**The Sabbath Year and Year of Jubilee**

In 1965 Andre Francois Raffay made what many would consider to be a safe bet. At 47 years of age he entered into a *en viager* agreement with Jeanne Calment, aged 90 whereby he would pay her $500 per month until her death at which time he would own her apartment. In 1995 Mr. Raffay passed away never having access to the apartment because Ms. Calment outlived him receiving $180,000 in payments which continued to be required of his widow even after his death. Ms. Calment died in 1997 at the age of 122. The en viager is similar to a life estate deed that is sometimes used in the United States when someone deeds a property to another person while retaining the right to reside in the property until death. The recipient of the deed actually owns the property but does not have the right to use it until the grantor dies. In our study of Leviticus, we see that the Israelites were given the right to use property but did not own it.

The chapter begins with God instructing Moses to tell the people they were to observe a sabbath year for the land God was giving them in Canaan. Every 7 years they were to leave the land fallow. They were to plant crops and tend vineyards for 6 years then rely on what the land would naturally yield for food in the 7th year. This of course was modeled after working 6 days and resting on the Sabbath. In addition to the spiritual meaning behind this there was a practical reason as well. Allowing the land to rest every 7 years would allow nutrients to be replenished as well as breaking the cycle of any plant diseases that might develop.

Next God set aside every 50th year as a year of jubilee. After observing 7 sabbath years, on the Day of Atone in the 50th year they were to refrain from planting or harvesting as in the previous sabbath years. Bob Deffinbaugh referred to this as the *Super Sabbath*. In verse 13 God told Moses that everyone was to return to their own property. God then addressed the property rights they were to observe. The sabbath years and years of Jubilee were to begin when they entered Canaan. These rules did not apply while they wandered in the desert since they were relying on manna and foraging for food rather than growing crops. God’s laws seem to have established that property owned by the Israelites could only be sold to a fellow Israelite. The sales price would be determined by the number of years remaining before the jubilee year as the true value of the land was in the crops that could be raised on it. Anyone who sold his property had the right to repurchase it at a later date or it could be repurchased by a relative known as a kinsman redeemer. If a repurchase did not occur, the property would revert to the original seller during the jubilee year. In verse 23 God said that the land could not be sold on a permanent basis since the land belonged to Him and the people were only tenants. In verse 21 He promised that abundant crops would be harvested in the 6th year providing for food in the sabbath year.

Houses in walled cities were treated differently since the small plots of land with them did not provide a means for feeding a family. Houses that were sold could be redeemed within 1 year after which the sale was permanent with the exception of Levite houses which were always subject to redemption and were to be returned during the jubilee year.

In verses 35 through 43 God provides rules for Israelites who need assistance. Loans were to be provided interest free and if an Israelite submitted to slavery due to poverty, the servitude would end after in the jubilee year. God did allow for slaves from other nations who would not have the same rights as Hebrew slaves. In the last section of the chapter, the redemption rights of Israelites slaves sold to aliens were the same as those sold to Israelites.

Some observations about this chapter:

1. The land of Canaan was a vital part of God’s covenant with the Israelites. He described it as a land flowing with milk and honey. This was a vast expanse from the Red Sea to the Mediterranean Sea and from the desert to the Euphrates River (Ex. 23:31). This was a diverse land containing seashore, rivers, valleys, mountains and fertile crop land providing the people multiple ways to support themselves. As God had given Adam and Eve the Garden of Eden, he gave Canaan to their descendants. As we have previously discussed, food was scarce in the times we are studying so land was an important resource. Land boundaries establish the identity of a nation so it is natural for its citizens to guard their land jealously.
2. God’s rules for the sale of the land would ensure that it would always remain in the hands of the Israelites. Since the land was to be apportioned tribes, the redemption rights would have provided for continuity of the tribes. God’s rules also required fair dealing among the people since He established the value of the land and their adherence to His rules.
3. The jubilee year provided a sort of reset every 50 years as well as redemption rights in the interim. This was a balancing mechanism that prevented anyone from accumulating vast assets at the expense of his fellow Israelite. It would have also served to break the chain of poverty by restoring property to a family.
4. Obeying God by not planting during a sabbath year required faith that God would provide enough food to make up for the lost harvest. Since God had provided their food for 40 years in the desert, it should not have been hard for them to trust Him to continue to provide.
5. Since the land was central to the covenant, it could be taken away if the Israelites failed to honor the terms of the covenant. God said that he had taken Canaan away from its inhabitants because of their wickedness and He would do the same to them if they defiled the land (18:28).
6. Two and one half tribes would later abandon God’s promise of land in Canaan in order to get land that was readily available (see Num. chapter 32, John 20:29, Gen. 25:29-33, 3:6, 13:10, Matt. 4:8, 1st John 2:16). These tribes were among the first to go into captivity generations later (2nd Kings 15:27).
7. The land can be considered symbolic of Jesus as it was a land of rest just as Jesus offers us rest through his completed work. The land was inherited just as we have a spiritual inheritance through Jesus (Matt. 25:34, Eph. 1:10-11). The redemption rights remind us that Jesus redeemed us (see Luke 4:19).