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CELEBRATE GOD'S OWNERSHIP

In many areas of the world the government owns all the real estate. Private ownership is just not a common practice. I remember visiting Cancun several years ago and the people who are in the timeshare business try to sell you "ownership" in a condo. The contract actually said that in 99 years the property would revert to the government of Mexico. I would have been buying a lease rather than the property itself. In socialized countries such as Russia, private ownership is almost not existent. In our nation, much of the range land in the western states, the national parks, much of Alaska and all the offshore areas are owned by the U.S. government. However, we do have a lot of private ownership.

Within limits, the owner of land can determine what he or she will do with that land. Ownership equals control. Our philosophy of who or what is or should be in control will influence our laws of ownership. In the parts of the world where there is complete government ownership, it reflects the idea that certain elitists who have gained political or military power are in control and will make the decisions. In our country, the land ownership reflects the attitude of our people. We have a strong sense of individualism and personal freedom that is mixed with a growing reliance on a strong central government that encroaches on that individualism and freedom. How a nation handles land ownership really reflects their ideas of who is in control.

We see a completely different philosophy in the laws concerning land ownership that were given to the emerging nation of Israel. The prevailing idea was that God owned everything and land was distributed to each tribe then within each tribe to each family unit. The people had stewardship of the land, but it belonged to God. As the Owner, He had the right to determine the way the land was to be used. Actually, this philosophy prevailed in relationships with other people. When the children of Israel were called God's people, those were not just idle words. As the Psalmist states so clearly in Psalms 8:1, "The earth is the Lord's, the world and all they who dwell therein."

Land ownership reflects our idea of Lordship. In nations in which the government owns everything, the state tends to set itself up as god. In our nations, each individual wants to be his own "boss" -- you hear people say it all the time, "no one is going to tell me what to do!" By having the land belong to God, the nation of Israel was witnessing to the fact that they accepted God as their Lord.

Because God owned everything (and specifically the land and the people), He set up rule for how the people were to use the land and how they were to deal with each other. Some rules were linked directly to a calendar that God gave the nation when they left Egypt. The calendar the Israelites were to observe started right before the Exodus from Egypt began. God instituted a new calendar as a reminder to the nation of Israel that her life as the people of God was grounded in God's redemptive act in the Exodus.

In this calendar, the Israelites were to observe certain cycles of sevens. For example, it was after this calendar was started that the first obligatory observance of a seventh day of rest occurred (Ex 16:23). This first observance was in conjunction with the giving of manna. The manna was given six days and a double portion was given on the sixth day and none on the seventh day. The time of six days on and one day off takes away the validity of speculation that manna was a naturally occurring (although unusual) substance. The seven-day cycle is not a naturally occurring time cycle. There is nothing in the natural cycle of "things" that equals a seven-day week. This was God's plan for man to keep track of time. Not only did He institute a cycle of seven days, He also instituted a cycle of seven years in that every seventh year was to be a year of rest or a "sabbath year" (See Lev 25:1-7).

LEVITICUS 25:8-10

8 ¶ "Count off seven sabbaths of years— seven times seven years— so that the seven sabbaths of years amount to a period of forty-nine years. 9 Then have the trumpet sounded everywhere on the tenth day of the seventh month; on the Day of Atonement sound the trumpet throughout your land. 10 Consecrate the fiftieth year and proclaim liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants. It shall be a jubilee for you; each one of you is to return to his family property and each to his own clan. (NIV)

In addition to the seven-year cycle, He also instituted a larger cycle of seven "sabbath years" which is called the jubilee cycle. Although it is not mentioned in connection with the Jubilee Calendar, there is thought to be an even larger cycle of seven that forms the time of the existence of sin and that is a seven-period cycle of one thousand years. Based on the chronologies and genealogies, it appears that sin entered the world around 4000 BC. If that is the case, then we are approaching the end of the 6th millennium. Using the pattern of the week of days and the week of

years, one could argue that the 7th millennium will be a "sabbath" period. Many see this as the Millennial reign of Jesus.

The purpose of the seventh **day** sabbath was to provide rest for people and animals. The purpose of the seventh **year** sabbath was to provide rest for the land. This seventh-year sabbatical not only gave the land a time of rest, but it also provided a test of faith for Israel every seven years. Would they trust God to provide for their needs in the year they did not plant? The 49th year was the last sabbatical of a Jubilee cycle. It was considered a high year because it was the seventh sabbatical. This year was followed by an once-in-a-generation Year of Jubilee. Once again the faith of the people was tested -- **two** consecutive years of not planting crops. This Year of Jubilee was also to provide a reminder to the nation that the land they enjoyed was a gift from God. They did nothing to earn it, nor deserve it. This was demonstrated by the land being returned to the original owners (families) to whom the land was distributed when they entered the Promised land. The Jubilee Year was considered to be a holy year and a year of rest or a sabbatical year.

LEVITICUS 25:23-24

23 ¶ "The land must not be sold permanently, because the land is mine and you are but aliens and my tenants. 24 Throughout the country that you hold as a possession, you must provide for the redemption of the land. (NIV)

Even though the land itself could not be sold on a permanent basis, the right to use land and to have the produce of the land was sold but only for a limited period of time. If there were 15 years before the Jubilee year, then the price for the use of the land would be a certain price. If there were only five years left, then the price would be much less, logically a third of the price for 15 years. The control of the land would revert to the family to whom it was originally assigned. If the family wanted the land back sooner, then they would have to pay the person who had bought the right to use the land. God gave instructions on how to carry out that redemption.

LEVITICUS 25:25-28

25 "If one of your countrymen becomes poor and sells some of his property, his nearest relative is to come and redeem what his countryman has sold. 26 If, however, a man has no one to redeem it for him but he himself prospers and acquires sufficient means to redeem it, 27 he is to determine the value for the years since he sold it and refund the balance to the man to whom he sold it; he can then go back to his own property. 28 But if he does not acquire the means to repay him, what he sold will remain in the possession of the buyer until the Year of Jubilee. It will be returned in the Jubilee, and he can then go back to his property. (NIV)

One reason a person might "sell" his family land could be desperate need of money. The law provided a way for him to get use of the land back if he could repay the money he received. Actually, he would not need to repay all of the money, since the value was prorated based on the number of years left until a Jubilee year was to occur. The law really favored those to whom the land was originally assigned. This was one way to keep people from getting locked into generation after generation of poverty with no way out. Since the economy was tied to agriculture and agriculture to the land, this provision was a safety net that would help break the cycle of poverty.

LEVITICUS 25:39-42

39 ¶ "If one of your countrymen becomes poor among you and sells himself to you, do not make him work as a slave. 40 He is to be treated as a hired worker or a temporary resident among you; he is to work for you until the Year of Jubilee. 41 Then he and his children are to be released, and he will go back to his own clan and to the property of his forefathers. 42 Because the Israelites are my servants, whom I brought out of Egypt, they must not be sold as slaves. (NIV)

If a person were in serious financial straits, he might find that he has sold all he has except himself. Since servitude was a legal practice, a person could literally sell himself into the service of another person. If this person were an Israelite, then the person was to be treated as a hired servant rather than a slave. This arrangement was somewhat like going to work for a person and getting paid all the anticipated wages for so many years up front. There would be an agreement that the person would be obligated to work for that number of years and if he could buy out his contract he could leave. The law required that the agreement could go no longer than until the year of the next Jubilee.

The purpose of all these provisions for dealing with land and people was to communicate to the Israelite the truth of the fact that they and the land really did belong to God. God's ownership is no less a factor today than it was then. All we have, are and ever hope to be, we owe it all to Him. To God be the glory.