

CHAPTER 15

INTRODUCTION TO DEUTERONOMY 15

This chapter treats of a release of debts every seventh year, to which a blessing is promised if attended to, (^{<B510>}Deuteronomy 15:1-6), which seventh year of release should not hinder lending to a poor man in distress, even though it was nigh at hand, (^{<B517>}Deuteronomy 15:7-11) and of letting servants go free, whether manservant or maidservant, at the end of six years' servitude, (^{<B512>}Deuteronomy 15:12-15) but if unwilling to go, and desirous of staying, must have his ear bored through with an awl, and serve to the year of jubilee, (^{<B516>}Deuteronomy 15:16-18) and of sanctifying and eating the firstlings of the herd and flock where the Lord directs, (^{<B519>}Deuteronomy 15:19-23).

Ver. 1. *At the end of every seven years thou shalt make a release.*] Not of servants, for they were not to be dismissed from their service until they had served six years, as is directed to in a following law; for if they were to be set free whenever a sabbatical year came, they might be discharged when they had not served more than a year, or than half a year, or than a month or two. Indeed when the year of jubilee intervened, they were released be it at what time it would; but not in a sabbatical year, which was a year of release of debts, as the following verses show, as well as there was, then a rest of the land from tillage, (^{<B310>}Leviticus 25:2-4). Now this was done at the end or extremity of every seventh year; not at the latter end or extremity of it, for if the debt of a poor man might be exacted of him in the year, and until the end of it, it would not in this respect have been a sabbatical year, or a year of rest and quiet; but this was done at the first extremity of it, at the beginning of it, as Aben Ezra and Ben Melech observe; though Maimonides ^{f162} asserts it to be after the seven years were ended; for he says,

“the seventh year releaseth not monies but at the end of it,”

according to (^{<B511>}Deuteronomy 15:1) that as in (^{<B510>}Deuteronomy 31:10) after seven years is meant, so the release of monies is after seven years.

Ver. 2. *And this is the manner of the release*, etc.] Or the rules to be observed in making it:

every creditor that lendeth ought unto his neighbour shall release it; that is, forgive the debt, or free the debtor from any obligation to payment. Some think this was only a release of debts for this year, in which there was no ploughing nor sowing, and so a poor man could not be in any circumstances to pay his debts, but might be exacted afterwards; but it rather seems to be a full release, so as the payment of them might not be demanded, neither this year nor afterwards; indeed, if a person afterwards should be in a capacity to pay his debts, he would be obliged, in conscience, duty, and honour, to pay them, though no reserve was made in this law, which nowhere appears:

he shall not exact it of his neighbour, or of his brother: he might receive it, if payment was offered, but he might not demand it, or sue for it; or give his neighbour or brother, whether in a natural or religious sense, any trouble about it: the Targum of Jonathan paraphrases it,

“his brother, an Israelite;”

one of the same nation and religion with him, though he might not be related in the bonds of consanguinity:

because it is called the Lord’s release; appointed and commanded by him, and was for his honour and glory, as a God gracious and merciful to the poor, and beneficent to those creditors; and which was proclaimed in his name, by the civil magistrate, according to his order; so the Targum of Jonathan,

“because the house of judgment, or the sanhedrim, proclaimed it a release before the Lord.”

Now this was typical of a release of debts, or of forgiveness of sins, which is an act of God’s grace through Christ, and for his sake. Sins are called debts, not what men owe to God, for then it would be right to commit them, and they might be committed with impunity, yea, with praise, since it would be doing what is fit and right, and well pleasing to God; but men are debtors to fulfil the law, and in case of failure, or a breach of it, are bound to the debt of punishment; and these debts are very numerous, and men are incapable of paying them: and by a release of these is meant not a liberty of sinning, nor a freedom from the being or bondage of sin, but from the guilt

of it, and from obligation to punishment for it; and is properly the forgiveness of sin, which is expressed by various phrases, as a non-imputation, a non-remembrance, a covering, blotting out, and removing of sin, and here typically a release of debts; (see ^{<1082>}Matthew 6:12), and God only can make it; he is the creditor, sin is committed against him, and he only can forgive it, which he does freely, fully, and at once, (see ^{<1074>}Luke 7:41,42).

Ver. 3. *Of a foreigner thou mayest exact it again*, etc.] Either on the seventh year, or after it:

but that which is thine with thy brother, thine hand shall release; a debt that lies between them, where the one is the creditor, and the other debtor, the creditor shall freely and fully forgive the debtor. So those only are released or forgiven by the Lord who are his own, whom he has reserved for himself, or chosen to everlasting life; who are interested in the covenant of his grace, one article in which is the forgiveness of sins; and who are redeemed by the blood of Christ, a branch of which redemption is remission of sin; and who are called by grace, and believe in Christ, to whom pardon of sins is promised; but those who are foreigners and strangers, and are not the Lord's chosen, redeemed, and called people, have no share in this blessing of grace; nor such who are rich in their own esteem, and need nothing; but those who are poor and unable to pay their debts, and are sensible of their spiritual poverty, and apply to the Lord for the forgiveness of their sins.

Ver. 4. *Save when there shall be no poor among you*, etc.] Then such a law could not take place, there would be no debts to be released; for this was never designed to screen rich persons from the payment of their just debts, or whoever were in a capacity of so doing, only such as were really poor, and unable to pay; and it supposes that this might sometimes be the case, that there were none poor in Israel, or needed the benefit of such a law; and, according to the Targum of Jonathan, it is suggested there would be none, if they were observant of the commands of God: and some take it for a promise, rendering the words "nevertheless" ^{f163}, notwithstanding such a law,

there shall be no poor among you; but then it must be understood conditionally: others interpret this as the end to be answered by this law, "to the end" ^{f164} there may be no poor among you"; by observing this law, all debts being released once in seven years, it would prevent persons falling

into distress and poverty, to such a degree as to be in want, and become beggars; and Julian the emperor observes, that none of the Jews begged ^{f165}, which he attributes to the care that was taken of their poor:

for the Lord shall greatly bless thee in the land which the Lord thy God giveth thee for an inheritance to possess it; which is either a reason why there would be no poor, should they observe the commandments of the Lord; or a reason why they should release the debts of the poor because they were so greatly blessed with a fruitful land, which brought them such an increase, as enabled them to free their poor debtors, when in circumstances unable to pay them.

Ver. 5 *Only if thou carefully hearken to the voice of the Lord thy God*, etc.] In his word, and by his prophets; this being the case, there would be no more poor among them, or however they would be so blessed of God, that they would be capable of releasing the debts of the poor, without hurting themselves and their families:

to observe to do all these commandments which I command thee this day; a phrase often used to put them in mind of the commands of God, and the necessity of keeping them, their temporal happiness depending thereon.

Ver. 6. *For the Lord thy God blesseth thee, as he promised thee*, etc.] He is faithful that has promised, and he always gives the blessing he promises according to the nature of the promise; if absolute, and without conditions, he gives it without respect to any; but if conditional, as the promises of temporal good things to Israel were, he gives according as the condition is performed:

and thou shalt lend unto many nations, but thou shalt not borrow; signifying they should be so rich and increased in goods, and worldly substance, that they should be able to lend to their neighbouring nations round about, but should stand in no need of borrowing of any of them. This is sometimes said of the language of these people, the Hebrew language, that it lends to all, but borrows of none, being an original primitive language; (see ^{<K&L>}Deuteronomy 28:12)

and thou shalt reign over many nations: which was fulfilled in the times of David and Solomon:

but they shall not reign over thee; that is, as long as they observed the commands of God; otherwise, when they did not, they were carried captive into other countries, and other people reigned over them, as at this day.

Ver. 7. *If there be among you a poor man of one of thy brethren*, etc.] As there would be, according to the Targums of Jonathan and Jerusalem, if they did not keep the commandments of the law, and continue therein:

within any of thy gates, in the land which the Lord thy God giveth thee; a native of the land was to be preferred to a foreigner, and a brother, whether in relation or religion, to a proselyte of the gate; and the poor of a city to which a man belonged, to the poor of another city, as Jarchi observes; which he gathers from this phrase,

within any of thy gates: thou shalt not harden thine heart, nor shut thine hand from thy brother; so as not to pity his distressed case, and have no bowels of compassion for him, and feel for his want, and so as not to distribute to his necessities, and relieve him.

Ver. 8. *But thou shalt open thine hand wide unto him*, etc.] And give him bountifully and liberally; in order to which the heart must be first opened, the affections moved, and a willing mind disposed to give generously:

and shalt surely lend him sufficient for his need in that which he wanteth: enough to answer his present exigencies, but not to cause him to abound, or to supply him with things needless and superfluous.

Ver. 9. *Beware that there be not a thought in thy wicked heart*, etc.] “Or, thy heart of Belial”^{f166}; thy worthless heart, and which is without a yoke not subjected to the law of God, as every carnal heart is; and in which Belial, Satan, the prince of this world, works effectually, and inclines to evil thoughts, afflictions, and desires, which are to be guarded against:

saying, the seventh year, the year of release, is at hand: perhaps next year, or within a few months:

and thine eye be evil against thy brother, and thou give him nought; being of an uncompassionate and covetous disposition, shall refuse to give or lend him anything on this consideration, because the year of release will quickly come, when, if poor and unable to pay him, he would be obliged to release his debt:

and he cry unto the Lord against thee; go to the throne of grace, and in prayer bring a charge, and lodge a complaint of unkindness and uncharitableness: and it be a sin unto thee; the Lord shall reckon it as a sin, a very heinous one, and call to an account for it.

Ver. 10. *Thou shalt surely give him*, etc.] Or lend to him; though lending in such a case and circumstances, that person being extremely poor, and the year of release at hand, is the same as giving. Jarchi remarks that money must be given him, even a hundred times if he asks it; but the limitation is to what he wants, and what is sufficient for his present wants, (⁴⁵¹⁸Deuteronomy 15:8)

and thine heart shall not be grieved when thou givest unto him; grieved at parting with his money he has little or no hope of seeing again, grudging it to him to whom it is given; when, on the other hand, it should be given freely and cheerfully, for God loves a cheerful giver:

because that for this thing the Lord thy God shall bless thee in all thy works, and in all thou puttest thine hand unto; that is, for lending or giving largely, liberally, and cheerfully, to persons in distress; (see ⁴¹¹⁴Proverbs 11:24,25 ²³¹⁸Isaiah 32:8 ⁴⁷¹⁶2 Corinthians 9:6-9).

Ver. 11. *For the poor shall never cease out of the land*, etc.] There would be always such objects to exercise their charity and beneficence towards, (⁴⁵¹⁸John 12:8), which is no contradiction to (⁴⁵¹⁴Deuteronomy 15:4) for had they been obedient to the laws of God, they would have been so blessed that there would have been none; so the Targums; but he foresaw that they would not keep his commands, and so this would be the case, and which he foretells that they might expect it, and do their duty to them, as here directed:

therefore I command thee, saying, thou shalt open thine hand wide unto thy brother; not give sparingly, but largely, in proportion to the necessities of the poor, and according to the abilities of the lender or giver; and this must be done to a brother, one that is near in the bonds of consanguinity, and to him a man must give or lend first, as Aben Ezra observes, and then “to thy poor”; the poor of thy family, as the same writer:

and to thy needy in the land; that are in very distressed circumstances, though not related, and particularly such as are in the same place where a man dwells; for, as the same writer remarks, the poor of thy land are to be preferred to the poor of another place,

Ver. 12. *And if thy brother, an Hebrew man, or an Hebrew woman, be sold unto thee*, etc.] By others, as by the sanhedrim for theft, for which a man might be sold, but not a woman, as Jarchi observes; but then a father might sell his daughter for an handmaid, if little and under age; and to such cases this law is supposed to refer; (see ^{<0210>}Exodus 21:2,7 22:3) though a man on account of poverty might sell himself:

and serve thee six years; as he was bound to do, if his master lived so long; if he died before the six years were out, he was obliged to serve his son, but not his daughter, nor his brother, nor his heirs, as the Jewish writers affirm ^{f167}: then in the seventh year thou shalt let him go free from thee; that is, at the end of the sixth, and beginning of the seventh year; (see ^{<0210>}Exodus 21:2).

Ver. 13. *And when thou sendest him out free from thee*, etc.] When he discharged him from his servitude, and made him a free man:

thou shall not let him go away empty; without anything to support himself, or to put himself in a way of business; he having in the time of his servitude worked entirely for his master, and so could not have got and saved anything for himself.

Ver. 14. *Thou shalt furnish him liberally*, etc.] Not only to supply his present wants, but for his future use, and to set him up in the world: “loading thou shall load him” ^{f168}, so some render the words; give him as much as he can carry, and well stand up under; the word used has the signification of chains wore about the neck for honour or ornament, and so may signify he should be very honourably dismissed, with plain marks of honour and respect; and the order is, to supply him

out of thy flock, and out of thy floor, and out of thy winepress; with sheep or lambs out of the flock, with corn out of the floor, wheat, or barley, or both, and wine out of the winepress; which take in all the necessaries and comforts of life: of that

wherewith the Lord thy God hath blessed thee thou shall give unto him; be it what it will, and in proportion to it, as of money as well as goods; it is asked, how much shall be given to him? not less than the value of thirty shekels, whether of one kind or whether of many kinds, according to the thirty shekels for the price of a servant, (^{<0213>}Exodus 21:32) ^{f169}. All this may be an emblem both of the servitude the people of God are in to sin, Satan, and the law, while in a state of nature; and of their freedom from it by

Christ, and of the sufficiency and fulness of food and raiment, and large measures of divine grace; even all things richly to enjoy, all things pertaining to life and godliness, which are given to them when brought out of that state; who otherwise come out of it destitute of all good things, having neither food nor clothes, nor money to buy either, but have all from Christ freely and fully.

Ver. 15. *And thou shalt remember that thou wast a bondman in the land of Egypt*, etc.] Where they were used hardly, and their lives were made bitter in hard bondage; and therefore should show the greater compassion to servants, whose case they could not but sympathize with, and have a fellow feeling of

and the Lord thy God redeemed thee; from the house of bondage and state of slavery, after they had been in it many years:

therefore I command thee this thing today, to release their servants at the end of six years, and not send them away empty, but generously contribute to them at their release; since when he redeemed them he gave them the spoil of Egypt, and of the sea, as Jarchi remarks; they came out of their bondage state with jewels, and gold, and silver, and raiment, even with great substance; and at the Red sea their spoil was increased which they took from Pharaoh and his host when drowned there; now as they came out of their servitude not empty but full, being sufficiently paid for their hard service, so they should remember to give to their servants liberally, when they made them free.

Ver. 16. *And it shall be, if he say unto thee, I will not go away from thee*, etc.] Out of his house, nor quit his service:

because he loveth thee and thine house; his master and his family, and so loath to leave them, but chooses rather to stay with them than have his liberty; hence the Jews say^{f170}, if his master has not a wife and children, his ear is not to be bored:

because he is well with thee; lives well with him, is well used by him, wants for nothing, and enjoys peace and quietness, and has everything to make him happy as such a state will admit of, and with the which he is well contented, and highly pleased. This is an emblem of the cheerful and constant obedience of the people of Christ to him their master, flowing from love to him; whom they love above all persons and things, with all their heart and soul, and his house also, the place of his worship, his

ordinances, truths, ministers and children; and therefore choose to be where they are, finding that they are there well used, fare well, having bread enough and to spare, spiritual provisions in plenty; are well clothed with the righteousness of Christ, have the good company of the saints and excellent in the earth, in whom is all their delight; and, above all, the presence of their Lord and master, and the smiles of his countenance.

Ver. 17. *Then thou shall take an awl, and thrust it through his ear unto the door*, etc.] Not of his master's house, but of the sanhedrim, or court of judicature, according to the Targum of Jonathan, before whom he was to be brought, and declare his desire to continue with his master; (see Gill on "⁽¹²¹⁶⁾Exodus 21:6"),

and he shall be thy servant for ever; that is, unto the jubilee, as the same Targum; for then all servants were released, and so Jarchi calls it the ever of jubilee:

and also unto thy maidservant thou shall do likewise; not bore her ear, for, as both Jarchi and Aben Ezra, and others say, she was not to be bored; though some are of opinion that a maidservant who was willing to continue with her master was to be bored as a manservant; but this respects the manner of dismissing her, or letting her go free, when she was not to go empty, but to be liberally furnished and supplied, as a manservant was.

Ver. 18. *It shall not seem hard to thee when thou sendest him away free from thee*, etc.] He should not grudge him his liberty, nor what he gives to him when he dismisses him:

for he hath been worth a double hired servant to thee in serving thee six years; since a hired servant a man is obliged to pay him wages for his work, besides his food, whereas a bondservant received no wages. Aben Ezra remarks, that this proves that a man might not hire himself for more than three years; or however, whereas a hired servant was sometimes hired for so many years, and this is the longest time of any we read of, a servant serving his master six years, his service must be worth double the service of an hired servant, which at most was but three years:

and the Lord thy God shall bless thee in all thou doest; thus well using thy servants, whether menservants or maidservants.

Ver. 19. *All the firstling males that come of thy herd, or of thy flock, thou shalt sanctify unto the Lord thy God,* etc.] According to the law in (^{<013>}Exodus 13:2,12,13).

thou shalt do no work with the firstling of thy bullock: as to plough or tread out the corn with it, which were done with other heifers:

nor shear the firstling of thy sheep; nor was the wool shorn of it to be made use of; one of the Jewish canons runs thus,

“if any man weave an hand’s breadth of the wool of a firstling into cloth, the cloth is to be burnt ^{f171}.”

Ver. 20. *Thou shalt eat it before the Lord thy God, year by year,* etc.] Which, if understood of male firstlings, as in connection with the preceding verse, only priests might eat of them, being devoted to the Lord; so Jarchi says, to the priest he speaks; but if this respects the Israelites in common, then they must be understood either of female firstlings or second firstlings, which the people voluntarily separated, and which they were not to eat in their own houses,

but in the place which the Lord shall choose, which was the city of Jerusalem; (see ^{<015>}Deuteronomy 12:5),

thou and thy household; the household of the priest, as Aben Ezra interprets it; but if it designs the same as in (^{<017>}Deuteronomy 12:17,18), then the Israelites and their families are meant.

Ver. 21. *And if there be any blemish therein,* etc.] In the firstling, as if it be “lame or blind”, or have

any ill blemish: thou shalt not sacrifice it unto the Lord thy God; blemishes in any beast made it unfit for sacrifices which were required; and so all peace offerings, vows, and freewill offerings, were to be free from any, (^{<019>}Leviticus 22:19-24 ^{<014>}Malachi 1:14), such were not fit for an holy sacrifice or an holy feast.

Ver. 22. *Thou shalt eat it within thy gates,* etc.] Though it might not be sacrificed, nor eaten as an eucharistic feast at Jerusalem, it might be eaten as common food in their own houses:

the unclean and the clean person shall eat it alike; such as were ceremonially unclean, by the touch of a dead body or the like, might partake of it with those that were clean, no difference was to be made:

as the roebuck and as the hart; which were clean creatures, and used for food, though not for sacrifice; (see ⁴⁵²¹⁵Deuteronomy 12:15,22).

Ver. 23. *Only thou shalt not eat the blood thereof*, etc.] Of the firstling:

thou shalt pour it upon the ground as water; (See Gill on ⁴⁵²¹⁶Deuteronomy 12:16, 23, 24”).