

6. Too hot to handle (studies in Leviticus) - Lord of the Years

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[0 : 00] And now, if we could have our Bibles open, please, at Leviticus 25, we'll have a moment of prayer together. Come then, with prayer and contemplation, see how in Scripture Christ is known.

Father, how wonderful it is as we search the pages of this ancient book, written so long ago to a people so far distant from us in time and space.

Yet we hear not what you once said only, but what you are saying now. We ask indeed that the Spirit will take these sacred pages and through them reveal the Lord Christ to us as we pray in his name.

Amen. Our title for this evening is taken from our first hymn, Lord of the Years, because that essentially, it seems to me, is what Leviticus 25 is about.

A few years ago, it was in 1999, in fact, on the 3rd of October, in the Observer newspaper, there was a headline which said this.

[1 : 20] The Jubilee line that works. Debt relief campaign, Jubilee 2000, can now claim its great victory thanks to Leviticus.

Now, the Observer was not a paper noted for its defense of the Gospel, nor is Will Hutton, the journalist, who wrote that article, particularly noted for his defense of the Christian faith.

But he very rightly realized that the inspiration for Jubilee 2000 came from the year of Jubilee, here in Leviticus 25.

The main purpose of that year was to provide relief from debt. And many of you will remember Jubilee 2000, some years ago. And Hutton, in that article, which is a very interesting article, talked about how the inspiration came not from secular sources, not primarily even from do-gooding.

It came from the ancient scriptures, as he called them. Now, I haven't looked up Google, but I'd be very interested if anyone did and discovered if Leviticus is ever featured in another newspaper article.

[2 : 33] I honestly don't know, but if any of you do know, let me know sometime. But nevertheless, this was very remarkable. An unbelieving journalist in a secular newspaper, realizing the sheer power of the Word of God.

A couple of introductory points. The year of Jubilee itself. Now, the details are fairly complex. You probably noticed it as we read it. But it's best seen, I think, as a special example of the Sabbath year with which the chapter begins.

Now, you know how Moses begins this great work, the Pentateuch, which we've been looking at a great deal over the last few months. He begins with the pattern of creation of the six days of labor and the seventh day, the Sabbath day of rest.

And that has given us a pattern for God's people to live in this world. The rhythm of work and rest. The pattern of six days work and the seventh day rest.

And that seven times seven becomes especially sacred. And so we have the Jubilee year. Probably the Jubilee year overlaps with the 49th year.

[3 : 44] Now, if the figures there confuse you, don't worry, because they confuse me. But I'm enumerate. But I think that's the best way of taking it. At the end of the... As the 49th year came to an end, this was specially signified by the beginning of the Jubilee year.

And notice the interesting detail in verse 9. On the Day of Atonement, you shall sound the trumpet throughout the land. Now, we looked at the Day of Atonement two weeks ago, that great time every year when the sins of all the year were covered.

Covered in anticipation of that once-for-all sacrifice that would take place at Calvary. And so here, this year, proclaims liberty. And surely the trumpet points forward to the last trumpet, which the prophets tell us will herald the new creation.

And Paul says in 1 Thessalonians 4, When the Lord returns, his return will be heralded by the voice of the archangel and the trumpet of God. So we're looking forward as we look at the Jubilee year.

And the second thing is, in many ways, this is the culmination of the book. Corresponding to the Day of Atonement, every year there was a new start.

[5 : 00] And here, every 50 years, there's a new start for the whole people and the land itself. People and land to be restored to live for God in the fallen world and point to the new heaven and the new earth.

As we'll see shortly, the Jubilee year was never particularly celebrated during most of Israel's history. And we'll come to that in a moment or two.

What I want to say this evening is, it seems to me as we study this great chapter, I want to draw out of it three great principles which underlie it. Three things which seem to me to point to the very essence of what God is saying to Moses, through Moses to the people of the time and beyond them to us.

And the first thing it seems to me he is saying is that God is Lord of time and place. And surely Moses is applying the teaching of the creation story.

One of the things that's very striking about Genesis 1 and 2 is they are an account of creation addressed to people who live in these twin dimensions of time and space.

[6 : 14] As Willie said when he was preaching on these chapters, they're not to tell us everything about everything, but they are addressed to us who live in time and space and directing us towards God who created us in these dimensions.

And this teaching is being applied to life as it's going to be in the land. They're about, as I say in a few chapters, they're about to leave Sinai and travel to the promised land.

And of course the disastrous story of numbers is that they take 40 years and indeed a whole generation dies out. Fascinating. If you look at the beginning of Deuteronomy, there's a little note that says, the journey from Horeb, another name for Sinai, to the banks of the Jordan took 11 days.

Now that's all it needed to take them. That unbelief, sin, apostasy and rebellion made it last for 40 years. So Moses is saying God is Lord of time and space.

And just two things about this. First thing is all times matter. But nevertheless there is a need for special times. Now let me develop what I mean by that.

[7 : 27] Verses 1 to 10 are developing the pattern of the Sabbath. When you come into the land, verse 2, that I give you, the land shall keep a Sabbath to the Lord. Six years and so on.

But in the seventh year, verse 4, there shall be a Sabbath of solemn rest for the land. A Sabbath to the Lord. The Sabbath to reflect on and to give thanks for what God has done.

Just as we are told in Genesis 2, that God rested on the Sabbath day. Now we've seen this already, that all time matters, but that sometimes God reveals himself particularly.

Remember I mentioned at the beginning of the series that Exodus 1 and 2, which we also looked at a few weeks ago, in these chapters several centuries pass. It's not obvious on first reading, but when you study those chapters, you find that something like 400 years have passed.

Whereas from Exodus 3, right on through the rest of Exodus, right through Leviticus, and right through to Numbers 10, we're dealing with the events of one tremendous year, when Israel gather around Sinai to hear the word of God.

[8 : 41] Now of course God was working during those four centuries, but the essence of his work then was it was hidden. It was unseen. It was in the background. It was unnoticed.

Kind of anticipation of the book of Esther, where it's even more in the background, and where God's name isn't even mentioned. So God was revealing himself through his word, revealing himself through the tabernacle, and revealing himself to his people in all kinds of ways, in this tremendous year.

And that reminds us of the importance of the Sabbath. Sabbath is mentioned three times in the creation account, which is a reminder of two things, I think.

A reminder that God completes his work. When God begins something, he completes it. Remember what Paul says, God who begins a good work in you, will continue it and complete it, until the day of Jesus Christ.

It also reminds us that at the heart of creation is rest, rather than work. God rested. That didn't mean God did nothing, of course, because the work of creating continues at this moment.

[9 : 53] We use the word providence to describe it, as God continues to work through the creation that he's made. But you see what I'm getting at. This jubilee year reminded them, as the Sabbath year reminded them, as the Sabbath day reminded them, that while all of our lives belong to God, while God is at work all the time, there need to be special times and places where we meet him.

Now, that doesn't mean that nowadays we have special buildings, special places of brick and mortar, which are sacred in a way that no other place is sacred.

But it does mean that we do not, as Hebrews says, forsake the gathering of ourselves together, gathering together under the word of God, as Israel did at Sinai, so that we can live for him during the six days that follow.

That's surely the point. It's just like in a marriage. People are married to their spouses, even when they're separate, maybe by hundreds of miles. But a marriage needs special times, holidays, special times together.

And so it is with the worship and fellowship with God, while he's with us all the time. That needs to be focused. That's the first thing, then, about God being Lord of time and space.

[11 : 09] And the second thing is its mirror image. All places matter. But we need special places. And I hope I made clear what I mean by that.

Let me repeat it, in case I didn't make it clear. That does not mean that our buildings are sacred in the way in which the old temple was. Because we are the temple of God, as the New Testament tells us.

But remember, even in the unfallen world, God met his people in a particular place. God planted a garden in the east in Eden. And there he met the people whom he had made.

I think that's significant. Even in the unfallen world, there needed to be a place. And so it is, the tent in the desert, the tabernacle, and later the temple, are really Eden, in the fallen world.

A place where the holy God can be approached. Now, in Eden, there were no sacrifices, there were no rituals, because man and woman were still innocent.

[12 : 14] But for fallen men and women to approach God could only be through sacrifice. So in the Jubilee year, Israel was to recall Eden, and to point to the new creation.

That's the point of the Sabbath day, the point of the Sabbath year, and even more so, the point of the Jubilee year. Look back to Eden, that perfect place that God created, where he could have fellowship with Adam and Eve, and to the new creation, where, what does it say in Revelation, the dwelling of God, is with humans.

And this year was to allow the land to replenish itself naturally. We already refer to this verse. Verse 23, The land shall not be sold in perpetuity, for the land is mine, for you are strangers and sojourners with me.

Exactly as Abraham was in that land. He lived, as we saw this morning, as a stranger in the land of promise. He recognized this was not the final goal.

And so here, you are strangers and sojourners with me. And the land is mine, Psalm 24 says, the earth is mine. But this also means that we can trust God.

[13 : 29] Back in verse, look back in verse 20, verse 20. If you say, what shall we eat in the seventh year? It's all very well saying, we'll have a seventh year when the land is fallow and so on.

We're going to eat then. Notice what God says, I will command my blessing on you in the sixth year. So it will produce a crop sufficient for three years.

Notice God say, notice the sheer generosity of God, which of course is a great feature of the creation accounts, the extravagant, exuberant, glorious generosity of God.

You think, you think you're not going to be able to eat for one year. Look, I'm going to give you food for three years. In the ninth year, you'll still be eating the food that I've given to you. William Cooper, the poet says, you are coming to a king, large petitions with you bring.

Since his grace and power are such, none can ever ask so much. Friend of mine always says, pray for miracles and plan for possibilities.

[14 : 30] I often think we almost do the opposite. We vaguely hope for miracles and then we pray for possibilities. You know, we think, well, we need a million pounds. Well, I can't really ask the Lord for that.

We ask him for ten. That would be a modest request. Now, the year of Jubilee is telling us this is a generous God who says in Psalm 50, the silver and the gold are mine, the cattle and a thousand hills are mine.

Creation is his. I will command my blessing on you. So again, God the creator provides in this world and leads beyond that to the world to come.

So that's the first thing then. God is Lord of time and place. The Jubilee year is to dramatize the great principles inbuilt in the creation story. Live in the land the way that Adam and Eve were supposed to live in Eden.

Secondly, God is Lord of human society. The Jubilee year was given to rescue those in debt. Verse 28. If he has not sufficient means to recover it, then what he has sold shall remain in the hand of the buyer until the year of Jubilee.

[15 : 42] In the Jubilee, it shall be released and he shall return to his property. Then in verse 39, we didn't read this verse. If your brother becomes poor beside you and sells himself to you, you shall not make him serve as a slave.

God has redeemed his people. God has paid their debt. Didn't we see this in the early sacrifices in Leviticus? Atonement to cover your sin.

Atonement to pay the debt. And since God had atoned for his people, that was to mark their lifestyles. Now we have to be very careful here.

This is not an alternative gospel. It's not saying, as I've heard some people say, well some of you guys are interested in theology and so I'm interested in practical things.

Social justice is not the gospel. It is the fruit of the gospel. Now we must never forget that. Justice to the poor, caring for the orphans and widows, which is said in the Old Testament, of particular concern of God himself who cares for orphans and widows.

[16 : 51] This is a fruit of the gospel because it anticipates the righteousness of the new creation. So let's develop this a little. First thing is that God is the landlord and we are tenants.

What do we have that we did not receive? Now we know that. And nevertheless, we often don't live as if that were the case. Back again to verse 23, the land is mine.

It's not. And we can say that surely about everything we possess. Your salary is mine. Your job is mine. Your money is mine.

That's what the Lord is saying here. You have nothing that you did not receive. One way or another, it's all a gift. Remember, we brought nothing into the world and we certainly can carry nothing out of it.

Except, of course, those things which will last into eternity, which are gifts of the gospel, not material gifts. And later on, Amos, the prophet, particularly, attacks the two nations which had developed.

[18 : 00] As Israel and Judah became wealthy at their last period of prosperity, they developed two nations. The rich became extravagantly rich in their ivory.

Read Amos. They're ivory houses. And the poor are being sold for a pair of shoes. People are being dishonest. Indeed, he has this wonderful picture of the business tycoons that worship saying, when will the Sabbath be over so that we can return to our money laundering and to our exploitation?

That's what he's saying. Read the book. It's a powerful book. The Abuse of Power and Wealth. And of course, its close neighbor is the so-called prosperity gospel, which is more common in America than in this country but does affect evangelicalism in this country.

The idea that if we are faithful we'll inevitably be wealthy. Now that is not the gospel. That is a caricature of the gospel.

But notice something very important. This is teaching given to the people by the word of God around Sinai. The consistent teaching of the Bible is that it is grace and forgiveness which unlocks people's hearts and wallets.

[19 : 21] 2 Corinthians 8 verse 9 That great verse you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. Now in that verse Paul is appealing for a collection for the poor Christians in Jerusalem.

He doesn't say remember the poor old widow. He doesn't say that. He doesn't say remember the starving children. Although he cares for them he says you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ that though he were rich for your sakes he became poor.

And you see it is word ministry gospel ministry which will produce this kind of action as well. In my years in Durham I was very grateful to the Lord for providing us many students who are now in word ministry.

But many other students went out to Uganda to India to Somalia to dig wells to help villagers to look after street kids and to care for orphans. And why did they do that?

For exactly the same reason as those people went into word ministry they were driven by the grace of God. You see it is not that there is a social gospel that is separate from the gospel itself.

[20 : 30] It is that when the gospel is listened to this is the kind of thing that will happen. People will go into word ministry people will also go into those other types of service.

I am sure it happens here it happens in every church where the word of God is preached. And those people who say why are you doing this? They may not use the words of Paul but ultimately it will come down to this we are knowing it we are doing it because of the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ who was rich but for our sakes became poor.

So God is Lord of society and that means freedom instead of slavery he is the Lord of the land it also means freedom instead of slavery verse 55 for it is to me that the people of Israel are servants they are my servants whom I brought out of the land of Egypt I am the Lord your God.

Notice the covenant language all through the books of Moses why does God ask them to do anything? We saw this last week in the whole question of sexual ethics and behavior the reason given is I am the Lord your God you are married to me you are in covenant with me you must live as my children God sets us free to live as he intended and Paul develops this powerfully in Romans Romans 6 and 7 where he says we cannot choose not to be servants but we can choose who we are going to serve we can choose to be servants to sin and selfishness and Satan or we can choose to be servants to the Lord Jesus Christ who has come to give us glorious freedom that was the point of those odd chapters we looked at a week or so go chapters 11 to 15 with all their earthly and routine and mundane matters free to live for God free to live for God and to see people as of more value than property so that's the first two great principles

God is Lord of time and space God is Lord of society but if you read through the rest of the Old Testament you'll find virtually no reference to the year of Jubilee and that's a strange thing isn't it but that leads me to my third point what was not fulfilled in the Old Testament was fulfilled in Jesus and that's my third point the Jubilee is fulfilled in the Lord Jesus Christ himself see part of Israel's failure read 1 and 2 Kings it's a very sad book was largely to neglect the Jubilee year even the great reforming kings Hezekiah and Josiah we don't read that they restored the Jubilee year we read they did many wonderful things there may just be a little hint in Isaiah 37 where Isaiah in Isaiah 37 verse 30 where Isaiah strengthening Hezekiah to face the

[23 : 33] Assyrian invasion talks about you will eat next year of the fruit you've grown this year that echoes the language here may just be a hint that in Hezekiah's time this was renewed but at the end of 2 Chronicles the chronicler sees the only way that God could fulfill the Jubilee year was by sending His people into exile 2 Chronicles 36 21 all the days the land lay desolate it enjoyed its Sabbaths until it had fulfilled 70 years you see the fact that the Jubilee was neglected doesn't mean that God had forgotten about it or didn't care about it there is an idea among many liberal theologians that if something is widely ignored then we don't need to bother about it because time has changed this is a particular case in sexual ethics it is the case in anything G.K. Chesterton once wrote Christianity has not been tried and found inadequate it has been found difficult and not tried and that's very much what happened with the year of Jubilee so as we look at this chapter we are impelled to Christ himself and to that passage I read at the beginning of the prayer earlier in Luke chapter 4 verses 18 to 19 read them later we are quoting

Isaiah 61 the Lord says this is the year of the Lord's favour not actually mentioned as the Jubilee but it is the Jubilee year he is the Jubilee as he comes to heal as he comes to free as he comes to save as he fulfills the prophecies made of the Messiah throughout the prophets that in the messianic age the principles of Jubilee would be fulfilled the land would blossom like the rose people would be free people would be secure so that's the first thing in his opening preaching the Lord Jesus Christ virtually announces the year of Jubilee it's begun but secondly it's yet to be fulfilled because as we know the first coming the coming at Bethlehem the coming and the dying and rising again and the ascending to heaven are pointing to a yet greater event in the book of Revelation in 22 we find the tree of life whose fruit was for the healing of the nations and that surely is a Jubilee symbol going back to Eden but fulfilled in the heavenly city and in the wonderful imagery of Apocalyptic there's not just one but two trees of life once again showing God's generosity and God's provision and in a real sense this sums up the whole of the book of Leviticus when Jesus comes his once for all sacrifice replaces the daily yearly and the seven yearly and the fifty yearly days of Jubilee and sacrifices he fulfills these in his own sacrifice those wounds yet visible above in beauty glorified and a witness to that he is the great high priest who presents us before the presence of God he is the lord of time and space he is the lord of the church as the letter to the Hebrews says he is the same yesterday and today and forever all time all eternity belongs to him so Leviticus it seems to me gives us a comprehensive guide to living a holy life in this world even those passages which have been superseded like the food laws and so on point us to great principles of unselfishness and caring and generosity and not just holy life in the sanctuary but holy life everywhere in the office in the school in the college in the factory in the bedroom in the kitchen every room of our lives that surely

Leviticus is one of the fullest pictures of the range of the work of Christ I believe that as Timothy Dudley Smith said in his hymn that we have indeed as we read this great book been led to Christ see how in scripture Christ we find and my prayer is that as the risen lord expounded the old testament including I have no doubt at all this book of Leviticus on the road to Emmaus that we will have had the same experience our hearts will have burned our eyes will have been opened and we will have been sent out into the world with the glorious message of the jubilee the lord is risen amen let's pray lord lord Jesus Christ passover lamb burnt offering high priest priest and sacrifice lord of every part of our lives lord of the jubilee lord of the present lord of the past and lord of the future we come to you now at the end of our study in this book and ask that this may have become part of your word built into us to strengthen us to give us christian character and to help us as we continue to journey through the desert of this world towards the promised land we ask this in his name amen