

# Leviticus Chapter 25

## The Sabbatical and Jubilee Years



This chapter divides into two unequal parts:

25:1-7 proclaims the Sabbatical Year very briefly

25:8-55 proclaims the Jubilee Year in great detail

Verses 8-22 Jubilee Regulations

Verses 23-38 Jubilee Redemption of Property

Verses 39-55 Jubilee Redemption of Slaves

These commands were not for the wilderness (where they were given) but for when they entered the land. That may be why God gave them to Moses, not at the Tabernacle but *at Mount Sinai*.

The whole reason for these regulations was to show and remind the people that the land belonged to God, not to them. They were only sojourners on His land. There is no evidence that the Israelites kept either of these commands.

[Picture from [www.keyway.ca/htm2008/20080624.htm](http://www.keyway.ca/htm2008/20080624.htm).]

### Leviticus 25:1-7 The Sabbatical Year

In this short section, God gives two basic regulations for the Sabbatical year:

1. *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 (25:4-5).*
2. *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. Even your cattle and the animals that are in your land shall have all its crops to eat (25:6-7).*

Just as the people were to work 6 days and rest on the 7<sup>th</sup>, the land was to be worked 6 years and allowed to rest on the 7<sup>th</sup>. So for one-seventh of the time, landowner and slave, rich and poor, Israelite and foreigner were all the same with respect to the produce of the land. Anyone, even the cattle, could glean from the fields, but no one could cultivate or harvest them. (Deuteronomy 31:10-13 tells us this was also a time of special instruction from the law of God.)

### Did Israel Ever Keep the Sabbatical or Jubilee years?

The next chapter (Leviticus 26:34-35) predicts that Israel will be scattered and the land will have the sabbatical rest they didn't give it. Second Chronicles 36:21 says that the Israelites were taken to Babylon: *to fulfill the word of the LORD by the mouth of Jeremiah, until the land had enjoyed its sabbaths. All the days of its desolation it kept sabbath until seventy years were complete.*

If we do the math, here is what we learn:

Nebuchadnezzar took the Jews into captivity to Babylon in two deportations, the last of which was in 605 BC. The exiles returned and began rebuilding the Temple in 536 BC (Daniel 9:2; Ezra 1:1).

**605 - 536 = 70**    **The Jews were in captivity in Babylon for 70 years.**

**70 x 7 = 490**    **70 years of captivity times 7 years between sabbaticals is 490 years of not keeping the sabbatical year.**

**605 + 490 = 1095**    **605 BC + 490 years of not keeping the sabbatical year = 1095 BC, about the time they anointed Saul as king.**

Therefore, it is possible that the Israelites kept the sabbatical year from the time when Joshua entered the land through the time of the Judges, even though there is no record of them doing that. It is then possible that they stopped keeping it after they anointed a king.

### Leviticus 25:8-22 Regulation of the Jubilee Year

At Mount Sinai, God also told Moses about a very unique year. He said:



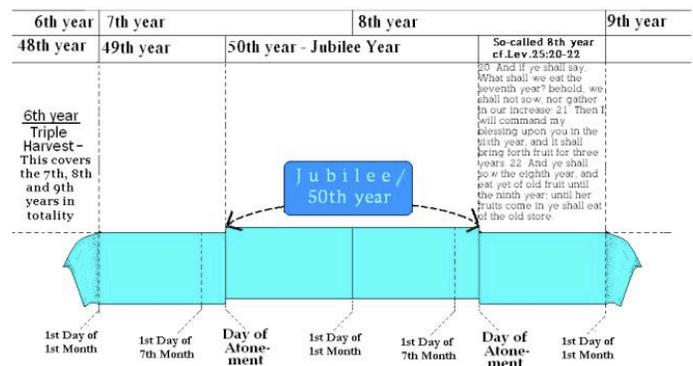
*You are also to count off seven sabbaths of years for yourself, seven times seven years, so that you have the time of the seven sabbaths of years, namely, forty-nine years. You shall then **sound a ram's horn** abroad on the tenth day of the seventh month; on the day of atonement you shall sound a horn all through your land. You shall thus consecrate **the fiftieth year** and proclaim a release through the land to all its inhabitants. It shall be a **jubilee** for you (25:8-10).*

Walvoord suggests the Hebrew word for Jubilee יָבֵל (yobel), *perhaps originally meaning “ram” or “ram’s horn,”* [is] *taken from the horn blown to announce the year* (“Bible Knowledge Commentary” note on 25:8-13). There have been many views about the Jubilee year. Some suggest it was actually the 49<sup>th</sup> year, others say this was only 49 days inserted into the seventh month of the 49<sup>th</sup> year. The discussion in verses 18-22, however, sounds like the Jubilee was a full year. At any rate, the basic impact of the year, and what made it a jubilee, was: *On this year of jubilee each of you shall return to his own property* (25:13).

Verses 14-17 tells us that buying and selling land was mainly about the crops it would yield, and land purchase was to be carried on with regard to how many years were left until the Jubilee year. The more the years, the higher the price could be, because actually the land was just being leased until the Jubilee year, when it would return to its owner.

Verses 18-22 deal with the question: *What are we going to eat on the seventh year if we do not sow or gather in our crops* (25:20)? God’s answer was: *I will so order My blessing for you in the sixth year that it will bring forth the crop for three years.* So God would provide enough food in the sixth year that it would last for the seventh (Sabbatical) year, the eighth (Jubilee) year, and into the ninth year until the new crop came in.

[Jubilee chart from [www.ccg.org](http://www.ccg.org).]



## **Leviticus 25:23-24 The Land Belongs to God**

The key statement of this chapter is:

***The land is Mine; for you are but aliens and sojourners with Me*** (25:23). This was the reason for establishing a Sabbatical and Jubilee year. It was to remind the people that the land was not theirs, it belonged to God. He was giving it to them to care for it as a good steward. And that is the main point of the chapter. Everything belongs to God, and whatever He has given us belongs to Him, and we are simply (good or bad) stewards of it. (Notice Christ's parables in Matthew 21:33ff and Matthew 25:14ff.)

[Land of Israel picture from [www.cfjjerusalem.org](http://www.cfjjerusalem.org).]



## **Leviticus 25:25-28 When a Fellow Countryman of Yours Becomes so Poor He Has to Sell Part of His Property**

There are three possibilities when this happens:

1. *His nearest kinsman is to come and buy back what his relative has sold.*
2. *He shall calculate the years since its sale and refund the balance to the man to whom he sold it, and so return to his property.*
3. *What he has sold shall remain in the hands of its purchaser until the year of jubilee; but at the jubilee it shall revert, that he may return to his property.*

## **Leviticus 25:29-34 The Exception of the House in a Walled City**

The house in a walled city, which was sold, could be repurchased within a year. If it was not, then it became the permanent possession of the buyer. The exception to the exception was that the Levite's property, even their city houses always reverted back to them on the Jubilee year.

## **Leviticus 25:35-46 Regarding the Very Poor**

There are three regulations given in this paragraph which deal with three different conditions of poverty:

1. *When an Israelites becomes so poor he must live with you, Do not take usurious interest from him. And that is defined as You shall not give him your silver at interest, nor your food for gain.*
2. *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.*
3. *You may acquire male and female slaves from the pagan nations that are around you. You may even bequeath them to your sons after you, to receive as a possession (25:46).*

Notice that you could lend to a poor Israelite but not charge an interest or anything which resulted in your financial gain. Lending to an Israelite was a form of charity. You could buy a fellow Israelite as a slave because he may need to sell himself to you to survive or pay his debts. But you were not to treat him as a slave but only as a hired hand. You could, however, buy and sell and inherit Gentile slaves.

## Leviticus 25:47 When An Israelite Becomes the Slave of a Gentile Sojourner

When a poor Israelite becomes the slave of a sojourner, he could be redeemed at any time by a near relative. In other words, the foreigner could not refuse to sell him back to a near relative. The Israelite could also buy his own freedom back at any time. If neither of those things happened, then he would go free at the year of Jubilee. Meanwhile the Israelite slave was not to be treated severely. So God commanded a genealogical, racial distinction between Israelites and Gentiles, even when the Gentiles were living with the Israelites.

### THOUGHTS AND APPLICATIONS

- There is something very interesting here (to me). The Jews have pretty faithfully kept the weekly Sabbath day over the years, both in the land and in their exiles (Diaspora). Most Christian denominations also keep a weekly special day. Most change it from Saturday to Sunday and incorrectly call it the Sabbath. And I suspect they get it from Jews, not the one example of a church meeting on Sunday in Acts 17. But what fascinates me is that neither the Jews nor the Christians ever attempted to keep a Sabbatical year. We Christians usually say something like: “We don’t keep the precise regulations of the Sabbath, but we keep the general idea of resting one day a week.” Well, what do we do that keeps the general idea of the Sabbatical year?
- The Jubilee year offered several benefits. It allowed all property to stay with the family, and, therefore, the tribe it was assigned to. It kept people from making foolish property decisions that could affect their families for generations. It regulated Jewish slavery. It also limited the consequences of extreme poverty. But the main reason for the Jubilee year was to force everybody to keep in mind: ***The land is Mine; for you are but aliens and sojourners with Me ... [including] every piece of property.*** By way of application, we should see everything we own as on loan from God. It is His, not ours, and we will be held accountable for what we do with it.
- Whether or not borrowing and lending is wrong cannot be determined from this passage. But it is clear that lending here has nothing to do with making money in business. Making money by lending to a poor Israelite was strictly forbidden. This lending is a form of charity. It was preferred over giving because it forced the recipient to be responsible. Direct giving without requiring any responsibility was only for the offerings given to God, or consumed and managed by the Levitical priests.
- God commands them to make a clear distinction between Israelite and Gentile slaves. He clearly allowed Gentile slaves with no qualifications (other than the human decency required by other parts of the Law). Today, the church makes no racial/genealogical distinctions between people. But there is a distinction made between the church, the body of Christ, and the unbelieving world. Paul wrote: *So then, while we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, and especially to those who are of the household of the faith* (Galatians 6:10). Paul speaks of *the household of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and support of the truth* (1 Timothy 3:15). As Israelites were to treat fellow Israelites differently, so we are to treat fellow believers differently. This argues against including “seekers” and unrepentant sinners in our fellowships. Sure, they should be allowed to visit and hear the truth of the Word of God. But when grace is described without repentance, unbelievers are

gradually included in the fellowship, and there is no possibility of treating the believers differently. People are treated as special because of their organizational affiliation rather than their belief.

- An Israelite who could not pay his bills could sell himself as a slave. But he was to be: (1) treated better than the Gentile slaves, (2) sold back to himself or any near relative who had the money, and (3) released on the Jubilee year. I suggest poor believers who cannot pay their bills should be helped financially but in such a way that they are made responsible. A person cannot be freed if they are being fed. As long as you are completely supporting someone, they are not free to mature and be responsible.