God’s people may not hold each other as permanent slaves.

But that does not mean that lawful debts should simply be ignored!

Lawful debts should be paid –
and so if you want to redeem your kinsman,
then you need to pay up!

Conclusion: Redemption from Slavery

You can see why the Jubilee is all about New Creation.

By tying the Jubilee to the Day of Atonement,
as one commentator puts it,
“the law’s meaning is tied to the forgiveness and restoration
that lies at the center of God’s work with Israel
and thereby with history in general.

Beyond the Sabbath, given in the first revelation of the law,
God now points Israel and the world to the Sabbath of Sabbaths.” (Radner, 267)

As we saw last time,

Israel was profoundly bad at observing the Jubilee –
so we don’t actually know what would have happened
if a society actually practiced this.

The prophets only refer to the Jubilee as something that Israel failed to do!

But that means that the year of Jubilee was remembered (even if not practiced)
throughout Israel’s history.

Indeed, in Luke 4:18-19, Jesus proclaims the year of jubilee
as he quotes from Isaiah 61:1-2.

“The Spirit of the LORD is upon me,
because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to set at liberty those who are oppressed,
to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”

The whole point of the Jubilee is fulfilled in Jesus.

And so we are to be a people characterized by the Jubilee.
That’s why Jesus teaches us to pray,
“forgive us our *debts* as we forgive our debtors.”

How do we think about the debts that others owe us?

Because Jesus – though he was in the form of God
took to himself the form of a slave.

He took our debts – he paid the price for all our transgressions.

He redeemed us!
He bought us back.

And so we ought to be a people characterized by the Jubilee!

We ought to be “redeemers” –

No – we cannot possibly redeem people from their sin!

But insofar as we are able to participate in freeing slaves,
helping restore people to wholeness in body and soul –
that is what Jesus is doing –

and so that is what he calls us to in and with him!