

### Cancelling of Debts and Release of Slaves

#### Deuteronomy 15

**Deuteronomy 15:1-11** - *“At the end of every seven years you shall grant a release of debts. <sup>2</sup> And this is the form of the release: Every creditor who has lent anything to his neighbor shall release it; he shall not require it of his neighbor or his brother, because it is called the Lord’s release. <sup>3</sup> Of a foreigner you may require it; but you shall give up your claim to what is owed by your brother, <sup>4</sup> except when there may be no poor among you; for the Lord will greatly bless you in the land which the Lord your God is giving you to possess as an inheritance— <sup>5</sup> only if you carefully obey the voice of the Lord your God, to observe with care all these commandments which I command you today. <sup>6</sup> For the Lord your God will bless you just as He promised you; you shall lend to many nations, but you shall not borrow; you shall reign over many nations, but they shall not reign over you.*

*<sup>7</sup> “If there is among you a poor man of your brethren, within any of the gates in your land which the Lord your God is giving you, you shall not harden your heart nor shut your hand from your poor brother, <sup>8</sup> but you shall open your hand wide to him and willingly lend him sufficient for his need, whatever he needs. <sup>9</sup> Beware lest there be a wicked thought in your heart, saying, ‘The seventh year, the year of release, is at hand,’ and your eye be evil against your poor brother and you give him nothing, and he cry out to the Lord against you, and it become sin among you. <sup>10</sup> You shall surely give to him, and your heart should not be grieved when you give to him, because for this thing the Lord your God will bless you in all your works and in all to which you put your hand. <sup>11</sup> For the poor will never cease from the land; therefore I command you, saying, ‘You shall open your hand wide to your brother, to your poor and your needy, in your land.’”*

#### Background Notes

Chapters 5-26 contained the second sermon that Moses gave to the children of Israel, while they were on the plains of Moab, before they entered the Promised Land. The bulk of this second sermon was a review and exposition of the various laws under the Mosaic Covenant. Chapter 14, for example, was a review and exposition of the laws about clean and unclean foods and the laws about tithing.

In chapter 15, a review and exposition of the law about the remission of debts was covered in the first half of the chapter, and a review and exposition of the law about the release of slaves was covered in the second half of the chapter. In chapter 14 we saw that the reason for the special tithe at the end of every third year was to care for the needs of the Levites, the foreigners, the orphans, and the widows in all the various towns. In chapter 15, the needs of other individuals were addressed – the needs of those who were in debt, and the needs of slaves.

## Doctrinal Points

### 1. Under the law, Hebrew debts were remitted in the seventh year.

In Israel, every seventh year was designated as a “sabbatical year.” Under the Law, certain restrictions applied during the sabbatical year. It was a year of rest – for the good of the land and for the good of the people. Exodus 23:10-11: *“Six years you shall sow your land and gather in its produce, but the seventh year you shall let it rest and lie fallow, that the poor of your people may eat; and what they leave, the beasts of the field may eat. In like manner you shall do with your vineyard and your olive grove.”*

Deuteronomy 15 taught that in addition to allowing the land to rest during the sabbatical year, all debts were to be remitted. By the way, the phrase “*at the end of seven years*” (v1) is a Hebrew idiom for “during the seventh year,” or “by the end of the seventh year.” So debts were remitted during the seventh or sabbatical years.

There is some question as to whether the debts were permanently cancelled, or only that no payments could be demanded from those in debt during the sabbatical year. During the sabbatical year the people could not work the land, so it would be difficult to make payments. If this was the case then the debt was only postponed for a year. Foreign debtors continued to pay off their debts during the sabbatical year because they were outside the Land, and thus were not under the sabbatical laws.

However, the warning about **attitude** (v9) leans in favor of the debts being permanently cancelled rather than delayed for a year: *“Beware lest there be a wicked thought in your heart, saying, ‘The seventh year, the year of release, is at hand,’ and your eye be evil against your poor brother and you give him nothing, and he cry out to the Lord against you, and it become sin among you.”* This verse certainly leans toward the idea that the debts were permanently cancelled. In any case the point of this law was at least two-fold:

1. To help to eliminate poverty from the land (v4). There will always be poor people (v11), and as the Lord Jesus said, *“The poor you will always have with you” (Mark 14:7)*. We too should aim at eliminating poverty by helping the poor - not giving indiscriminately to “free loaders,” but to help the truly poor and needy.
2. To prove that God would bless the people, and provide even more than they needed to help the poor if they obeyed Him by their kindness to the poor. And God will test us as well in the area of helping and showing kindness to the poor.

This sabbatical system of remitting debts certainly would remind the people to maintain a good credit rating if they wanted to get a loan! And this law did not prevent a poor person from paying back his cancelled debt if and when he had the

means. Verse 6, by the way, is one factor as to why the Jewish people became the world's financiers: *"For the Lord your God will bless you just as He promised you; you shall lend to many nations, but you shall not borrow."*

## **2. Under the law, Hebrew slaves were released in the seventh year.**

**Deuteronomy 15:12-18** - *"If your brother, a Hebrew man, or a Hebrew woman, is sold to you and serves you six years, then in the seventh year you shall let him go free from you. <sup>13</sup> And when you send him away free from you, you shall not let him go away empty-handed; <sup>14</sup> you shall supply him liberally from your flock, from your threshing floor, and from your winepress. From what the Lord your God has blessed you with, you shall give to him. <sup>15</sup> 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 thing today. <sup>16</sup> And if it happens that he says to you, 'I will not go away from you,' because he loves you and your house, since he prospers with you, <sup>17</sup> then you shall take an awl and thrust it through his ear to the door, and he shall be your servant forever. Also to your female servant you shall do likewise. <sup>18</sup> It shall not seem hard to you when you send him away free from you; for he has been worth a double hired servant in serving you six years. Then the Lord your God will bless you in all that you do."*

It's important to realize that as an institution in Israel, slavery was not like the bondage that the Hebrew people experienced in Egypt, or like slavery in the early years of America. No! The "slavery" of Hebrews in Israel essentially amounted to **voluntary servitude**, very similar to the practice of indentured servants. Many Israelites sold themselves as indentured servants to pay off their debts, and they were treated essentially as hired servants. Verse 18: *"It shall not seem hard to you when you send him away free from you; for he has been worth a double hired servant in serving you six years."* Also Leviticus 25:39-40: *"And if one of your brethren who dwells by you becomes poor, and sells himself to you, you shall not compel him to serve as a slave. As a hired servant and a sojourner he shall be with you and shall serve you until the Year of Jubilee."*

In reference to the release of Hebrew slaves, another point to notice is that the seventh year was not necessarily the same as the sabbatical year. If a man or woman served for six years, and he or she would be released in the seventh year - whatever that year was (v12). Exodus 21:2, *"If you buy a Hebrew servant, he shall serve six years and in the seventh he shall go out free and pay nothing."* So the seventh year in which a slave was released was not necessarily a sabbatical year - it was after they served for six years.

In the Year of Jubilee, of course, all Hebrew slaves were released, regardless of the number of years they had served (Leviticus 25). The main point of Deuteronomy 15 is that when slaves were set free, they were not to be sent away empty handed. *"And when you send him away free from you, you shall not let him go away empty-handed"* (v13). They were to be given enough so that they could become established again in the society of Israel. You could call it a "jump start" to help them get back on their feet.

Here again, in yet another area, the Mosaic Law tested the obedience of the people of Israel. It also provided an opportunity for them to be blessed if they would obey.

If any servant decided that he or she would rather not be set free because they loved their master who treated them kindly and fairly, they would go through a ceremony in which their ear was pierced with an awl, and they would then serve permanently. *“Then you shall take an awl and thrust it through his ear to the door, and he shall be your servant forever. Also to your female servant you shall do likewise” (v17).* What a beautiful picture of the committed Christian! We have been set free from sin, and now we serve the Lord in love!

There are more details of the release of slaves in Exodus 21. Under the law, Hebrew slaves were released in the seventh year.

## Practical Application

### Don't give the Lord your “defective stuff.”

**Deuteronomy 15:19-23** - *“All the firstborn males that come from your herd and your flock you shall sanctify to the Lord your God; you shall do no work with the firstborn of your herd, nor shear the firstborn of your flock. <sup>20</sup> You and your household shall eat it before the Lord your God year by year in the place which the Lord chooses. <sup>21</sup> But if there is a defect in it, if it is lame or blind or has any serious defect, you shall not sacrifice it to the Lord your God. <sup>22</sup> You may eat it within your gates; the unclean and the clean person alike may eat it, as if it were a gazelle or a deer. <sup>23</sup> Only you shall not eat its blood; you shall pour it on the ground like water.”*

Under the Mosaic Law, the firstborn of the flocks and herds belonged to the Lord. When the people brought these animals up to the Temple in Jerusalem, they could eat part of the animal in a communal meal, and then give the rest to the priests.

No defective animals were to be given to the Lord. These animals could be used for food at home, as long as the blood was properly drained. But defective animals were not acceptable as sacrifices.

There's a lesson here for us. Do we offer defective stuff to the Lord? Do we offer Him our spare time - and our leftover talent? Do we donate the worn-out stuff that we can't even unload in a yard sale to our church or to our foreign missionaries? Do we dump it on the Lord so we can get an income tax write-off?

Don't give the Lord your defective stuff!