

Sabbath for the Land

Bible Study:

Some passages of Scripture are difficult to engage; they can convict the reader with truths that seem unfair or harsh and they can even portray God as having problematic characteristics that do not correspond with the attributes of justice, mercy, and love. People of faith have a duty not to retreat from these passages, but to wrestle with them, praying for discernment and that God may add to our understanding of what these passages are communicating and how they can inform our lives. Often we will come away from the text with more questions than we do answers. We must learn to allow these questions to instruct us and help us grow in faith, trusting that God holds every answer we need.

When it comes to creation care, it is important to understand the glory of God's creation, the remarkable gift we have been entrusted with, and the responsibility we have to be good stewards of the earth. Scripture contains numerous affirmations of the goodness of creation and what humanity's proper relationship to the earth should be. The Bible also contains strong warnings about the consequences endured by God's people when they ignore their responsibility to God and abuse the land.

Leviticus 26 is a passage that affirms God's sustaining relationship with humanity through creation, but also convicts those who neglect God's commands. The curses contained in this chapter are troubling, both in their portrayal of God, and also how aptly they apply to our current global environment. Readers are directly confronted with the questions of God's agency in disasters. Is God the cause of tragic events that are meant to serve as punishment, or are tragic events the natural result of humanity disobeying God's commands? When the Bible speaks of humanity experiencing God's wrath, is it because God is acting out of vengeance and anger, or do we perceive those attributes because we have removed ourselves from the goodness and blessing of God by choosing to follow our own paths and not God's? As the world is ravaged by natural disasters, diseases, food scarcity, all of which can be linked to climate change, these are extremely difficult questions that must be grappled with. In the end, however, Leviticus 26 does not conclude with a word of judgment, but redemption. As much as disobedience and sin are part of the Biblical account, so too are healing and restoration. Those two threads are integral to understanding humanity's relationship with God and they must not be separated.

Below are some questions to help guide you through a discussion on Leviticus 26.

Text: Leviticus 26

Main Themes:

Humanity's relationship with God is intimately connected to the land

Being good stewards of the earth is one of the commands given to us by God

The consequences for humanity's disobedience to God are born out through the land

Repentance and obedience lead to healing and restoration

Verses 1-13: The chapter opens with a recitation of the good works of God and a description of humanity's intended relationship with God.

Questions:

- How is the relationship between God, humanity and creation depicted?
- What does it mean that the fruitfulness of the land is tied to following God's statutes and commands?
- Is there any significance to the fact that God's promise to provide rains and food is followed by an assurance of peace in the land?

Verses 14- 39: The list of penalties for disobeying God's commands raise the difficult questions about God's justice and character discussed in the introduction. Current economic and political climates should also be held in mind. Consider that the U.S. is borrowing money from China to buy oil from the Middle East to burn in ways that are destroying our environment. Consider also that droughts and flooding are creating millions of climate refugees, forcing populations to compete for dwindling agricultural resources and creating destabilized regions where terrorism can thrive. Lastly, consider that the spread of diseases such as malaria is on the rise globally in part because of changing environmental conditions. Keep these modern day issues in mind as you discuss the following.

Questions:

- Do we spurn God's statutes and abhor God's ordinances when we do not properly care for creation? Read Gen 2:15, Lev. 19: 9-11, 25: 24, Micha 6:8
- What does it say to us that in the midst of all the destruction that will befall humanity for its disobedience, God notes that the land will have its Sabbath?
- Does this passage connect punishment with how we treat the land?
- Do any of these punishments resonate with current global issues?
- Given what we know about the interconnected nature of climate change, poverty, disease, political destabilization etc, is it possible to view these punishments less as God's vengeance and more as an inevitable result of living outside of the relationship with creation that we were commanded to have?
- What do these verses reveal about the nature of God and human disobedience?

Verses 40-46: Redemption is possible. God will not forsake God's people or abandon them to punishment forever, but repentance is necessary.

Questions:

- Is restoration possible? What must humanity do?
- What does repentance look like in terms of our relationship to creation?

- Does a right relationship with creation put us back in right relationship with God?