



Deuteronomy - Chapter Fifteen

III Deuteronomy 12:1-26:19 - Moses' Second Speech: Specific Covenant Stipulations (continues)

Summary of Chapter Fifteen

Debts are to be repaid by each seventh year the Sabbatical Year, else they become void within the community. However, the people are called upon to still lend to their poor neighbours even as the Sabbatical Year approaches, knowing that the debt will likely become void and unpaid. This does not apply to foreigners and other nations, who will be indebted to the people of God, providing Israel obeys God. Likewise, if anyone has bought a Hebrew servant, they may have them for six years but in the seventh year they are to release them as free people.

Each firstborn calf and lamb is to be offered to God and can be eaten by the family in God's presence at the location of his choosing. However, if the animals have any defects they cannot be offered in sacrifice to God but may still be eaten.

III.f Deuteronomy 15:1-18 - Laws concerning the Sabbatical Year

The laws in these verses relate to the sabbatical year. Refer to Exodus 23:10-11 and Leviticus 25:1-7 for further details.

¹ Every seventh year you shall grant a remission of debts. ² And this is the manner of the remission: every creditor shall remit the claim that is held against a neighbour, not exacting it from a neighbour who is a member of the community, because the Lord's remission has been proclaimed. ³ From a foreigner you may exact it, but you must remit your claim on whatever any member of your community owes you.

Deuteronomy 15:1-3

Every seventh year you shall grant a remission of debts. All debts between Israelites are to be cancelled at the end of every seventh year regardless of the amount of debt or its term. Debts owed by foreigners are not subject to this release, which is in keeping with other laws, for example: <<*You shall not eat anything that dies of itself; you may give it to aliens residing in your towns for them to eat, or you may sell it to a foreigner. For you are a people holy to the Lord your God*>> (Deuteronomy 14:21a).

Because the Lord's remission has been proclaimed. This was an important matter to God; the release was said to be the Lord's remission. As Israel obeyed this command, there would never be a permanent under-class in Israel. Some might go through a bad period, but would have the opportunity to rebuild their lives financially on a regular basis.

⁴ There will, however, be no one in need among you, because the Lord is sure to bless you in the land that the Lord your God is giving you as a possession to occupy, ⁵ if only you will obey the Lord your God by diligently observing this entire commandment that I command you today. ⁶ When the Lord your God has blessed you, as he promised you, you will lend to many nations, but you will not borrow; you will rule over many nations, but they will not rule over you.

Deuteronomy 15:4-6

There will, however, be no one in need among you. The ideal in v.4 is in effect a command to be generous: 'Let there be no poor among you.' Since the land will be sufficiently blessed by God (v.6), provided the economic laws are upheld (v.5), there should be no one who is poor. Verse 11 perhaps expresses the reality that Israel will fail to fulfil the law and thus there will always be poor and the need for generosity.

You will lend to many nations, but you will not borrow. Israel will be rich in blessing, provided there is obedience (v.5). There follows a warning for when there is disobedience: <<*Aliens residing among you shall ascend above you higher and higher, while you shall descend lower and lower. They shall lend to you but you shall not lend to them; they shall be the head and you shall be the tail*>> (Deuteronomy 28:43-44).

⁷ If there is among you anyone in need, a member of your community in any of your towns within the land that the Lord your God is giving you, do not be hard-hearted or tight-fisted towards your needy

neighbour. ⁸ You should rather open your hand, willingly lending enough to meet the need, whatever it may be.

Deuteronomy 15:7-8

A member of your community. This law does not apply to the poor outside Israel. The cause of the fellow Israelite's poverty is not the issue, even if it is the result of squandering or foolishness. The command is internal: do not be hard-hearted or tight-fisted towards your needy neighbour. True obedience stems from the heart, and it may be costly to the Israelite in giving what is needed. The verbs open and lend are emphatic. The law of release in the seventh year was never to be used to discourage giving to those in need. The law might discourage lending to the poor; therefore God wanted Israel to be generous givers to those in need. Christians are also to be generous toward one another: <<*How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help?*>> (1 John 3:17).

Paul writes: <<*So then, whenever we have an opportunity, let us work for the good of all, and especially for those of the family of faith*>> (Galatians 6:10). **It is right that support can start within the local church and its community, but there is nothing to stop it spreading outwards from there.**

⁹ Be careful that you do not entertain a mean thought, thinking, 'The seventh year, the year of remission, is near', and therefore view your needy neighbour with hostility and give nothing; your neighbour might cry to the Lord against you, and you would incur guilt. ¹⁰ Give liberally and be ungrudging when you do so, for on this account the Lord your God will bless you in all your work and in all that you undertake. ¹¹ Since there will never cease to be some in need on the earth, I therefore command you, 'Open your hand to the poor and needy neighbour in your land.'

Deuteronomy 15:9-11

Be careful that you do not entertain a mean thought. If the sabbatical year is close, then any money lent is less likely to be repaid. So the command is to lend what is needed, regardless of the date of the next sabbatical year. Jesus would later extend this law further: <<*If you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same. If you lend to those from whom you hope to receive, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, to receive as much again. But love your enemies, do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return. Your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High; for he is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked*>> (Luke 6:33-35).

Give liberally and be ungrudging when you do so. This reiterates v.8, emphasising a heart of generosity.

There will never cease to be some in need on the earth. This does not just imply there will be poor people in other nations. There will be poor in Israel too for a number of reasons but that could be overcome if the community shares what it has. Jesus recognised the reality of the situation: <<*For you always have the poor with you, but you will not always have me*>> (Matthew 26:11). Jesus knows the heart of the people: <<*But Jesus on his part would not entrust himself to them, because he knew all people and needed no one to testify about anyone; for he himself knew what was in everyone*>> (John 2:24-25). It is a heart he wants to see changed.

¹² If a member of your community, whether a Hebrew man or a Hebrew woman, is sold to you and works for you for six years, in the seventh year you shall set that person free.

Deuteronomy 15:12

In the seventh year you shall set that person free. This section assumes that some Israelites might fall into desperate poverty and become, within Israel, slaves or 'bondservants.' This may suggest a failure by Israelites to be generous as commanded in vv.1-11. The sabbatical year provides a limit to such slavery; refer to Exodus 21:2-6 and Leviticus 25:39-46. Slavery in Israel was therefore a short-term measure to help self-employed peasant farmers who could not pay their debts. Thus a rich landowner who offered a bankrupt peasant guaranteed employment and support until the sabbatical year was valued. Taking on such a 'slave' was viewed as an act of charity as shown when Joseph 'enslaved' the poor Egyptians, ensuring their survival during the famine (Genesis 47:21-25). Some 'slaves' might find the secure status of employee so attractive that they became permanent slaves as described in vv.16-17.

¹³ And when you send a male slave out from you a free person, you shall not send him out empty-handed. ¹⁴ Provide liberally out of your flock, your threshing-floor, and your wine press, thus giving to him some of the bounty with which the Lord your God has blessed you.

¹⁵ Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the Lord your God redeemed you; for this reason I lay this command upon you today.

Deuteronomy 15:13-15

To prevent immediate return to being a slave, the slave owner is not to send him out empty-handed but is to furnish him liberally recognising that he has done

much to earn the wealthy of his owner. God commanded generosity to the departing slave, giving him something to start his new life with. This would give the slave about to be freed hope and greater incentive to please his master.

With which the Lord your God has blessed you. Throughout this chapter, the blessing of God on Israel motivates obedience to these laws.

Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt. The second motivation comes from Israel's experience of oppression in Egypt; refer to Deuteronomy 5:15 and the comments made on it.

¹⁶ But if he says to you, 'I will not go out from you', because he loves you and your household, since he is well off with you, ¹⁷ then you shall take an awl and thrust it through his earlobe into the door, and he shall be your slave for ever. You shall do the same with regard to your female slave.

Deuteronomy 15:16-17

I will not go out from you. If a slave loved his master, and wanted to continue to serve him, he was not required to leave his master at the seventh year. In such a case, piercing with an awl marks permanent ownership: <<*But if the slave declares, 'I love my master, my wife, and my children; I will not go out a free person', then his master shall bring him before God. He shall be brought to the door or the doorpost; and his master shall pierce his ear with an awl; and he shall serve him for life*>> (Exodus 21:5-6).

Because he loves you and your household. The willing slave could stay, and his status was declared by piercing through his ear lobe with an awl at the door of his master's home. In this, he declared his love and devotion to his master, a willing slave, who was free to choose and yet chose his master.

Jesus is the great fulfilment of this willing slave. David spoke prophetically of Jesus: <<*Sacrifice and offering you do not desire, but you have given me an open ear*>> (Psalm 40:6a); this speaks of this 'opening' of the ear in the bond-slave ceremony. He was the willing bond-slave of God the Father.

Isaiah shows that Jesus' character as the willing slave was most perfectly shown in His sufferings at the Cross: <<*The Lord God has opened my ear, and I was not rebellious, I did not turn backwards. I gave my back to those who struck me, and my cheeks to those who pulled out the beard; I did not hide my face from insult and spitting. The Lord God helps me; therefore I have not been disgraced; therefore I have set my face like flint, and I know that I shall not be put to shame*>> (Isaiah 50:5-7).

The Christian is also to be a willing slave of God. The common NT word *doulos* describes this kind of slave. Hiebert says of *doulos*, “a slave, a bondservant, one who is in a permanent relation of servitude to another ... Among the Greeks, with their strong sense of personal freedom, the term carried a degrading connotation.” That is one reason why the Greeks must have found the apostles willingness to express their servitude to Christ so unusual: <<*Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus*>> (Philippians 1:1a), <<*James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ*>> (James 1:1a), <<*Simeon Peter, a servant and apostle of Jesus Christ*>> (2 Peter 1:1a), and: <<*Jude, a servant of Jesus Christ and brother of James*>> (Jude 1:1a). On each occasion the writer uses the word *doulos*. Paul makes an impassioned plea to Philemon as to how he should receive his wayward slave Onesimus back into his family: <<*Perhaps this is the reason he was separated from you for a while, so that you might have him back for ever, no longer as a slave but as more than a slave, a beloved brother – especially to me but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord*>> (Philemon 15-16).

He shall be your slave for ever. Once agreeing to be a bond slave, that one was committed to their master forever. It was a permanent relationship. Pagans had a custom of branding the slave with the name or the sign of the owner; Paul refers to himself as just such a slave: <<*From now on, let no one make trouble for me; for I carry the marks of Jesus branded on my body*>> (Galatians 6:17).

You shall do the same with regard to your female slave. In an age of great inequality for women, God commands that these women in such lowly positions should be treated no differently from men. It seems that God had always intended such equality: <<*So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them*>> (Genesis 1:27). It is men who have changed the rules!

¹⁸ Do not consider it a hardship when you send them out from you free persons, because for six years they have given you services worth the wages of hired labourers; and the Lord your God will bless you in all that you do.

Deuteronomy 15:18

Do not consider it a hardship. This is a warning against greed. These slaves had served their masters well, had worked hard towards the success of the business and are therefore worth the wages of hired labourers. God will judge such people who deny their workers what is due to them: <<*Then I will draw near to you for judgement; I will be swift to bear witness against the sorcerers, against the adulterers, against those who swear falsely, against those who oppress the hired workers in their wages, the widow, and the orphan, against those who*

thrust aside the alien, and do not fear me, says the Lord of hosts>> (Malachi 3:5), <<Listen! The wages of the labourers who mowed your fields, which you kept back by fraud, cry out, and the cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord of hosts>> (James 5:4).

III.g Deuteronomy 15:19-23 - The Firstborn of Livestock

These verses deal with firstborn animals, which are to be dedicated to the Lord. Giving the firstborn to the Lord is an expression of thanks and trust that more animals are to come. The animal is to be eaten in the central place. However, the animal must be unblemished, like any sacrificial animal. If blemished in any way, it is to be eaten as a normal, non-sacrificial meal.

¹⁹ Every firstling male born of your herd and flock you shall consecrate to the Lord your God; you shall not do work with your firstling ox nor shear the firstling of your flock.

Deuteronomy 15:19

Every firstling male born of your herd and flock you shall consecrate to the Lord your God. Consecrate means to ‘set apart to the Lord’; the firstborn was to be set apart to God. The firstborn animal was not to be used as a regular domesticated animal: you shall not do work with your firstling ox nor shear the firstling of your flock. There are three reasons for this. First, because Israel was God’s firstborn: <<*Then you shall say to Pharaoh, “Thus says the Lord: Israel is my firstborn son”*>> (Exodus 4:22), and this honoured that fact. Second, because the firstborn was thought to be the best, and the best was always given to God. Finally, it was to be a reminder to all generations of when God redeemed Israel, his firstborn: <<*When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son*>> (Hosea 11:1).

²⁰ You shall eat it, you together with your household, in the presence of the Lord your God year by year at the place that the Lord will choose. ²¹ But if it has any defect – any serious defect, such as lameness or blindness – you shall not sacrifice it to the Lord your God; ²² within your towns you may eat it, the unclean and the clean alike, as you would a gazelle or deer. ²³ Its blood, however, you must not eat; you shall pour it out on the ground like water.

Deuteronomy 15:20-23

You shall eat it, you together with your household, in the presence of the Lord your God. When the firstborn animal was brought to the tabernacle, and later to the temple, and was given to the priests for sacrifice to the Lord, a portion of the

sacrifice went to the family that brought the animal. It was given so that they could eat a joyful ceremonial meal in the presence of the Lord.

But if it has any defect – any serious defect. If this was the case, the animal was given to the priests, but not sacrificed to the Lord: <<*When you offer blind animals in sacrifice, is that not wrong? And when you offer those that are lame or sick, is that not wrong? Try presenting that to your governor; will he be pleased with you or show you favour? says the Lord of hosts*>> (Malachi 1:8), or, it was redeemed for money and the money given into the service of God.

Its blood, however, you must not eat; you shall pour it out on the ground like water. Once again, the requirement is that animals are to be slaughtered in a prescribed manner that ensures the blood is drained completely out of the carcass before it may be cooked and eaten. Those who disobey God in that are not worthy of their inheritance: <<*Therefore say to them, Thus says the Lord God: You eat flesh with the blood, and lift up your eyes to your idols, and shed blood; shall you then possess the land?*>> (Ezekiel 33:25).