

# Deuteronomy 15 - Cancellation of Debts; Freeing Servants; Law of Firstborn Animals

II. Second sermon: What Israel must do for God (Deut 4:41—26:19)

(3) Exposition of the Decalogue (Deut 12:1—25:19)

(D) Laws arising from the fourth commandment (Deut 14:22—16:17)

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(d) Freeing servants (15:12-18)

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## Deuteronomy 15

(b) Canceling debts (15:1-6)

1 "At the end of *every* seven years you shall grant a release of debts.

1 "At the end of *every* seven years you shall grant a remission of *debts*.

1 "You must cancel your debts at the end of every seventh year.

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

2 And this is the regulation for the release of debts: every creditor is to forgive what he has loaned to his neighbor; he shall not require it of his neighbor and his brother, because the LORD'S release has been proclaimed.

2 This is the manner of remission: every creditor shall release what he has loaned to his neighbor; he shall not exact it of his neighbor and his brother, because the LORD's remission has been proclaimed.

2 This is the way to conduct remission: every creditor must cancel the loan that his friend borrowed, and he must not pressure his friend or brother to repay it, because remission to the LORD will be proclaimed.

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 the LORD's release.

- The debt was canceled completely and permanently

- The practice of canceling the entire debt permanently in the 7th year was

evidently meant to prepare the Israelites for the extravagant practices commanded for the

Jubilee (50th) Year in which each one was to receive back his family property (Lev 25:8-17). Permanent cancellation of debts would help prevent poverty (Deut 15:4).

The sabbatical year or year of release was also commanded in Ex 23:10-11 and Lev 25:1-7. However, while these verses stated that in the seventh year the land was to lie fallow (without any crops being planted), they did not mention the cancellation of debts.

3 From a foreigner you may require *it*, but your hand shall forgive whatever of yours is with your brother.

3 From a foreigner you may exact *it*, but your hand shall release whatever of yours is with your brother.

3 You may exact payment from a foreigner, but cancel whatever your brother owes you.

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

4 However, there will be no poor among you, since the LORD will certainly bless you in the land which the LORD your God is giving you as an **inheritance** to possess,

4 However, there will be no poor among you, since the LORD will surely bless you in the land which the Lord your God is giving you as an inheritance to possess,

4 Moreover, there will be no poor person among you, for the LORD will surely bless you in the land that he is about to give you to possess.

4 Save when there shall be no poor among you; for the LORD shall greatly bless thee in the land which the LORD thy God giveth thee for an inheritance to possess it:

- "...inheritance" - the Promised Land was Israel's inheritance (not a "type" of heaven");

Cf. Deut 19:14; 25:19; 26:1

5 if only you listen obediently to the voice of the LORD your God, to follow carefully all this commandment which I am commanding you today.

5 if only you listen obediently to the voice of the LORD your God, to observe carefully all this commandment which I am commanding you today.

5 Only be certain to obey the voice of the LORD your God. Carefully observe all of these commands that I'm commanding to you today.

5 Only if thou carefully hearken unto the voice of the LORD thy God, to observe to do all these commandments which I command thee this day.

6 For the LORD your God will have blessed you just as He has promised you, and you will lend to many nations, but you will not borrow; and you will rule over many nations, but they will not rule over you.

6 For the LORD your God will bless you as He has promised you, and you will lend to many nations, but you will not borrow; and you will rule over many nations, but they will not rule over you.

6 For the LORD your God will bless you just as he promised. You are to lend to many nations but not borrow. Also, you will rule over many nations, but they will not rule over you."

6 For the LORD thy God blesseth thee, as he promised thee: and thou shalt lend unto many nations, but thou shalt not borrow; and thou shalt reign over many nations, but they shall not reign over thee.

- Israel had the opportunity to be the richest and most prosperous nation on the face of the earth ("He will richly bless you," v4b; Cf. v6a)

- This prosperity would not be due to any technological achievement on her part, but because of her wholehearted commitment to God

- Moses' statement, "you will lend to many nations but borrow from none," was, in effect, a promise of world sovereignty (you will rule over many nations).

— This has not happened throughout history, but will be the case during the Messianic Kingdom, where Israel will hold a leadership over Gentiles.

— It will be part of Israel's reward for obedience (Deut 28:1). This obedience awaits Israel's national regeneration.

— The promise is reiterated in Deut 28:13.

— Israel's future headship over the Gentiles is also described in Is 14:1-2; 49:22-23; 61:6-7.

#### (c) Rights of the poor (15:7-11)

7 "If there is a poor person among you, one of your brothers, in any of your towns in your land which the LORD your God is giving you, you shall not harden your heart, nor close your hand from your poor brother;

7 "If there is a poor man with you, one of your brothers, in any of your towns in your land which the LORD your God is giving you, you shall not harden your heart, nor close your hand from your poor brother;

7 "If there should be a poor man among your relatives in one of the cities of the land that the LORD your God is about to give you, don't be hard-hearted or tight-fisted toward your poor relative.

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

8 but you shall fully open your hand to him, and generously lend him enough for his need *in* whatever he lacks.

8 but you shall freely open your hand to him, and shall generously lend him sufficient for his need *in* whatever he lacks.

8 Instead, be sure to open your hand to him and lend him enough to lessen his need.

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

- Moses left the realm of law for a moment to appeal to his fellow Israelites' hearts. The law of debt cancellation (v1-6) was intended to instill a spirit of generosity within the Israelites and thus a freedom from the love of money and things.

9 Be careful that there is no mean-spirited thought in your heart, such as, 'The seventh year, the year of release of debts, is near,' and your eye is malicious toward your poor brother, and you give him nothing; then he may cry out to the LORD against you, and it will be a sin in you.

9 Beware that there is no base thought in your heart, saying, 'The seventh year, the year of remission, is near,' and your eye is hostile toward your poor brother, and you give him nothing; then he may cry to the Lord against you, and it will be a sin in you.

9 Be careful not to think this wicked thought to yourselves: 'The seventh year, the year of remission, is drawing near,' and you show ill will toward your poor relative and not give to him. He may then call to the LORD on account of you, and you will be guilty of sin.

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 the LORD against thee, and it be sin unto thee.

- Therefore a calculating Israelite was guilty of sin if he refused a loan for a poor or needy brother out of fear that it might not be repaid since the seventh year was near

- Being hardened or tightfisted meant he was not trusting the Lord to bless all his work

- Solomon may have been meditating on these words of Moses when he wrote, "One man gives freely, yet gains even more; another withholds unduly, but comes to poverty" (Prov 11:24).

- Moses summarized the attitude the Israelites should have toward those in need: be openhanded (Deut 15:8,11)

10 You shall generously give to him, and your heart shall not be grudging when you give to him, because for this thing the LORD your God will bless you in all your work, and in all your undertakings.

10 You shall generously give to him, and your heart shall not be grieved when you give to him, because for this thing the LORD your God will bless you in all your work and in all your undertakings.

10 You must certainly give to him and not feel regret for doing so. Because of this, the LORD your God will bless all your works and everything you do.

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

11 For the poor will not cease to exist in the land; therefore I am commanding you, saying, 'You shall fully open your hand to your brother, to your needy and poor in your land.'

11 For the poor will never cease to be in the land; therefore I command you, saying, 'You shall freely open your hand to your brother, to your needy and poor in your land.'

11 Since poor people won't cease to exist in the land, therefore I'm commanding you: Be sure to be generous to your poor and needy relatives in your land."

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 sad confession, there will always be poor people in the land, is perhaps a tragic foreshadowing of Israel's refusal to obey the Lord fully (v5)

(d) Freeing servants (15:12-18)

Sometimes a person unable to pay his debts would sell himself as a servant to his creditor. If the size of his debt meant he must work for six years, he was to be freed in the seventh year. This did not necessarily correspond to the year of debt cancellation (v1-6), but was the seventh year of that person's work as a servant. The Lord had previously made it clear that six full years of a person's life were enough to make up for defaulting on a loan (Cf. Ex 21:2). However, in Deuteronomy Moses added that the employer must do more than free the servant; he must also supply him liberally with livestock, grain, and wine in accord with the way the Lord had blessed him.

**12** "If your fellow countryman, a Hebrew man or woman, is sold to you, then he shall serve you for six years, but in the seventh year you shall set him free.

**12** "If your kinsman, a Hebrew man or woman, is sold to you, then he shall serve you six years, but in the seventh year you shall set him free.

**12** "When a fellow Hebrew male or female slave is sold to you and serves you for six years, then in the seventh year you are to set them free.

**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.

13 And when you set him free, you shall not send him away empty-handed.

13 When you set him free, you shall not send him away empty-handed.

13 But when you set them free, don't send them away empty-handed.

13 And when thou sendest him out free from thee, thou shalt not let him go away empty:

14 You shall give generously to him from your flock, your threshing floor, and from your wine vat; you shall give to him as the LORD your God has blessed you.

14 You shall furnish him liberally from your flock and from your threshing floor and from your wine vat; you shall give to him as the LORD your God has blessed you.

14 Provide for them liberally from your flock, threshing floor, and wine vat. As the LORD your God has blessed you, so give to them.

14 Thou shalt furnish him liberally out of thy flock, and out of thy floor, and out of thy winepress: of that wherewith the LORD thy God hath blessed thee thou shalt give unto him.

15 And you are to remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the LORD your God redeemed you; therefore I am commanding this of you today.

15 You shall remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the LORD your God redeemed you; therefore I command you this today.

15 Don't ever forget that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, yet the LORD your God redeemed you. Therefore, I'm giving you these commands today.

15 And thou shalt remember that thou wast a bondman in the land of Egypt, and the LORD thy God redeemed thee: therefore I command thee this thing to day.

- After six years the servant would have little or nothing, so to send him away empty-handed would have jeopardized his freedom all over again

- Obedience to this command would serve the valuable purpose of reminding employers of the grace God had shown Israel in redeeming her from Egypt (Cf. Deut 24:18,22)

- It would remind them that their own welfare also depended on that grace

16 But it shall come about, if he says to you, 'I will not leave you,' because he loves you and your household, since he is doing well with you,

16 It shall come about if he says to you, 'I will not go out from you,' because he loves you and your household, since he fares well with you;

16 "Should that slave say to you, 'I won't leave you,' because he loves you and your household, and it was good for him to be with you,

16 And it shall be, if he say unto thee, I will not go away from thee; because he loveth thee and thine house, because he is well with thee;

17 then you shall take an awl and pierce it through his ear into the door, and he shall be your servant permanently. You shall also do the same to your female slave.

17 then you shall take an awl and pierce it through his ear into the door, and he shall be your servant forever. Also you shall do likewise to your maidservant.

17 then take an awl and pierce through his earlobe into the door. Then he will be your slave forever. You are to do the same for your female slaves.

17 Then thou shalt take an aul, and thrust it through his ear unto the door, and he shall be thy servant for ever. And also unto thy maidservant thou shalt do likewise.

- Moses also provided for a servant who had become too attached to a family to leave it

— The employer was to pierce the servant's earlobe with an aul to indicate he was the man's servant for life

— Duolos: the Bondservant

**18** "It shall not seem difficult for you when you set him free, because he has given you six years *with* double the service of a hired worker; so the LORD your God will bless you in whatever you do.

**18** "It shall not seem hard to you when you set him free, for he has given you six years *with* double the service of a hired man; so the LORD your God will bless you in whatever you do.

18 Don't view this as a hardship for yourself when you set him free, for he will have served you for six years—twice the time of a paid worker. Then the LORD will bless you in all that you do."

18 It shall not seem hard unto thee, when thou sendest him away free from thee; for he hath been worth a double hired servant to thee, in serving thee six years: and the LORD thy God shall bless thee in all that thou doest.

- Moses offered a double motivation to one who was perhaps too greedy to set his servant free

— In fairness he should realize that it might have cost him at least twice as much if he had hired someone for six years

— Second, if in faith he would obey the command to release his servant, the Lord would bless him in everything he would do

— This promise of blessing in return for obedience is stated often in Deuteronomy, four times in this chapter alone (v4,6,10,18)

#### (e) Consecration of the firstborn (15:19-23)

Like the laws of canceling debts and releasing servants, it involved giving up one's possessions. First recorded in Ex 13:11-15, it was pedagogical: reminding the Israelites of their redemption from Egypt when all the firstborn Egyptian sons died. It was an occasion to teach their children about God's redemption of their nation. Every firstborn male was to be completely set apart for the Lord; its owner received no benefit on his farm from the animal: firstborn oxen were not to plow; firstborn sheep were not to be shorn. (Goats are also mentioned in Num 18:17.)

Annually (presumably during one of the annual feasts; Cf. 6:16) the young firstborn animals were to be taken to the central sanctuary to be sacrificed. The sacrificed animals were then eaten there in a communal meal with one's family.

**19** "You shall consecrate to the LORD your God all the firstborn males that are born in your herd and in your flock; you shall not work with the firstborn of your herd, nor shear the firstborn of your flock.

**19** "You shall consecrate to the LORD your God all the firstborn males that are born of your herd and of your flock; you shall not work with the firstborn of your herd, nor shear the firstborn of your flock.

**19** "Set apart for the LORD your God every firstborn male among your herd and flock. You must not put the firstborn of your ox to work or shear the firstborn of your flock.

**19** All the firstling males that come of thy herd and of thy flock thou shalt sanctify unto the LORD thy God: thou shalt do no work with the firstling of thy bullock, nor shear the firstling of thy sheep.

20 You and your household shall eat it every year before the LORD your God in the place which the LORD chooses.

20 You and your household shall eat it every year before the LORD your God in the place which the Lord chooses.

20 Then in the presence of the LORD your God, you and your household must eat them every year at the place the LORD will choose.

20 Thou shalt eat it before the LORD thy God year by year in the place which the LORD shall choose, thou and thy household.

21 But if it has any impairment, *such as* a limp, or blindness, *or* any serious impairment, you shall not sacrifice it to the LORD your God.

21 But if it has any defect, *such as* lameness or blindness, *or* any serious defect, you shall not sacrifice it to the LORD your God.

21 If it has a blemish—lameness, blindness, or any kind of defect—you must not sacrifice it to the LORD your God.

21 And if there be any blemish therein, as if it be lame, or blind, or have any ill blemish, thou shalt not sacrifice it unto the LORD thy God.

22 You shall eat it within your gates; the unclean and the clean alike *may eat it*, as a gazelle or a deer.

22 You shall eat it within your gates; the unclean and the clean alike *may eat it*, as a gazelle or a deer.

22 In your cities both the unclean and the clean together are to eat together, as the gazelle and the deer.

22 Thou shalt eat it within thy gates: the unclean and the clean person shall eat it alike, as the roebuck, and as the hart.

23 Only you shall not eat its blood; you are to pour it out on the ground like water.

23 Only you shall not eat its blood; you are to pour it out on the ground like water.

23 Only you must not eat its blood. Pour it on the ground like water."

23 Only thou shalt not eat the blood thereof; thou shalt pour it upon the ground as water.

- An imperfect firstborn animal was not acceptable as a sacrifice (Cf. 17:1), so it was to be treated like a game animal (Cf. 12:15; 14:4-5)—eaten at home but not sacrificed

— As stated previously (Deut 12:16,23-24) the blood of such animals was not to be eaten

— According to Ex 22:29-30 the firstborn were to be sacrificed on the 8th day after birth.

Firstborn animal sacrifices were also used to help support the priests (Num 18:15-18)