



FEED MY SHEEP

PUBLISHED BY JAMES W. BRUGGEMAN
STONE KINGDOM MINISTRIES
P. O. BOX 6388
ASHEVILLE, NC 28816 U.S.A.

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The Unknown Sabbath Laws, Part 2

WE ARE LEARNING about God's sabbath laws. No, not about the commonly known, if much disputed, seventh *day* sabbath, but about the two generally unknown sabbaths which are beyond the weekly sabbath; namely, the sabbatical year and the jubilee. In part one, we discovered that God had commanded not only that man "take a breather" (virtually the literal meaning in the Hebrew!) every seventh day, but He commanded that we also let the *land* rest every seventh year.

Just as we are to release ourselves, along with our servants or employees, from labor on the sabbath day; so also are we to release the earth, the ground, the dirt from its service of growing crops for us. We are to give the land a respite for a complete year, one year in seven. We noted how this must be applied uniformly and simultaneously across the nation in order to obtain the benefits intended. But now we will find, that in addition to releasing the land, God commanded two other releases in the seventh year: a release of *servants* and a release of *debts*. First, regarding servitude, the Word says:

Exo. 21: 2 *If thou buy an Hebrew servant, six years he shall serve: and in the seventh he shall go out free for nothing.*

Then follows specific instructions, discussion of which we shall defer for the moment while we take up a more basic question: Is this seventh year, when the servant is released, always coincident with the nationwide land sabbath year? Or does this law mean that a man can be held in servitude for six full years regardless of when the national land sabbath falls?

To illustrate, suppose the year 2,000 was a sabbath year. The next sabbatical year will be 2007. If Mr. Poorman had to sell himself into servitude to Mr. Master in 2004 and the debt would not be repaid until sometime after 2007, does Exodus 21:2 (above) mean that Mr. Poorman remains in servitude to Mr. Master right on through the land sabbath year of 2007 until the debt is paid? Bible scholars for millennia have had divided opinions on this question. Our interpretation is that the year of release is simultaneous for all three: for *servants*, for *debts* and for the *land*.

Opinions among Bible scholars are also divided over the issue of whether or not debts were cancelled *completely* in the seventh year, or whether payments were merely suspended for that and then resumed in the eighth year. Here we hold to the latter interpretation. Let us now scrutinize the pertinent passages. Simply reading Exodus 21:2 alone, one can see how it can easily be interpreted to mean that an owner may keep a person in servitude for six years from the time he commenced serving. A parallel verse in Deuteronomy, read by itself, would seem to indicate the same.

Deuteronomy 15:12 *And if thy brother, an Hebrew man, or an Hebrew woman, be sold unto thee, and serve thee six years; then in the seventh year thou shalt let him go free from thee.*

Some Bible critics point out that in these passages no mention is made of the land sabbath. They therefore conclude that the seventh year release of a servant is applied merely on an individual case basis which may or may not coincide with the land sabbath. But this view is short-sighted and does not consider

the marvelous harmony seen in God's law when all three releases are viewed as occurring simultaneously across the nation.

Notice the context. In the same chapter (Deut. 15) that speaks of releasing *servants*, the first thing mentioned in the chapter is the statute regarding release of *debts*. This, at a minimum, suggests a link between the two releases simply by reason of context.

Deuteronomy 15:1 At the end of every seven years thou shalt make a release.

2 And this is the manner of the release: Every creditor that lendeth ought unto his neighbour shall release it; he shall not exact it of his neighbour, or of his brother; because it is called YHWH's release.

Keep in mind that while anyone could experience misfortune and need to go into debt, that the case of formal servitude was simply an extreme case of debt. It appertained in cases where either a thief was sold for his debt of making restitution (cf. Exodus 22:1, *et al.*), or in cases of such severe hardship that a man had to sell himself into bondage.

Therefore, in Deut. 15:1 & 2, certainly this release of debt would apply to the man or woman in servitude as much as it would to the ordinary debtor who is not in formal servitude. To state it another way, the person in servitude is in servitude because he is in debt. Therefore, if debts are released in the seventh year, then it certainly applies to the debt owed by the servant as well.

To this point, then, we have linked two of the three releases together. Now, even a paltry amount of common sense will be sufficient to understand how the third release is inextricably linked to the other two. For consider: during the year of land sabbath, there is no harvesting of crops. Hence, there would be no profits for a man to continue "servicing his debt" (to use a modern term). And so God provided the 12-month moratorium on debts. Although this alone is convincing, other reasons for the simultaneity of the three releases will be observed as we continue to scrutinize the sabbath passages.

Deuteronomy 15:12 specified that the debtor-servant is a *Hebrew* man or woman. Verse 2 specifies that debts to a *neighbor* or *brother* are to be released. However, such a release was not commanded when

dealing with non-Hebrews, as seen in verse 3:

Deuteronomy 15:3 Of a foreigner thou mayest exact it again: but that which is thine with thy brother thine hand shall release;

Next comes God's positive command that the "haves" are to assist the "have-nots." We almost hesitate to use those terms due to their constant use by those with a socialistic mindset. However, those terms are accurate descriptions when it comes to what God expects. The difference between the modern socialist and God's command is that God expects individuals to *voluntarily* lend to the "have-nots" *out of a compassionate heart*, while the socialists favor taking by force (via taxes) from the "haves" and then for the stolen wealth to be redistributed by government.

God's way is one-on-one. A man sees a neighbor in need and he gladly steps up and offers assistance. Socialists are group-oriented (*communitistic*). They take (steal) from one group and give to other groups. It is all impersonal and thus deprives the good-hearted lender of the joy of personally helping his brother in need. God's command is to individuals here, not government.

Deuteronomy 15: 7 If there be among you a poor man of one of thy brethren within any of thy gates in thy land which YHWH thy God giveth thee, thou shalt not harden thine heart, nor shut thine hand from thy poor brother:

8 But thou shalt open thine hand wide unto him, and shalt surely lend him sufficient for his need, in that which he wanteth.

We hasten to point out that the word "wanteth" in the KJV means "lacks." This law has to do with basic needs and the necessities of life. It does not mean that one must lend to a brother in order to fulfill his *wants* (meaning *desires*). We suggest that this command be interpreted liberally as one considers the society and culture in which he lives.

For example, in America virtually all homes have indoor plumbing whereas in sub-Saharan Africa it is a rarity, we would suppose. Thus, if my neighbor in Asheville has suffered a major plumbing crisis, in that his water heater broke and the ensuing flood ruined his carpet; we would liberally construe the command so that if he were unable to buy a new water heater today, we would lend him the cash to do so.

Hot water is, in a sense, a necessity in modern America. His family needs to shower, wash dishes and do laundry. This is construing the law liberally. However, offering a further loan of cash to replace his carpet probably would not fall into the same category. New carpet is not in any sense a necessity, even in America.

Similarly, if my neighbor's car breaks down and needs some major repair work and he simply and truly does not have the money to fix it, this again would probably fall into the necessity category, since virtually everyone drives to get to work in America. But if the air conditioning in his car broke, that would be a different story.

If one lived in sub-Saharan Africa, on the other hand, one would not be obliged to help a neighbor obtain indoor plumbing since such is not common in that land. That is what we mean by considering the culture in which one lives in the liberal interpretation of God's law.

Would that all God's people were always ready with open hearts and open wallets to lend to a brother in need! Of course, if the sum being lent is considerable, one's thoughts naturally gravitate to how soon one can expect repayment. Knowing this tendency in man, God issued a caution. Ponder this carefully in light of a debt release in the seventh year.

Deuteronomy 15: 9 Beware that there be not a thought in thy wicked heart, saying, The seventh year, the year of release, is at hand; and thine eye be evil against thy poor brother, and thou givest him nought; and he cry unto YHWH against thee, and it be sin unto thee.

10 Thou shalt surely give him, and thine heart shall not be grieved when thou givest unto him: because that for this thing YHWH thy God shall bless thee in all thy works, and in all that thou puttest thine hand unto.

11 For the poor shall never cease out of the land: therefore I command thee, saying, Thou shalt open thine hand wide unto thy brother, to thy poor, and to thy needy, in thy land.

The above passage provides another strong point in favor of the uniformity of the sabbatical year—that it is for the simultaneous release of *debts*, release of *servants* and release of the *land* from service. Using the same dates as in the previous illustration, let's say

Mr. Welloff is approached by Mr. Poorman in the year 2006 with an immediate, compelling and legitimate need for a cash loan. Mr. Welloff thinks to himself: "Gosh, next year is 2007 and it's the year of release. If I lend Johnny Poorman 3,000 bucks, I'll be lucky if I get back 500 before the year of release. I think I will turn him down."

This is clearly disobedience to the law of God. Our heavenly Father says: "Do it anyhow and I will bless you in everything you do." What a promise! But how few Christians actually put God to the test on this one. (Again, the reason they don't is because they have never been taught there is such a law, or if they have, that all those Old Testament laws are "abolished in Christ.") But such the caution set forth in Deuteronomy 15:9-11 would be both superfluous and meaningless if the sabbath year were not uniformly observed in the nation!

Consider the opposing view: if every time a Christian made a loan to his brother Christian and the clock began its six year countdown with the giving of the loan, then why would God caution us against thinking to our self: "the year of release is at hand?" It would never be at hand in the opposing view scenario. Obviously then, the year of release does *not* commence counting from when the loan is made; it is uniformly and simultaneously applied across the nation.

The case for a uniform sabbatical year of release is further strengthened by the wording in one of Moses' final speeches to the Israelites.

Deuteronomy 31: 10 And Moses commanded them, saying, At the end of *every* seven years, in the solemnity of the year of release [#8059], in the feast of tabernacles,

11 When all Israel is come to appear before YHWH thy God in the place which he shall choose, thou shalt read this law before all Israel in their hearing.

This was to be an important event in the nation. At the very time that there was a national proclamation of release of debts, the entire law of Yahweh was to be read in the audience of all Israel. If we were to focus on the KJV word "solemnity," we could point out that this indicates that the year of release was a nationally declared event. Even if we allow that the word "solemnity" is a poor translation—the Hebrew is

SRN 4150, מועד [mo`ed]—which means “appointed time,” our point remains unaffected. Compare the New American Standard’s rendering:

NAU Deuteronomy 31:10 Then Moses commanded them, saying, “At the end of every seven years, at the [appointed] time of the year of remission of debts, at the Feast of Booths,

This clearly substantiates that there was a national, septennial remission of debts. The release was not done on an individual basis six years after the loan was made. All debtors were released at the same time. It was connected to a national celebration commemorating the bounty and goodness of Yahweh, at the time of the ingathering of the fall fruits.

The word “release” (v. 31) also serves to tie together the three events: the sabbath for the land, release of debts and release of servant-debtors. The word “release” here is the same Hebrew word (#8059) translated “release” in Deut. 15:1-3 & 15:9. The verb form (#8058), also translated “release” in v. 3 is the same word translated “let it rest” in Exodus 23:11, referring to the “release” of the land.

Exodus 23:11 But the seventh year thou shalt let it rest [#8058; i.e., release it] **and lie still; that the poor of thy people may eat: and what they leave the beasts of the field shall eat. In like manner thou shalt deal with thy vineyard, and with thy oliveyard.**

As for the question of whether or not debts were cancelled completely in the sabbatical year, the weight of evidence falls on the side of a temporary suspension of payments. First, as we noted previously, it is only common sense that with no harvesting of crops in the seventh year, there would be no profits with which a man could make payments on a debt.

Secondly, the definitions for the Hebrew words translated “release” and “let rest” above are: “letting drop of exactions, (temporary) remitting, release (from debt)” [underlined emphasis ours. Source: *Hermeneutika BibleWorks* software lexicon, derived from *Strong’s*, *Brown-Driver-Briggs* and other lexicons].

Thirdly, the Word expects a righteous man to repay his debts.

Psalm 37: 21 The wicked borroweth, and payeth not again: but the righteous sheweth mercy, and giveth.

Fourthly, a scheming but enterprising thief could take advantage of the complete cancellation scenario. He could be motivated to steal a huge amount in the sixth year, knowing that he would not have to pay back anywhere near what he stole because all debts would be wiped out in the seventh year. Thus, crime would pay. Theft would be profitable if total cancellation of debts occurred every seventh year.

A final compelling—and we contend—unassailable proof that the seventh year sabbath was meant to be universal and simultaneous in Israel is the simple fact of the jubilee. The jubilee was nationwide and it therefore would require that all the preceding seventh year sabbaths to have been celebrated uniformly across the land in the same year. This will be seen much more clearly as we commence the study of the jubilee itself.

Purpose of the sabbatical year

From our study to date of the “unknown” sabbath laws, we can discern some of the purposes of these laws and notice how they are foundational to New Testament doctrines. They teach us—

- * to have mercy towards those less fortunate. (Exo. 21:2; 23:10, 11; Deut. 15:1- 11)
- * and reinforce the concept that God owns all the land. (Psa. 24:1) We are stewards of it.
- * that the sabbath is to honor Yahweh. (Lev. 25:4)
- * to partially “reset” the economy (so it would not get too far astray in anticipation of the jubilee year’s “great reset.”)
- * to rest the land so that it can rejuvenate itself and thus serve man better as man honors God.
- * Finally, the sabbath laws teach us *by experience*—both on the giving and the receiving end—about forgiveness, grace and mercy. Ω

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