

The Year of Jubilee
Leviticus 25:8-54

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In a Peanuts cartoon, Lucy approached Charlie Brown with a paper and pen and said, *“Here, sign this. It absolves me from all blame.”*

Then she goes to Schroeder with the same paper and said the same, *“Here, sign this. It absolves me from all blame.”*

Finally, she comes to Linus, *“Here, sign this. It absolves me from all blame.”* As she walks away Linus says, *“Gee, that must be a nice document to have.”* This is what we’re looking at this morning.

We’ve seen how Elijah declared the Word of the Lord, not only when it was hard to hear but when it was hard to preach.

This taught us that we need to declare the Word of the Lord, faithfully according to the Bible.

Then we looked at John the Baptist who was a voice in the desert crying, *“Prepare ye the way of the Lord.”*

This taught us that the way to prepare for the coming of the Lord in our lives, as well in the lives of others, was through repentance.

This morning, it’s time to turn a phrase in the song that many people have heard of, *“The year of Jubilee.”*

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Leviticus 25:8-54 gives the details for the Year of Jubilee. Basically, it would have been one long party.

No work was to be done in the fields, slaves were to be freed, debts cleared, and property returned to its original owners. It was to be the great equalizer.

It almost turned the economic status of the Israelites into an episode of Star Trek. Why Star Trek? Well, the original Star Trek was famous for its reset button.

No matter how bad the situation was, no matter how grim the problem, or how much of an advantage the enemy had, you knew at the start of the next episode everything would return to the way it had begun.

Captain Kirk might have a love interest, but come the next week she would be forgotten never to return.

The Enterprise might be damaged beyond all recognition but come the next week, it would be back to its straight out of the shipyards perfection.

The characters might be at each other's throats, fighting over some issue, but come next week they'd be best friends again. The famous reset button. Everything returned to the way it was.

The Year of Jubilee could also be compared to the boardgame Risk. The board's a map of the world, divided into countries and continents.

Each player is assigned a set number of countries and a set number of plastic figures representing armies.

The idea is to take over the world. The point is that no matter how badly you did in one game, no matter how quickly your armies were wiped out, no matter how bad your tactics were, you always started the next game with a full set of troops and full set of countries.

The Year of Jubilee was to be the reset button, the great leveler. It was supposed to turn the economics of a dog-eat-dog world into a 50 year game with a reset button.

Now, not everything was reset, money was not pulled and then redistributed, but your ancestral lands were to be returned, slaves were to be released, and unpaid debts were to be cancelled.

It sounds great but I doubt if it would've been workable. I can't comment on the results of the Year of Jubilee because it's doubtful whether it was ever implemented.

There's no evidence to prove it ever was implemented. In fact, if you think about God's judgement on Israel, you can see the 70 years of exile in Babylon was 1 year for every time the Year of Jubilee should have been celebrated but wasn't.

However, it's probably not as unworkable as it might seem. People knew when the Year of Jubilee was coming, and the value of things could've been worked out according to that.

Obviously, no-one's going to give someone a loan for millions dollars in December in the year before the Jubilee, but this also extended to the way the "sale" of land was carried out, too.

Technically, the land couldn't be sold but only leased until the next Jubilee Year, and the price that was paid would've been worked out in relation to this.

So, if you "bought" a field just after the Jubilee Year you paid a lot more than you did if you "bought" the same field nearer to the time of the Jubilee Year.

It was reminder to the people that the land wasn't really theirs but was God's Who entrusted it to them.

It was also a type of economics unlike anything the world was seen before or since.

It wasn't communism, where everything was state controlled since you weren't supposed to own anything or make your own profit, but it wasn't un-restrained capitalism either.

There were limits on what you could and couldn't do. You couldn't permanently buy up all your neighbors' land. You couldn't bankrupt your neighbors or competitors permanently.

You were to care for the poor and not take advantage of them. No matter how bad things got at the end of the 50 years, you would have the land back.

You'd be freed from your debts and whatever situation you had gotten yourself into, so you or your children could start again. It brought hope, there was a way out.

However, the ultimate concept associated with Jubilee was that of forgiveness and restoration.

Debts were to have been forgiven and property restored to the condition that God had given them on first entering the land.

Like I said earlier, the Year of Jubilee was probably never implemented. However, there were two instances in history where something like it had been attempted. One ancient and one modern.

The first incident happened around 35 years after Jesus' death and resurrection. In AD 66, when the Jews revolted against Rome, one of their first acts of rebellion was to burn the temple records of debt.

Debt was a problem then as now, with many of the poor in so much debt they couldn't realistically pay.

The act of burning the records was a Jubilee statement of clearing the debts. The new, free nation of Israel was to get a clean start.

The other example is a more recent. It was initiated in 1999 called Jubilee 2000. Now, I don't know if you've heard of Jubilee 2000 or not, but it was an appeal involving both Christians and non-Christians.

One of the highest profile personality in the movement was Bono of U2. The reason for the name Jubilee was because of the large driving force of Christians and the Biblical Year of Jubilee.

It was an attempt to get first world countries to forgive third world countries their debts, as a one-off deal.

The problem was they were paying more in interest payments to first world countries than they were receiving in aid.

Britain agreed to the plan, provided the countries agreed not to spend the money on weapons, other countries didn't support the plan.

The concept is still going today, but with different names in different countries. Here in the United States, it's known as Jubilee USA.

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Regardless that it was never celebrated, Leviticus wasn't the end of the Year of Jubilee. The imagery and thoughts behind it are found at least twice more.

Once in Isaiah 61:1-2, and once when Jesus quoted Isaiah in Luke 4:

Luke 4:17-19, "And the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was handed to him. Unrolling it, he found the place where it is written: "The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor."

He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

This passage is often called the Nazareth manifesto. It's here where Jesus laid out the framework of His mission here on earth.

While the quote from Isaiah doesn't actually mention the Year of Jubilee, it contains much of the same imagery, and the idea is firmly behind what Isaiah said. However, Isaiah seems to take it beyond an every 50 year event.

Perhaps, in frustration that it never took place and the ideas designed to protect the poor were just ignored, Isaiah looked for an ultimate Jubilee when everything would be put right once and for all.

So, what was Jesus trying to communicate by saying this passage had been fulfilled. Was He calling Israel to actually implement the Year of Jubilee or was it all about economic reform?

While Jesus did make economic comments in His ministry, there's no evidence that Jesus was trying to get Israel, as a whole, to implement the Year of Jubilee.

So, was Jesus just trying to put a spiritual interpretation to it? Well partly, yes. There's a spiritual interpretation here to which we need to pay attention.

Here Jesus is offering a release from slavery to sin. We're reminded that true blindness is not seeing what God's saying or requiring.

The oppression from which the people most needed freeing wasn't the Romans but rather the sin.

Remember, in the context of the Year of Jubilee, the key themes were forgiveness and restoration.

The Year of Jubilee talked about slavery but it's not the usual type of slavery which we think. It's not the slavery of a subject race by a conqueror.

Also, when someone got into debt that he couldn't pay, they were taken as a slave to pay that debt. So, when the Year of Jubilee came that debt would've been forgiven, and the man set free.

In one case there was forgiveness; the debt was cleared. But there was also another aspect; there were freedom and restoration issues.

It wasn't always a person's fault when they got into debt, sometimes they were just exploited by a rich, powerful, and nasty neighbor.

The Year of Jubilee was for them as well. They got their land back. The exploitation was undone.

Jesus' death not only dealt with forgiving us but also helping us deal with what had been done to us. It's not always instant or painless but it's there.

Corrie ten Boom told of not being able to forget a wrong that had been done to her. She had forgiven the person, but she kept rehashing the incident causing her to lose sleep.

Finally, Corrie cried out to God for help in putting the problem to rest. Corrie wrote, *"Help came in the form of a kindly Lutheran pastor to whom I confessed my failure after two sleepless weeks."*

"Up in the church tower," he said, nodding out the window, "is a bell which is rung by pulling on a rope. But you know what? After the sexton lets go of the rope, the bell keeps on swinging."

First ding, then dong. Slower and slower until there's a final dong and it stops. I believe the same thing is true of forgiveness. When we forgive, we take our hand off the rope.

But if we've been tugging at our grievances for a long time, we mustn't be surprised if the old angry thoughts keep coming for a while. They're just the ding-dongs of the old bell slowing down."

"And so, it proved to be. There were a few more midnight reverberations, a couple of dings when the subject came up in my conversations, but the force -- which was my willingness in the matter - - had gone out of them.

They came less and less often and at the last stopped altogether. We can trust God not only above our emotions, but also above our thoughts."

Someone else put it this way, "Forgiveness doesn't make the other person right, it makes you free."

In the spirit of Jubilee, as a result of what Jesus did, Philip Yancey said in his book, *What's so Amazing About Grace*:

"At last I understood: in the final analysis, forgiveness is an act of faith. By forgiving another, I'm trusting that God is a better justice-maker than I am. By forgiving, I release my own right to get even and leave all issues of fairness for God to work out. I leave in God's hands the scales that must balance justice and mercy."

Remember, the two key ideas here are forgiveness for the debts we've gotten ourselves into and also freedom from slavery. Jesus came to usher in the Year of Jubilee.

His death not only dealt with the evil we had committed but also dealt with the wrong done to us. The Year of Jubilee... freedom from our sins and freedom from the sins done to us.

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But it's not just that, the year of Jubilee wasn't just about spiritual truths, it was how spiritual truths should affect our lives as well, and some of these are social.

I think it's fair to say that Jesus expected His followers to form communities and to enact these Jubilee principles within those communities. Which, if we read the description of the New Testament church from Acts, we can see evidence of.

It was about forgiveness, not just before God but between people as well. Not just in Spiritual matters but in material matters, too. People pooled resources and gave them to the poor.

One of the complaints Paul had was about lawsuits between Christians. Paul basically said he'd rather be wronged or cheated than take another Christian to court.

Christians shouldn't be exploiting one another. The principals of Jubilee, forgiveness and freedom, should be lived by Christians all the time.

British General James Oglethorpe, founder of the colony of Georgia, bluntly told John Wesley, "*Preacher, I never forgive.*" Wesley replied, "*Then, sir, I hope you never sin.*"

The opposite of the Jubilee attitude is seen in this illustration about a pastor who arranged a gathering of the women's auxiliary. It was to be a garden party on the church lawn, under the old oak tree.

At the last moment on the morning of the party, Mrs. Pastor discovered her husband had left Sister Hissyfit off the invitation list. The Pastor called the dear sister and begged forgiveness.

“I’m so sorry we didn’t catch this sooner, Mrs. Hissyfit, won’t you please come to the garden party?,” coaxed the pastor. *“Beggin’ won’t help now, Pastor,”* said the offended Mrs. Hissyfit, *“I’ve already prayed for rain.”*

The Jubilee 2000 project was something in which Christians should’ve been involved. It was about the lifting of debts to give countries a chance to break the cycle.

Like the Year of Jubilee, it wasn’t a guarantee of success, but merely the offer of a second chance.

It’s a Christian principle to give second chances. Think about who you can give Jubilee second chances to in your life. Who has let you down, is indebted to you, or wronged you?

Who can you offer a second chance to in the spirit of Jubilee? To be Christian is to seek opportunities to offer the Jubilee second chance.

Philip Yancey said, *“The people of God are not merely to mark time, waiting for God to step in and set right all that is wrong. Rather, they are to model the new heaven and new earth, and by so doing awaken longings for what God will someday bring to pass.”*

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Conclusion

So, what did we learn about the Year of Jubilee? What do we mean when we sing the words *“Lift your voice, it’s the year of jubilee?”*

First, we're lifting our voices in thanksgiving and praise; in thanks that God is a God of forgiveness. That Jesus came to bring forgiveness.

Forgiveness not only for the wrongs we've done, as one version of the Lord's prayer says, "forgive *us our debts*," but also to bring forgiveness and healing to the things done to us, to set us free, to restore us.

Sometimes that takes a long time and hard work, but God holds out the offer.

Second, we must raise our voice in the proclamation of the Year of Jubilee; in the call for justice, the call for a second chance. The call for equality and for a rebalancing of the books.

We must seek people and situations to which we can announce the Year of Jubilee and a second chance.