

Getting to Know Your Bible

Lesson 4

The Purpose and Importance of the Sabbatical Year

Quick Review of Lesson 3	12. The Ark was named the Ark of the Covenant/Testimony because it was the secure repository for the written WORD of God. It was guarded by the LORD Himself. Only the High Priest and his family, direct descendants of Aaron, were allowed to touch and look at the Ark without the penalty of death. 13. In Numbers 3 – 4, the LORD put a protocol in place to protect the WORD of God stored in the Ark of the Covenant/Testimony. 14. As the books of the Old Testament were completed, they were placed in the care of the priestly line of Aaron, who put them in the Ark of the Covenant/Testimony. 15. Upon entering the Promised Land, upon arriving at Mount Gerizim and Mount Ebal at the beginning of the second year in the Promised Land, an altar was built under the direction of Joshua. The stones were covered in plaster. Joshua read the books to the people and wrote the words on the plaster. In addition, it was the official start of the Sabbatical year instruction for Israel. 16. Forty-eight Levitical cities were established in the Promised Land, four in each tribal area. These cities were provided to receive the gifts and offerings of the Israelites from their surrounding areas that were used for the regular required sacrifices and the feeding of all the Levites and their families. In addition, each Levitical city had a copy of the books in the Ark of the Covenant. The priests in each Levitical city were required to read the books to the people every seventh year, called the Sabbatical Year.
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The Purpose and Importance of the Sabbatical Year

In the last instructions to the Nation of Israel through Moses, the LORD instituted the Sabbatical Year requirements on Israel. Just as the LORD rested from the work of creation on the Sabbath, or seventh day, so, too, the Nation of Israel was to rest from working the fields every Sabbatical Year, every seventh year. This instruction came in the Law written in the book of Leviticus and instructed to the people before they left Mount Sinai the first time.

The LORD then spoke to Moses at Mount Sinai, saying, “Speak to the sons of Israel and say to them, When you come into the land which I shall give you, then the land shall have a sabbath to the LORD. Six years you shall sow your field, and six years you shall prune your vineyard and gather in its crop, but during the seventh year, the land shall have a sabbath rest, a sabbath to the LORD; you shall not sow your field nor prune your vineyard. Your harvest’s aftergrowth you shall not reap, and your grapes of untrimmed vines you shall not gather; the land shall have a sabbatical year. ‘All of you shall have the sabbath products of the land for food; yourself, and your male and female slaves, and your hired man and your foreign resident, those who live as aliens with you. 7 Even your cattle and the animals that are in your land shall have all its crops to eat. (Leviticus 25:2-7)

As you might remember, the Nation of Israel did not take the Promised Land the first time they left Mount Sinai. The LORD knew that would happen. Still, the Law of the Sabbatical Year needed to be placed in the Levitical Law for the priests to uphold when taking the Promised Land 39 years in the future.

The purpose of the Sabbatical Year was to be a year of rest for the land and the people. As the people were with Moses in the Plains of Moab, Moses knew that he would not be traveling with them to take the Promised Land; therefore, the LORD allowed Moses to reveal the rest of the purpose for the Sabbatical Year to the people who would be initially under the direction of Joshua. We find that in Deuteronomy.

So Moses wrote this law and gave it to the priests, the sons of Levi who carried the Ark of the covenant of the Lord, and to all the elders of Israel. Then Moses commanded them, saying, “At the end of every seven years, at the time of the year of remission of debts, at the Feast of Booths, when all Israel comes to appear before the Lord your God at the place which He will choose, you shall read this law in front of all Israel in their hearing. Assemble the people, the men and the women and children and the alien who is in your town, so that they may hear and learn and fear the Lord your God, and be careful to observe all the words of this law. Their children, who have not known, will hear and learn to fear the Lord your God, as long as you live on the land which you are about to cross the Jordan to possess.” (Deuteronomy 31:9-13)

We need to notice a few things in this passage.

First: Moses says to the priests, “*... you shall read this law in front of all Israel in their hearing.*”

Second: Moses says, “*Assemble the people, the men and the women and children and the alien who is in your town, so that they may hear and learn and fear the Lord your God, and be careful to observe all the words of this law.*”

Third: Moses tells them to do this every seventh year, “*as you live on the land which you are about to cross the Jordan to possess.*”

Fourth: The reading of the Law to the people was to occur “*at the place which He will choose, you shall read this law in front of all Israel in their hearing...*” which will be read separately in all the 48 Levitical cities which the LORD chose.

For the priests to read the law books to the people in the towns where they lived and worked, every Levitical town had to have copies of the books.

Before we go on, let's address a few words in the Leviticus 25 passage stated above and bring an understanding about those words as they are revealed by the LORD in the whole of Scripture. The words are “MALE AND FEMALE SLAVES.”

Let me sum up the conclusion to the Scriptural position on these words, and then we will explain.

The LORD strictly PROHIBITS the people of Israel from enslaving anyone, making anyone into a slave, owning slaves, or selling slaves. However, they could buy enslaved people, redeeming them so that they could be freed.

In “Getting to Know Your Bible,” you need to be able to explain things in the Bible. Slavery is one of those things that you need to be able to explain.

First, every bad thing in this world since creation and until the Great White Throne Judgment is mentioned, taught and explained in the Bible why it is an unrighteous sin. In the same way, every good thing in this world since the time of creation and until the Great White Throne Judgment is mentioned, taught and explained in the Bible why it is righteous. Let that soak in. Nothing that will ever happen or be done in this world by anyone is left out of the Scripture, whether good or bad.

Second, slavery is covered in the Bible, and it is considered a sin. Every nation in the world engaged in “slavery.” However, the LORD strictly forbids the Nation of Israel from being like the world and prohibits the people of the Nation of Israel from ever endorsing, establishing, or participating in slavery practices. Let me state this another way. Slavery is found in the Bible in the context of the whole world, but slavery was never allowed or permitted by the LORD among the Israelites.

Coming out of Egypt, the Nation of Israel was freed from slavery. But for the four hundred years that the Israelite people were in Egypt in slavery, many were sold as slaves to merchants of the surrounding world. When they entered the Promised Land as a nation, the Israelites would become aware of Hebrews sold into slavery from Egypt and were in the other countries that did not participate in the Exodus. The Israelites with Moses were redeemed from slavery, but those not in Egypt were not redeemed; they were still enslaved, owned by those who bought them. Right after giving the Ten Commandments to the people of Israel, standing at the foot of Mount Sinai, the LORD gave the people instructions on how to redeem their Hebrew relatives as they were made aware of them and how to treat them to provide them with freedom. First, when they came across a Hebrew on the slave market, they were to purchase that person or persons with money.

“Now these are the ordinances which you are to set before them: ‘If you buy a Hebrew slave, he shall serve for six years; but on the seventh he shall go out as a free man without payment. If he comes alone, he shall go out alone; if he is the husband of a wife, then his wife shall go out with him. If his master gives him a wife, and she bears him sons or daughters, the wife and her children shall belong to her master, and he shall go out alone. But if the slave plainly says, ‘I love my master, my wife and my children; I will not go out as a free man,’⁶ then his master shall bring him to God, then he shall bring him to the door or the doorpost. And his master shall pierce his ear with an awl; and he shall serve him permanently. ‘If a man sells his daughter as a female slave, she is not to go free as the male slaves do. If she is displeasing in the eyes of her master who designated her for himself, then he shall let her be redeemed. He does not have authority to sell her to a foreign people because of his unfairness

to her. If he designates her for his son, he shall deal with her according to the custom of daughters. If he takes to himself another woman, he may not reduce her food, her clothing, or her conjugal rights. If he will not do these three things for her, then she shall go out for nothing, without payment of money. (Exodus 21:1-11)

LET ME TRANSLATE FOR CLARITY. When an Israelite had the opportunity to purchase a Hebrew man, woman, or family on the world market, the purchased persons were not enslaved; they became employees to work off the cost of their redemption out of slavery. Whatever it cost, and whenever they were purchased, at the beginning of the Sabbatical year, they were free to go live their life in the Promised Land. If they knew their tribal origins, they would have probably gone to live in that tribal area. If he was a single man purchased, he left in freedom as a single man. If he came as a man with a family, the whole family left as a family. However, if he came as a single man, and during his time of paying off his redemption cost, he was allowed to marry a woman in the purchaser's family, the woman was already free, living with her family. When the Sabbatical Year came, he could leave free, but his wife, and the children they bore, were to stay with the purchaser's family because they were originally part of his family. If the purchased man wanted to stay with his wife and children as a free man, he could. But, in doing so, he would put a hole in his ear as a sign that he wanted to be part of the family of his purchaser forever. The hole indicated that it was his will to be a "bondservant," or a willing employ of his redeemer for the rest of his life. If an Israelite purchased a woman at the foreign market, the daughter of a foreign man willing to sell her, to make her a bride, or perhaps the bride of a son, she had to be treated rightly. As a woman, she was to be protected by the purchaser even if he found her to be displeasing. He was absolutely forbidden from selling her back in the market. He was to treat her as an equal woman with all the other blood-line women in the family for life. If the man was not willing to do these things for the woman, then she was free to go as a free woman. The decision was made during the Sabbatical Year when all outstanding debts were forgiven, and all contracts ended. No purchased slave had to work more than six years to pay off his redemption cost.

Second, even in Israel, some people were so poor that they would voluntarily try to sell themselves as enslaved people. This was also forbidden. However, he could work a deal to be a hired hand to provide for his family.

If a countryman of yours becomes so poor with regard to you that he sells himself to you, you shall not subject him to a slave's service. He shall be with you as a hired man, as if he were a sojourner; he shall serve with you until the year of jubilee. He shall then go out from you, he and his sons with him, and shall go back to his family, that he may return to the property of his forefathers. (Leviticus 25:39-41)

LET ME TRANSLATE FOR CLARITY. The Sabbatical Year occurred every seventh year, but, when the cycle of seven Sabbatical Years had passed, totaling 49 years, the 50th year would be a Year of Jubilee. Every fifty years, all contracts were ended. All land that had been sold was returned to the original family that the land was gifted to by Joshua when they took the Promised Land. Using our Leviticus passage, let's create an example. Let's say, in the last seven years of the Jubilee cycle, let's say, five years before the year of Jubilee, a poor man sold his land to provide for his family. He and his family would work for the purchaser for some amount of money that would need to be worked off. For five years, the purchaser would own the new land the poor man and his family lived on. The purchaser would pay for everything, including meals and clothing for the poor man and his family. He provided the seed for the crops and extra help at harvest time. However, upon the turn of the Year of Jubilee, the poor man's property reverted to the poor man. It was his again, free and clear, regardless of the improvements the purchaser had made over the five years. Be that as it may, the poor man was never to be enslaved; he was to be an employee of the purchaser. A poor man's selling of his property was different from purchasing a slave on the market. The slave only worked six years to pay off the redemption price; the poor man's property would belong to the purchaser until the next Year of Jubilee, which could take as long as 49 years until the canceling of the purchase contract.

We have taken up much space in this lesson concerning the topic of slaves in the Bible. Yes, the Bible speaks of slaves and their ills because the Bible does not hide the fact that every nation of the world engaged in the buying and selling of humans in the slave trade; however, the LORD forbid the Israelite people from participating in the slave trade. Rather, the LORD encouraged the Israelites to purchase people on the slave market, allow them to work off their cost by helping on the farm, and in the Sabbatical Year, they would be

totally free to live from then on in the Promised Land. The LORD calls it a “redemption” from the slave market. The slave was redeemed out of slavery by the Israelites into freedom.

The LORD held to the Sabbatical Year throughout the book of Genesis before He revealed its purpose and importance to the Israelites through Moses.

I could take you back through all the important things that the LORD did on the Sabbatical Year, but let me just give three examples.

1. The LORD ended the book of Genesis in the 2352nd year after the creation of Adam. Dividing 2352 by 7, the LORD ended the book exactly 336 Sabbatical seven-year cycles after creation. The death of Joseph occurred in a Sabbatical year. The family of Israel was free in Egypt that year, but that would change soon.
2. Joseph died when he was 110 years old in Egypt. However, he entered Egypt when he was 17, 93 years before his death. (2352 – 93 = 2259 years after the creation of Adam) Moses tells us that Israel departed from Egypt 430 years to the day after the family of Jacob began moving to Egypt. That move began with Joseph. Therefore, we add to the year Joseph was sold into slavery in Egypt 429 years. (*We add 429 years because the zero was not created in the numbering system until the year Jesus was born in 3 BC. As with all babies, as well as animals born until that time, on the day they were born, they were one year old, even though they were only one day old. In our case, the 430th year had not passed because they left Egypt on the first day of the 430th year, not the last day or any day in between. 2259 + 429 = 2688 years after the creation of Adam.*) Dividing 2688 by 7, the Exodus occurred 384 Sabbatical seven-year cycles after the creation of Adam. The Exodus occurred in a Sabbatical Year, a year of freedom for Israel.
3. When Israelites entered the Promise Land with Joshua, they did not arrive at Mount Gerizim and Mount Ebal until the second year after crossing the Jordan River. Therefore, adding 42 years in the wilderness to the time of the Exodus in 2688, the camp arrived at Ebal 2730 years after the creation of Adam. Dividing 2730 by 7, the meeting was exactly 390 Sabbatical cycles from the time of the creation of Adam. It was a Sabbatical Year, a year of freedom.

From the meeting at Mount Ebal, the Sabbatical Year observance will be required forever. In addition, in the year following every seven Sabbatical Year cycle, the year of Jubilee will occur in the 50th year. The Sabbatical Year was a way for the LORD to make sure the Israelites knew His law, were free from debt and were free from slavery. (*For prophecy buffs, the LORD will return to set up His kingdom at the Battle of Armageddon in the 7000th year after the creation of Adam. Divide 7000 by 7, and you will learn that the LORD will return on the 1000th Sabbatical Year from the creation of Adam.*)

Back to the development and protection of the Bible – specifically the Old Testament. With time, the history of the Old Testament unfolds, and the LORD adds to the Scripture through the years. With each new book, be it history, poetry, proverbs, songs, or prophecy, the written originals are placed in the hands of the priests to protect. In 722 BC, when the northern kingdom was taken captive by Assyria, all the Scriptures were still safe in the priest's care in Jerusalem. When the Temple was destroyed in Jerusalem, the Southern Kingdom was taken into captivity in 586 BC, and copies of the books were in all the Levitical cities. The books being written at the time were Jeremiah, Lamentation, Ezekiel, Daniel, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Nahum, and Obadiah, which were protected by the prophets themselves. In addition, copies were being made and circulated between the prophets and priests in exile. For example, if you will remember, Daniel, the second in command of the Babylonian Empire under Nebuchadnezzar, was reading a copy of Jeremiah's prophecy in Daniel 9:2. Then, in 536 BC, Ezra, the priest, who had also worked as a scribe in exile, led the exiles back to Jerusalem, where he began teaching the law of God to them (Ezra 7:11-26). At that point, all of the previous OT books were under his care, and the priest who followed him would continue as caretakers. 1st & 2nd Chronicles and Ezra, Nehemiah, Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi would be given to the priests. These books would finish the Old Testament. Copies upon copies would be made. How do we know this? Within 25 years after the completion of Malachi, the Jewish priests translated the whole Old Testament into Aramaic around 375 BC because Aramaic was the language of the returning Israelites from exile in Assyria and Babylon. Then about 250 BC, after the conquest of Alexander the Great, and Greek became the language of the Jews, the Jewish priests successfully completed a Greek translation of the books in their care, and it is known as the Greek Septuagint (translated at least 250 years before the birth of Jesus). Our Old Testament is accurate because we have copies of the Hebrew text going back to the days of Solomon and copies of the Aramaic and Greek translations going back to the days of Jesus.

In our next lesson, we will cover the development and protection of the New Testament.