Remembering with Joy

Sunday school lesson for the week of May 20, 2018
By Dr. Hal Brady

Spring Quarter: Acknowledging God
Unit 3: Give Praise to God

Lesson Scripture: Leviticus 25:1-12

Lesson Aims

1. Summarize the nature of the rest the land was to receive during the Sabbath year and the year of Jubilee.
2. Explain the spiritual principles that these laws were meant to instill.

The writer introduces this lesson before us by talking about what it means to live by faith. Most of us will relate that meaning to a religious concept – one who lives by faith is one who trusts in God. The fact is, however, that everyone lives by faith, even those who have no interest in religion.

We travel on airplanes because we have faith that the pilot has the training and skills to get us to our destination. At drug stores, we get prescriptions filled because we have faith that the pharmacist is competent to help. We buy groceries at a certain store because we have faith in the honesty of the merchant. So, whether we are a Christian, an atheist, or somewhere in between, we live by taking steps of faith. As we have been reminded, this faith is based on evidence and not blind faith.

In the lesson background, we discover that often the various regulations found within the Law of Moses are placed in three categories: “civil” (those that helped maintain an orderly society), “ceremonial” (those dealing with how God’s covenant people were to express their worship to him), and “moral” (those dealing with right living). Whereas the first two groups applied only to Old Testament Israel (though there may still be general principles of conduct to be drawn from them), the moral laws continue to serve as standards of right and wrong behavior.

As the writer continues to explain, today’s passage from Leviticus 25 falls primarily within the “ceremonial” category. This is true because it contains certain religious observances, even though they do not apply to Christians. To be clear, the teacher should read Colossians 2:14-17 to the class. This specifically refers to the Sabbath year and the year of Jubilee. So, if the specific commandments of today’s text no longer apply, why should we study them? Principles! Because these commandments speak to principles of conduct that are important today.

Sabbath Year (Leviticus 25:1-7)
“The Lord said to Moses on Mount Sinai ‘say to the people of Israel, when you come into the land which I will give you…” So the laws were meant for a future period, when conditions might be quite different. Israel had remained for one year at Sinai and did not move on until the twentieth day of the second month of the second year after their exodus from Egypt (Numbers 10:11-12). And even though their entry into Canaan will not be for another 38 years, as far as Moses knows at this point it is imminent. Therefore, he instructed them that when they enter the land that the Lord their God is giving to them, the “land itself must observe a Sabbath to the Lord” (v.2.).

It is imperative that the Israelites keep in mind who will own the promised land. God states, “The land must not be sold permanently, because the land is mine and you are but aliens and my tenants (v.23). Therefore, the most important feature of the promised land that lies ahead is that it will be God’s gift. His covenant people, the Israelites, will not be able to claim they have earned it (Deuteronomy 9:6). They will be stewards of God’s grant, not owners who are entitled. The land will be on loan only, so to speak, on loan from God. What this means is that God actually shares his land with us, and we are to use it for his glory, not just for our gain.

So, the land of Israel belongs and will belong to God. In consequence, the Israelites must understand that the land itself must observe “a Sabbath to the Lord” (v.2). Thus, the Israelites dare not exhaust its resources, or turn it into a dust-bowl, or exploit it, or use it up so that there is nothing left but a treeless desert.

The writer of the lesson reminds us that at this point the Israelites have already received the Ten Commandments, the fourth being that of keeping the Sabbath (Exodus 20:8-11). The importance of this commandment is underlined by the fact that it is the longest of the 10. And it is to be obeyed by every person in Israel, including non-Israelites who live among them. Even animals are to be given a rest. Point! The Sabbath is to be applied to the land as well.

Note that the “year of Sabbath rest” for the land operates on a principle similar to that which undergirds the Sabbath Day. As the people are to work for six days and rest on the seventh, the land is to be sown and its produce reaped for six years. However, every seven years, even the soil is to be given a year of rest, just as God’s creatures and the persons made in God’s image are given a rest every seven days.

The focus of this instruction is spiritual: this period of Sabbath rest for the land is a Sabbath to the Lord.

We are informed that the timetable to be observed with this law is similar to the laws concerning both debts and servants. On the Sabbath Year, debts are to be canceled (some suggest “suspended”) in the case of loans made to Israelites (Deuteronomy 15:1-6). According to the law, it also states that a Hebrew servant is to serve for six years, then in the seventh year he or she is to be set free (Deuteronomy 15:12).
During the seventh year, when the land lies fallow, no landowner is to lay exclusive claim to anything that happens to sprout on its own from the seed that has fallen into the ground from the previous year’s harvest. And everyone can eat off the land regardless of whose property it grows on. Even the vineyards are to be left “unpruned” (v.5). Thus, the entire land is given the opportunity to rest, and not just the part the people have farmed.

To clearly show that God is the ultimate owner of everything, nothing is to be harvested in the seventh year. Although no harvesting or reaping occurs, enough food will be available during the entire year. The natural produce of the land is even to feed the poor (Exodus 23:1). The people need have no fear, for God promises that there will be adequate food for everybody whether Israelite, non-Israelites, or animals.

Moreover, enough food is promised in the sixth year to carry the people through this sabbatical year. God says in Leviticus 25:21, “I will send you such a blessing in the sixth year that the land will yield enough for three years.” The land will experience its rest in the seventh year, the people will sow new crops in the eighth year, and the ninth year will be the next year during which crops are harvested (v.22).

Note again that the promised land is the Lord’s. And since the Lord is the ultimate caretaker, His people must trust that He will produce exactly what the people and the animals need. But, of course, these stated blessings and provisions hinge on the people’s faithful obedience to the Lord as Leviticus 25:18, 19 makes clear.

**Year of Jubilee (Leviticus 25:8-12)**

Adding to the Sabbath year that occurs every seventh year, God has another requirement. After seven sabbatical years, totaling 49 years, a ram’s horn is to be sounded (v.9) on the tenth day of the Day of Atonement. It is to be sounded throughout the land to mark the commencement of the year of jubilee (v.9-11) in the fiftieth year.

We should note that the basic reason for God’s gift of the Sabbath was in the first place a humanitarian one. It was the one day in the week when a person dare not be compelled to work. By law an Israelite could claim a rest day.

But then, as George A.F. Knight pointed out in his commentary on Leviticus, God’s universe is one. In the biblical view, we cannot separate humankind from his or her world (environment). Humankind is even part of the soil and will return to it at death.

So the forty-ninth year is to be followed by a complete Sabbath for all nature to rejoice in. It is to be a “jubilee” year. The word itself comes from the Hebrew for ram’s horn. And since it is to be sounded everywhere, it may be the duty of the priests or Levites, who will be assigned territory among the people of Israel (Joshua 21).
The Jubilee year is to be hallowed or consecrated (v.10), just as the Sabbath day is set apart to the Lord. The writer points out that our word “holiday” derives from the phrase “holy day,” but in many cases we have kept the celebration part while not retaining the holiness aspect. The Israelites are not to miss the latter. The liberty to be proclaimed throughout the land to all its inhabitants every fiftieth year is certainly ample cause for celebration. The people will celebrate it as a Jubilee. But they must also be sure to consecrate that year, meaning to set it aside as a holy year.

According to George A.F. Knight, the emphasis of this jubilee is on three things: (1) liberty for all (v.10) based upon the fact that God had given Israel liberty from Pharaoh’s cruel oppression; (2) Complete relaxation offered to everyone so that families might be reunited in joy and contentment, for God loves family life (a man could even reclaim his ancestral property at this Jubilee if he had been forced, through misfortunes or debt, to alienate it); and (3) freedom for all growing things to recover their natural cycle of life. (Note the fascinating possibility of the renewal of nature bound up with the renewal of humankind through the forgiveness that God offers him/her at the Day of Atonement).

Now, the announcement of the Year of Jubilee on the same day that the Day of Atonement is observed is not an accident. God wants his Covenant people to understand that on the same day that reconciliation with him is carried out, a kind of reconciliation among people is to happen as well every 50 years. As the people are restored with God spiritually, those who have been separated from their homes due to personal setbacks are to be restored to their families and their property. Therefore, reconciliation with God is to be lived out in a very practical tangible manner.

As the writer reminds us, the primary purpose of legislation such as that in today’s text is not agricultural or economic, although there are indeed benefits to be had along those lines. Rather, the primary purpose is spiritual. God’s people are being encouraged to place their faith in the Lord and to trust him as the giver of the land to provide for his people.

Sadly, however, the record in the Old Testament shows a people who repeatedly disobeyed God’s commands. As God’s people in the southern kingdom of Judah are then into exile, we are told in 2 Chronicles 36:21 that the land enjoyed Sabbath rests while lying desolate. The land’s rests were presumably denied prior to the exile because of the disobedience of God’s people.

New Testament Jubilee

The writer suggests that when we consider what the year of Jubilee signified for God’s people in the Old Testament, it is not difficult to see a reference to a new jubilee in Jesus’ declared intent “to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free,” as he quoted from Isaiah 61 in Luke 4:18.

In one of his great hymns Charles Wesley expressed it like this: “He [Jesus] breaks the power of canceled sin, He sets the prisoner free; His blood can make the foulest clean; His blood availed for me.”
So Jesus is the one who frees humankind from all our sins and enables us to come home to God. The “liberty” of this jubilee is the freedom from sin that Jesus brought about by defeating the devil and releasing us from bondage to him (Hebrews 2:14,15). And the jubilee that Jesus began at his first coming will reach its fulfillment when he comes again. At that time, another trumpet will sound (1 Thessalonians 4:16) and all Christians will finally be liberated from the curse and brokenness of sin – to dwell with God forever. “A jubilee for eternity,” the writer stated.

**Action Plan**

1. Discuss how the Sabbath is applied to the land and why.
2. Why did the day of jubilee begin on the Day of Atonement? What do you think?
3. What steps can we take to help fellow Christians to live more fully as beneficiaries of Jesus’ jubilee?

*Dr. Hal Brady is a retired pastor who continues to present the Good News of Jesus Christ and offer encouragement in a fresh and vital way through Hal Brady Ministries ([halbradyministries.com](http://halbradyministries.com)).*