Leviticus - Commentaries by G.S. Byford

The Poor Brother, Poor Brother, The: Part 2

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“AND if thy brother [that dwelleth] by thee be waxen poor, and be sold unto thee, thou shalt not compel him to serve as a bondservant.” “And if a sojourner or stranger wax rich by thee, and thy brother [that dwelleth] by him wax poor, and sell himself unto the stranger [or] sojourner by thee, or to the stock of the stranger's family; after that he is sold he may be redeemed again, one of his brethren may redeem him” (Lev. 25:39, 47, 48).

The blessing promised to Abraham was absolutely free and unqualified. It was hampered by no conditions, nor was its continuance made dependent in any way upon the line of conduct pursued by his children. It was an absolute gift (in promise), dependent only upon the word of Him who cannot lie, “the most high God, possessor of heaven and earth.” His indisputable right it was and is, to dispose of the earth to whom. He will, as now it is His delight to enrich the believer in Christ with “all spiritual blessings in heavenly places.” The promises made to Abraham point to these two orders of blessing—the earthly or material, and the heavenly or spiritual, both to be made good in Christ the promised Seed. When the time of the promise drew nigh, however, Israel made the fatal mistake of trusting in their own competency to satisfy God's righteous requirements when entering upon possession to continue and leave it as an inheritance in perpetuity for their children after them. They despised the pleasant land and “could not enter in because of unbelief” (Num. 14, Heb. 3:19). As the people had elected to go in on the principle of law (“all that Jehovah hath spoken we will do,” Ex. 19:8), they must be held to it. God was indeed very compassionate, and again and again interfered in sovereign grace to alleviate their misery, or to recall them to the place of obedience and blessing. Nevertheless there must be, and there was, the full and sufficient trial of man in the flesh, a fallen creature, proving his inability to keep the blessing into which God had conducted him.

The lamentable results of disobedience soon manifested themselves in Israel's altered circumstances in the land, always directly traceable to their failure in obedience to the terms of the covenant, and in appropriating that which God had given them. “And when Jehovah saw that they humbled themselves, the word of Jehovah came to Shemaiah, saying, They have humbled themselves, [therefore] I will not destroy them, but I will grant them some deliverance; and my wrath shall not be poured out upon Jerusalem by the hand of Shishak. Nevertheless they shall be his servants; that they may know my service, and the service of the kingdoms of the countries. So Shishak, king of Egypt, came up against Jerusalem, and took away the treasures of the house of Jehovah and the treasures of the king's house; he took all: he carried away also the shields of gold which Solomon had made. Instead of which king Rehoboam made shields of brass, and committed [them] to the hands of the chief of the guard, that kept the entrance of the king's house. And when the king entered into the house of Jehovah the guard came and fetched them, and brought them again into the guard chamber. And when he humbled himself, the wrath of Jehovah turned from him, that He would not destroy [him] altogether: and also in Judah things went well” (2 Chron. 12:7-12).

Shields of brass were a poor substitute for shields of gold, and the service exacted of Israel by Shishak, king of Egypt, was not to be compared with that which Jehovah required of them. Again and again did they have to learn that it was “an evil [thing] and bitter” to depart from the living God. “Whosoever committeth sin the same is the servant of sin” (John 8:34). It was in the closing days of Jehu, that the Lord began to cut Israel short, to be followed in the days of Hoshea by the expatriation of the principal inhabitants of the land. The kingdom of Judah was preserved in the land for a longer period for reasons we need not now dwell upon, and was subjected to deeper suffering and more humiliating experiences under Nebuchadnezzar, into whose hands God had committed the power and authority for government in the earth, in the stead of Israel, in a way which He had not done to Shalmaneser, king of Assyria. It is well to note the difference in the respective punishments of the two sections of the same nation, as also the way in which God exercises absolute control in the day of His visitation of those Gentile powers whom He had for the time made the executors of His wrath against His people. (Compare 2 Kings 17 with 2 Chron. 36)

In the portion before us, however (Lev. 25), it is not the final break up1 of the nation that is in question, but the more immediate results of the individual failure of His people now about to exchange the wilderness for the land, wherein nevertheless God would manifest His faithfulness and truth towards them. The curtailment of the family inheritance in the mortgaging of estates, and the ensuing conditions of poverty, debt, and bankruptcy, would be bad enough; but worse remained. The loss of liberty (ver. 39) might involve the loss of self-respect, and would indeed do so but for the principle of grace so abundantly in evidence in this chapter. A strict adherence to the letter of law was not all that God required of Israel. Israel's origin and early history had been such as should have instructed them to “do justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with thy God.”

“And thou shalt speak, and say before Jehovah thy God, A Syrian ready to perish [was] my father, and he went down into Egypt, and sojourned there with a few, and became there a nation, great; mighty, and populous: and the Egyptians evil entreated us, and afflicted us, and laid upon us hard. bondage: and when we cried unto Jehovah, God of our fathers, Jehovah heard our voice, and looked on our affliction, and our labor, and our oppression: and Jehovah brought us forth out of Egypt with a mighty hand, and with an outstretched arm, and with great terribleness, and with signs, and with wonders” (Deut. 26:5-8). The remembrance of all that they had suffered when bond-slaves in Egypt, and the divine interposition in power and goodness for their deliverance, should have softened their hearts towards the poor and needy of their brethren, as well as humbled them in the presence of God. In the land of Israel, where righteousness and obedience brought their own reward, it was quite possible, and even likely, that some should be “righteous over much,” which was as much to be avoided as being “over much wicked.” The gracious godly Israelite would see in the circumstances of his poor brother an opportunity for manifesting the reality and excellence of that principle of grace on which God had acted towards himself. To belong to Israel brought much blessing, many privileges and responsibilities of a mutual kind not always legal. To insist upon righteousness while overlooking grace, and refusing to show mercy, were a grievous affront to God Himself; for where would they have been if mercy had not been shown in Jehovah's dealings with them?

Still the contract, which bound the slave to his master and deprived the former of freedom, was quite legal and could not set aside the rights of the master secured thereby. Did not he hold possession? How about the rights of the slave? He had none; he had signed them away. Yet here grace found an opportunity; it meets us at the very lowest point—the very principle of the gospel— “when we were yet without strength.” When the decayed, broken-down Israelite had sold himself to a brother, the application by the latter of this precious principle of grace would not indeed annul the contract, but would nevertheless bring light and joy and liberty into the soul. It is not in this chapter (as it is in Deut. 26) a question of worship, but of guarding against oppression, and of acting in the fear of God. “Thou shalt fear thy God: for I [am] Jehovah your God” (vers. 17, 36, 38, 43, 55). So with the Christian now. We may be in circumstances the most depressing in themselves, but the knowledge and enjoyment of the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord, will enable us to “glory in tribulations also, knowing that tribulation worketh patience, and patience experience, and experience hope, and hope maketh not ashamed, because the love of God is shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Ghost which is given unto us. For when we were yet without strength, in due time Christ died for the ungodly” (Rom. 5:3-6).

But this dying for the ungodly really closes the subject. Christ has done that, and therefore all is secured for the believer. The price of our redemption has been paid, God has been glorified, justice satisfied. The full results are still to be waited for; yet are we sure of the final triumph of grace, and of the coming deliverance of the creature from the bondage of corruption into the liberty of the glory of the children of God (Rom. 8:19-25). “We boast in hope of the glory of God,” and not this only, but “we boast in tribulations also.” In contrast to this, the natural man, still in his sins, has in this present a dreadful foreboding of an eternity of misery. But if the whole creation groans and travails in pain together until now, we groan too, but intelligently and in gracious sympathy, waiting for the adoption, the redemption of our body, and have meanwhile the firstfruits of the Spirit, “the earnest of our inheritance, until the redemption of the purchased possession, unto the praise of His glory” (Eph. 1:14).

“And if a sojourner or stranger wax rich by thee, and thy brother [that dwelleth] by him wax poor, and sell himself unto the stranger [or] sojourner by thee, or to the stock of the stranger's family; after that he is sold he may be redeemed again; one of his brethren may redeem him; either his uncle, or his uncle's son, may redeem him, or [any] that is nigh of kin unto him of his family may redeem him; or, if he be able, he may redeem himself” (vers. 47-49). Here the case might appear to be hopeless, for the rich stranger could not be expected to act in grace towards the poor brother; his only hope then, if he could not redeem himself, was to look for the appearance of one who should be sufficiently gracious to act towards him in power and goodness. And did not such an One indeed in due time come to His own land and people and announce His willingness so to act? But His own received Him not, not knowing the time of their visitation. “The Spirit of the Lord [is] upon me, because he hath anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor; he hath sent me to heal the brokenhearted, to preach deliverance to the captives, and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty them that are bruised, to preach the acceptable year of the Lord. And he closed the book and gave [it] again to the minister, and sat down. And the eyes of all them that were in the synagogue were fastened on him. And he began to say unto them, This day is this scripture fulfilled in your ears. And all bare him witness, and wondered at the gracious words which proceeded out of his mouth” (Luke 4:18-22).

“For ye know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that, though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, that ye through his poverty might be rich” (2 Cor. 8:9).

These scriptures make clear that the Lord Jesus, having come into the circumstances of Israel in all the poverty and weakness of the nation, giving up earthly glory and all that men value here, and even life itself, will in the future bring them into restored relationship to Jehovah and into full enjoyment of every blessing promised; while for the one that now receives the Savior, he has present participation in the redemption already “found” (Heb. 9:12), receiving now the salvation of the soul. The heart is filled with joy and gladness, and waits with patience for the full manifested results in glory of the work of our Lord Jesus Christ, to Whom be glory both now and forever. Amen. G. S. B.

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The Poor Brother, Poor Brother, The: Part 1

“IF thy brother be waxen poor, and hath sold away [some] of his possession, and if any of his kin come to redeem it, then shall he redeem that which his brother sold... And if thy brother be waxen poor and fallen in decay with thee, then thou shalt relieve him, a stranger or a sojourner; that he may live with thee... And if thy brother [that dwelleth] by thee be waxen poor, and be sold unto thee, thou shalt not compel him to serve as a bondservant.. And if a sojourner or a stranger wax rich by thee, and thy brother [that dwelleth] by him wax poor, and sell himself unto the stranger or sojourner by thee, or to the stock of the stranger's family: after that he is sold he may be redeemed again; one of his brethren may redeem him” (Lev. 25:25, 35, 39, 47, 48).

The misery of man's impoverished condition has in one way or another contributed to many an Old Testament history. God has from the beginning shown us that He alone has the power and the will to restore to man all that he has lost, and more too. This gracious purpose has illumined many a dark page in Israel's record, and furnished a key to what would otherwise have been enigmatical. Two illustrations may suffice, “And it came to pass, as he was telling the king how he had restored a dead body to life, that, behold, the woman whose son he had restored to life, cried to the king for her house and for her land. And Gehazi said, My lord, O king, this [is] the woman, and this her son whom Elisha restored to life. And when the king asked the woman, she told him. So the king appointed unto her a certain officer, saying, Restore all that [was] her's, and all the fruits of the field since the day that she left the land, even until now” (2 Kings 8:5, 6). Israel will get all back through the Son raised from the dead, and now alive again.

Again, “Behold, I will gather them out of all countries whither I have driven them in mine anger, and in my fury, and in great wrath; and I will bring them again unto this place, and I will cause them to dwell safely; and they shall be my people, and I will be their God. And I will give them one heart, and one way, that they may fear me forever for the good of them, and of their children after them. And I will make an everlasting covenant with them, that I will not turn away from them to do them good; but I will put my fear in their hearts, that they shall not

depart from me. Yea, I will rejoice over them to do them good; and I will plant them in this land assuredly with my whole heart, and with my whole soul" (Jer. 32:37-41). God will undertake his people's cause in that day and will fulfill all His own promises.

There is no more interesting study for our hearts renewed by grace than that of tracing in the Old Testament scriptures God's gracious ways with man from the beginning, that is, after the fall. If Adam had remained in his original position there would have been no such history to set before us, no revelation of God beyond what His works afford (Psa. 19) Driven from paradise, that he might not be cursed with perpetual existence in a sinful state, God follows Adam and begins to work for his blessing, finding in his necessitous and ruined condition the opportunity (which Eden would not have supplied) of gratifying His own heart in exalting the lowly, enriching the poor, filling the hungry with good things, and ultimately meeting man in fullest grace, wherever the soul turned to God in the truth of its condition. Where any sought to approach by a way of their own, denying or evading the truth, it was to their own confusion, and rejection (Heb. 11:4). This grace now flows from the redemption that is in Christ Jesus and brings into divine relationship. Yet it was only when the page of man's history closed at the cross that the "gospel of the grace of God" could go forth into all the world. Grace and truth came by Jesus Christ. It is the full and blessed answer of God to the infinite work of His beloved Son. Man's distressed condition was in evidence in the days of our Lord wherever He turned. John 5 bears witness to this fact as also to man's inability to remedy his condition, let alone to pay the price of his redemption (Psa. 49).

"The Son of man must be lifted up." It is this redemption by purchase that is the subject of Lev. 25, the expression occurring four times in the chapter. "If thy brother be waxen poor," is not a mere repetition of words, but suggests a different condition of misery each time it is used, both progressive and accumulative. The cross must be our starting point for such a study, not the incarnation. Whilst it was instruction for the guidance of the people of Israel in the first place, it had nothing to do with law as a principle, the maintenance of strict righteousness and the requirement of it from others, but points to the principle of grace upon which God had dealt with Israel and on which He expected His people to act towards others. It begins where law ends; its place here is significant. It is after the law had spoken its last word, and the priestly system had been fully developed, and before, too, the solemn declarations of judgments that should surely descend upon the transgressors of the covenant as in chap. 26. Here, in our chapter, is that which points clearly to the resources of grace in God and the intervention of the Kinsman Redeemer.

Let us trace its development. "If thy brother be waxen poor, and hath sold away [some] of his possession" (ver. 25), a deplorable condition for an Israelite to be in surely, and one which should have had a voice to his conscience, for Joshua before leaving the scene reminds them that, "Not one thing hath failed of all the good things which Jehovah your God spake concerning you... all good things are come upon you which Jehovah your God promised you" (Josh. 23:14, 15). His inheritance then had become alienated from him by reason of sin; it would return to him at the set time as ordained by God to which the jubilee points (ver. 10). So it has been with the nation, nevertheless millennial days shall see them restored to their possession, dwelling in safety and rest under the peaceful reign of the Son of David.

But this is true in a far deeper sense of all mankind. He has lost his inheritance, forfeited life and become subject to vanity. The more our natural knowledge is increased and the wider our range of observation, the more painfully shall we be impressed with the sense of man's deep poverty. "He that increaseth knowledge, increaseth sorrow." His enjoyment of the present is seriously interfered with by the painful sense of the uncertainty of life. He cannot even depend upon the little span of life usually allotted to him. This is felt the more keenly in proportion to the expansion of the intellect and the elevation and refinement of his tastes. No doubt our first parents realized this more fully than the majority of the human race which has succeeded them. What should have been joyous occasions for Eve, were mingled with sorrow which doubtless recalled the divine sentence upon her sin. Every occurrence of death must have been a painful and humiliating experience for him whose disobedience had brought death into the world. Mark 10:17-23 supplies an illustration of a numerous class of people who are not burdened with the sordid cares and privations incidental to poverty, nor besotted and degraded by common vices. Perhaps, however, they are the more conscious of their real poverty and nakedness before God. This man was very rich and very earnest, for he came running to Jesus. Very religious also, as appears in the question he put to the Lord, "What shall I do that I may inherit eternal life." Was not this equivalent to asking the terms upon which he himself might redeem his alienated possession? Yet he was not prepared to pay the price, and so went away sorrowful; nevertheless the Lord in His answer let fall a precious invitation of grace for faith (had it been present) to fasten upon. "Come follow Me," was an intimation that "He who was rich" had already become poor that we through His poverty might be rich. He might be, safely trusted to act the part of a Kinsman Redeemer, "And if thy brother be waxen poor, and fallen in decay with thee, then thou shalt relieve him" (ver. 35). The Israelite, sensible of his poverty might make many attempts to right himself, but all to no purpose. Obligations could not be fulfilled, promises alas I made only to be broken. Such is man's position morally before God. A bankrupt—vows and resolutions may be formed but never to be realized; "his hand faileth" (see margin), he is "without strength" (Rom. 5:6). The case of the impotent man—(John 5) illustrates this condition of evil in one who is conscious of it and struggles ineffectually to get the blessing. "While I am coming, another steppeth in before me." It was the position of Naomi returned to Bethlehem. Death had robbed her of every natural help and protector. A widow, and childless, her inheritance gone also, it might be the beginning of the barley harvest, but hardly for her! What a type of Israel in the last days, broken hearted and suppliant, returning to the land, of promise, counting no longer on their own strength, as at Horeb— "all that the Lord hath spoken we will do," but solely on the mercy and faithfulness of God! The presence of Ruth (one shut out of the congregation of the Lord unto the, tenth generation) makes it still more striking a type of the spared remnant when, attracted by the mercy and, goodness of Jehovah, they are reestablished in the inheritance by their Kinsman Redeemer. Boaz, a mighty man of wealth ("in him is strength"), takes up their cause, disposes of every other claim and leads into rest and blessing amongst the people of God. This naturally leads on, to the glory of the earthly kingdom, and will surely receive its full accomplishment.

But while all this awaits another day for Israel and this poor blighted world, it is made good now, individually and spiritually, as sinners hear the gospel and believe. It does not in any way apply to the church collectively as the bride, the Lamb's wife, but is a blessed and simple illustration of that which is realized by every weary heart that comes to Christ. Grace is the very foundation of the gospel, but there must be power too. There is the grace that seeks and finds, but when He has found, die taketh it on His shoulders and bringeth it home. The Good Shepherd undertakes everything for us and charges Himself with our burden. So, in this narrative, Ruth is invited to "sit still... for the man will not be in rest, until he have finished the thing this day" (Ruth 3:18).

The redemption of the purchased possession (Eph. 1:14) involves the interests and glories of our Redeemer in a way beyond all our thoughts or desires as poor and needy sinners. True the awakened sinner fears coming judgment, and is in anxiety as to his personal salvation from divine wrath, which shuts out for the time every other consideration. Yet it is no question of that here, but of the redemption of the inheritance and subjection of the habitable earth. "For the earnest expectation of the creature waiteth for the manifestation of the sons of

God. For the creature was made subject to vanity, not willingly, but by reason of him who hath subjected it, in hope that the creature itself also shall be delivered from the bondage of corruption into the liberty of the glory of the children of God” (Rom. 8:19-21). “What day thou buyest... thou must buy also of Ruth—to raise up the name of the dead upon his inheritance.” The Son of man will be supreme over the redeemed creation, the world to come whereof we speak. In that day shall there be perfect harmony between the various parts of God's creation, The reconciliation “of all things on earth and in heaven” shall be so complete that the Lord Himself will delight in His people. “I will hear, saith Jehovah, I will hear the heavens, and they shall hear the earth; and the earth shall hear the corn, and the wine, and the oil; and they shall hear Jezreel (seed of God). And I will sow her unto me in the earth; and I will have mercy upon her that had not obtained mercy; and I will say to [them which were] not my people, Thou [art] my people; and they shall say, My God” (Hos. 2:21-24).

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