

Sabbath Release, Relief, Rest, and Rejoicing – Deuteronomy 15:1-23

Introduction – Sabbath observance, which is in Christ, is filled with great rejoicing because we have been released of our debts, set free from our slavery, and granted the rest of salvation. What is it like to be overwhelmed with debt, have your creditors show up at your door and hear, “your debts have been forgiven.” If debt had made you a slave, but you knew that after six years you would be granted freedom from your work, would you view the coming year of release as legalistic or would you call it a delight? Do you know how to give and receive Sabbath?

Release from Debts (vv1-11) – At the end of every seven years there was to be a release of debts (v1) and it was to be done in the name of Yahweh (v2). Economic recovery was to be granted to those covenant brothers in need (v3) and God expected there to be little need of this if Israel lived obediently (vv4-6). Jumping ahead to v11, however, we find a typical theme in Deuteronomy; the law will not be kept and there will be a need to care for the poor.

If God’s providence is hard on a man and brings him into poverty, this is not Israel’s cue to be hard-hearted on the man (v7), rather, they were to be open-handed (v8). They were to be careful not to calculate their own profit in such lending (v9) but remember the blessing of God (v10).

Does the Bible Teach on Economics? – It sure does. First, we learn that, while poverty can be from personal sin (Prov 24:30-34, Thess 3:10), societal sin and special hard providences from God also bring forth poverty or calamity upon individuals, none of whom actually committed a sin related to this consequence. Second, it follows that economic recovery and growth begins with obedience to the law and biblical generosity to the poor and distressed. The return of debts was tied to the land in types and shadows, but the principle of generosity, serving the poor in the context of local help, and all within the covenant of the church, remains. Recall the distribution to those in need during the days following Pentecost (Acts 4:32ff), and Paul’s collection for famine relief in Jerusalem (1 Cor 16:1-2, Gal 2:10), as well as his admonition to the rich (1 Tim 6:17-19).

Release from Slavery (vv12-18) – If a Hebrew was sold into slavery, he was to be released in the seventh year, a Sabbath to him (v12). He should receive a “pantry-pounding” and set up to live free as a blessing from his former master, recognizing the blessing from God (vv13-14). The master was to remember that he had been a slave before as well (v15) and this should motivate the desire to set free others, if they desire (vv16-17). And so, all of this releasing is evidence that the masters are freemen as well, released men, forgiven men – looking to the future blessing of God (v18). They were to be a people known for giving and not grasping.

Release unto Rejoicing (vv19-23) – At first glance, this may seem unconnected, but because we are talking about the Sabbath mind, it is not. Firstborns from the flock were to be “released” as well from work, and offered up in sacrifice on the special feast-days. They would be the means by which the people would rejoice with their families and Yahweh in a great thanksgiving feast. With release should come the opportunity for great rejoicing, year by year (v20), and Sabbath after Sabbath.

The Heart of Forgiveness – The way we treat one another is to flow from our understanding of how the Lord has and is treating us. God is not miserly with His grace, love and forgiveness. He delights in mercy and seeks to see His praise declared in the glory of His grace. Therefore, giving grace, giving release, relief, and rest, and doing so in the spirit of rejoicing before God, is how His name is hallowed.

A Type of Forgiveness – Paul does not tell us to forgive one another; he tells us to forgive “even as Christ forgave you” (Col 3:13) and Moses, instructing in types and shadows, teaches us this principle in the context of Sabbath-keeping. We forgive because we know we have been forgiven. We free and give because we remember where we once struggled. We are tenderhearted because God has been tenderhearted with us (Eph 4:32).

If Your Eye Be Evil (Deut 15:9) – This idiom refers to one who is miserly or unforgiving. A “good eye” referred to one who was generous and open-handed (Prov 22:9). Jesus uses this idiom in His Sermon on the Mount (Matt 6:22-23) just following His teaching the Lord’s Prayer (vv8-14) where He warned that “*if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.*” We give because it has been given to us and we give because we will be given more and more from the hand of a God with a “good eye.”

Celebrate Sabbath – We are learning what the point of Sabbath observance is all about. It is not about scrupulously watching what your neighbor is doing to break the rules. It is about grace, replicating God’s heart of generosity and overflowing blessing. It is about freeing others, forgiving others, relieving others, and rejoicing with others over God’s immeasurable love.