



SABBATICAL



GOD'S COVENANT OF REST,
RELEASE, AND PROVIDENCE
IN THE LAND AND IN LIFE



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Everything in the *Law of Moses* has a meaning in the New Covenant of Christ. No words are irrelevant. For the first 30 years of the New Testament Church, there were no *NT Scriptures*; they weren't yet written. They had to find Christ in the *Law* and in the *Prophets*. You cannot have a good grasp on Christianity without a solid foundation in the *OT*.

The highest aim of the *Law* is to bring believers into "rest." Israel failed to do that. God said:

Psalm 95:10 For forty years I was grieved with that generation, and said, "It is a people who go astray in their hearts, and they do not know My Ways." So I swore in My wrath, "They shall not enter My rest."

The Sabbath rest of the *NT* is the indwelling of the holy spirit. Thus, the New-Testament Christian has the Sabbath dwelling within; every day is his Sabbath.

Sabbatical Year – *Sh'mittah*

Of even greater importance than the keeping of the sabbath was the observance of the sabbatical year. Could anything have been more important than the Sabbath? Consider, the sabbath day was one day out of seven. The sabbatical was an entire year. There were three important aspects of the *sh'mi-tah*:

1. The release of debts;
2. The release of indentured Hebrew servants; and
3. A year's rest for farm land.

Deuteronomy 15:1-4,12-16 At the end of every seven years you shall grant **a release of debts**. 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. Of a foreigner you may require it; but you shall give up your claim to what is owed by your brother.

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. And when you send him away free from you, you shall not let him go away empty-handed; you shall supply him liberally from your flock, from your threshing floor, and from your winepress. From what the Lord has blessed you with, you shall give to him. 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.

Leviticus 25:4-7 In the seventh year there shall be a **sabbath of solemn rest for the land**, a sabbath to the Lord. You shall neither sow your field nor prune your vineyard. What grows of its own accord of your harvest you shall not reap, nor gather the grapes of your untended vine, for it is a year of rest for the land. And the sabbath produce of the land shall be food for you: for you, your male and female servants, your hired man, and the stranger who dwells

with you, for your livestock and the beasts that are in your land -- all its produce shall be for food.

Of all the sins that Israel and Judah committed, including all the pagan customs of the heathen which they practiced, it was for none of these that brought about the destruction of the Kingdom of Israel and the Babylonian captivity of Judah. No. It was the sin of ignoring the sabbatical law that they went into captivity, not one aspect of which was kept. For a period of four hundred ninety years, from the days of Joshua, the *sh'mittah* was not observed. If you will divide seven into four hundred ninety, you will get seventy. In other words, God's people omitted seventy sabbatical years. The prophet Jeremiah rehearsed their sin.

Jeremiah 34:16 Then you turned around and profaned My Name, and every one of you brought back his male and female slaves, whom he had set at liberty, at their pleasure, and brought them back into subjection, to be your male and female slaves.

They would not observe the Lord's release seventy times; they omitted seventy sabbaticals.

*Jeremiah 25:10,11 Moreover I will take from them the voice of mirth and the voice of gladness, the voice of the bridegroom and the voice of the bride, the sound of the millstones and the light of the lamp. And this whole land shall be a desolation and an astonishment, and these nations shall serve the king of Babylon **seventy years**.*

Seventy years of captivity seems like a harsh punishment. Did it have any good results? It did. Just like spanking a wayward child turns the child around, so did the Babylonian captivity do wonders for the Jews. During Maccabean and Herodian times the law regarding the Sabbatical year was strictly observed, even if it frequently weakened the cause of the Jews (1 Maccabees 6:49,53; Josephus, *Antiquities* XIII, viii, 1).

So strictly did the Jews observe the sabbatical that Romans were appalled by it. The historian Tacitus expressed his disdain of the Jewish character and customs:

For the seventh day they are said to have prescribed rest, because this day ended their labors.

Then, in addition, being allured by their lack of energy, they also spend the **seventh year** in laziness.

The spirit of the sabbatic year was that of the weekly Sabbath. The rest that the land was to keep in the seventh year was **not** for the purpose of increasing its fruitfulness by lying fallow. Perhaps resting was a benefit to the land, but that was never mentioned as a purpose. Nor was it merely to be a time of recreation from labor for men and beasts. It was rather to promote true spiritual rest and quickening. It was also to honor God, their Owner and the land's Owner. Israel, as the people of God, was to learn that the earth, though created for man, was not merely that he might turn its powers to his own profit, but that he might be holy to the Lord and also that he might enjoy this blessed rest. Further, the people were to learn that the goal of life was not in incessant laboring of the earth which is associated with sore toil in the sweat of the brow (*Genesis* 3:17,19), but in the enjoyment of the fruits of the earth, free from care, which the Lord their God gave and ever would give them, if they would but keep His covenant.

Such a convention as the sabbatic year might seem, at first sight, to be impractical; nothing else of the *Law of Moses* better demonstrated the personal, spiritual goal God intended for His people, a complete spiritual makeover and total trust in Him.

Some people think that the restrictions on the land in the seventh year were not all that devastating to the economy, because each parcel of land had its own sabbatical, and the entire country was not lying fallow all at once. They teach that the Jubile fifty-year cycle was never violated, but that the sabbatical was on an individual property basis. However, the evidence seems to me that everyone observed the sabbatical at the same time. The present country of Israel acknowledges the sabbatical year. In 1889, the early Zionist pioneers re-established *sh'mittah*. 1994, 2001, 2008, 2015, and 2022 were/are sabbatic years in Israel. They have found that it does hurt the agricultural economy, but not severely. I was frankly surprised to find out that the nation of Israel does practice the agriculture part of *sh'mittah*. I wonder how God looks at that observance, since Jesus has fulfilled the picture by bringing His disciples peace and redemption. Might He think, "Well, at least they are trying to serve and to obey Me?" Perhaps He will honor this much of their faithfulness.

It might be further noted that the Sabbath day was one day a week set aside, but the regulation regarding the sabbatical had some special significance for each of the other years, as well. In addition to the regular ten percent tithe that was given to the Levites when the Temple still was standing, in the other years there was an extra ten percent set aside: in the third and sixth years this was given in benevolence; in the first, second, fourth, and fifth years an extra ten percent was set aside for the people to make their pilgrimages to Jerusalem to keep the feast days.

No pleasure in this world, no matter how hard we work for it can ever compare, even a little, to the eternal pleasure of the World-to-Come. The *sh'mittah* cycle says, "This produce doesn't belong to me; it belongs to God." If one believes that the produce is truly God's (as a nation of priests ought to believe) then one is not upset about the ten percent that was taken, but grateful for the ninety percent that was left, which was truly God's gift. Gifts led to gratefulness, which in turn led to love and dependency. This is what the entire *sh'mittah* cycle was supposed to foster in the mind and heart of the Jew.

The Jew was to keep an eye out for things that would enhance his upcoming Sabbath. The whole week looked forward to the Sabbath. The Jew was also to look forward to the next *sh'mittah*. Even moreso the Christian should be ever-mindful of reliance on the leading of the holy spirit. How often? Continuously. And always seeing the opportunities to give, to serve, to prefer, to yield, and to promote others! The real Christian does not feel constrained to do these things, but rather desirous.

His focus is always on God's Will. His goal is never worldly, but eternal.

Israel was taught by the sabbatical year to be charitable and generous, and not to heap all to themselves, but to be willing that others should share with them in the gifts of God's bounty, which the earth brought forth of itself.

Further, they were brought to live in a constant dependence upon the divine Providence, finding that, as man lives not by bread alone (*Matthew* 4:4), and yet he has bread, but not solely by his own labor, but, if God pleases, by the blessing from His Hand, without any care or pains of man. When Yeshua taught, "Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors," his Jewish audience understood immediately he was referring to the *shimittah*.

What is the lesson for us in the "sabbath year?" Life depends on the Will of God. He can support it in other ways as well as by bread. He has created other things to be eaten, and man may live by

whatever his Maker has commanded. Not only Jesus, but Moses and Elijah were sustained by God in another way than by food. We are to inquire whether the thing is or is not commanded, and whether, therefore, it is right to do it, and not trust to our own feelings, or even our wishes, in the matter.

Are we ever in a state of lack? Might we be deprived? Trust God. God can do it. He can take care of us.

We may be tempted to take many irregular courses for our supply, when our wants are ever so pressing. The sabbatic year teaches that in some way or other, the Lord will provide. It is better to live meagerly upon the fruits of God's Goodness, than to live plentifully by wrong-doing. Oh, that we could but take our hands off of our own lives, and be committed to God.

*Psalm 37:3 Trust in the Lord, and do good; so shall you dwell in the land, and **truly you shall be fed.***

It is interesting to note that in the *sh'mittah* year of 2008 there was a severe freeze which killed the potato crop of those farmers who did not observe the sabbatical year. Thirty thousand tons of potatoes were lost.

However, farmers in the western Negev region, who observed the strict law of not planting in the seventh year, but planted in the summer instead of September discovered that the potato leaves were damaged but the tubers were spared the freeze.

The produce from the farms will be gathered by the public in a large-scale manner and will be sold in a public, not-for-profit manner, to which one hundred eighty stores have agreed to this deal.

Sh'mittah means to drop or to abandon.

Can you abandon that grudge you are holding? Can you take your hands off the financial circumstances you are facing? Can you cast your cares upon Yeshua, knowing that He cares for you (1 Peter 5:7)? Can you trust the Redeemer for your health problems, instead of medicine or surgery? Can you give Christ that broken heart, that bad habit, that betrayal by a dear one? Can you surrender that addiction and put it upon His Altar to be burnt up until He can give you beauty for ashes? Can you forgive your debtors? Can you take a deep breath and give him that spirit of heaviness, that worry, that pressing concern which has you bogged down? Can you take your burden to the Lord and leave it there? Can you trust Yeshua? Do you really have confidence in Him for your life and even for your death? Can you abandon your claims for that unfairness done to you? Can you drop all charges against your brother and, yea, your enemy?

When you can truly say, "Yes, Lord," then you will know that the sabbatical year has become a part of your soul; the *sh'mittah* has come into you. Sabbath peace, rest, joy, and comfort are yours. So be it!

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