
JUBILEE: OUTDATED AND IRRELEVANT, OR DESPERATELY NEEDED?

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You shall count off seven Sabbaths of years, seven times seven years; and there shall be to you the days of seven Sabbaths of years, even forty-nine years. Then you shall sound the loud trumpet on the tenth day of the seventh month. On the Day of Atonement you shall sound the trumpet throughout all your land. You shall make the fiftieth year holy, and proclaim liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants. It shall be a jubilee to you; and each of you shall return to his own property, and each of you shall return to his family

Leviticus 25:8-10 (WEB)

Some Bible scholars discount the Old Testament Year of Jubilee (Leviticus 25) by claiming that the methods advocated to obtain relief from poverty and oppression are outmoded and unworkable in the modern world. There is some truth in that position, since many of the strategies used to implement Jubilee were of a time-specific nature, and would be troublesome if practiced today.

But it's the Jubilee principles that really matter. And the principles of Jubilee are as relevant today as ever, even though strategies tailored for use in simple agrarian societies would be of limited use today.

The purpose of God's provision for a Year of Jubilee was to create in Israel an egalitarian, just society free from poverty, exploitation, and oppression. But the experiment had barely begun when Israel fell into idolatry and apostasy. Thus no real attempt was ever made to implement these principles long enough for them to bear their intended fruit. One may thus conclude that perhaps they exist in Scripture for our benefit today, since God well knew that apostate Israel would at that time fail to implement His will for economic and social health.

A leading Jubilee principle concerns ongoing preservation and revitalization of the earth. Agricultural land was the leading productive resource in ancient times, so the Jubilee principle of preserving the land was a major method of enhancing productive capacity and conserving real wealth. Every seven years the land was to be rested by remaining fallow. God promised plenty during the sixth year so that there would be no food shortages. Even domestic animals and people were thus rested, to the overall benefit of both the land and its inhabitants.

When we read of the evils of "soil mining," and massive erosion today, with the consequent loss in fertility countered by excessive use of fertilizers, herbicides, and pesticides; we wonder if God didn't have it right in the first place.

Another Jubilee principle held that the land belonged only to God, so persons using the land for their economic welfare must consider themselves tenants and stewards rather than owners. In the beginning Adam and Eve were commanded by God to "dress" and "keep" the Garden of Eden. Even though they were given domination over God's creation, their role of stewardship did not allow for abuse or neglect of God's gift. One cannot help contrast this view of responsible land use with the current malaise in which coal companies feel vindicated in stripping bare the mountains of West Virginia, and rapacious timber companies clear-cut pristine watersheds. Other businesses feel justified in polluting land, air, and water, and landowners believe ownership of land entitles them to do much as they please.

Under Jubilee principles, productive resources such as land existed to benefit people; not the other way around as is so often true in modern society. Provision was made for every family to possess a portion of land as a productive factor to guarantee their economic welfare. Land could be sold at any time, with the price being dependent upon the number of years to Jubilee. At Jubilee all land outside walled cities would revert to its original owners, thus ensuring that productive wealth was never permanently lost to any family.

Jubilee also provided several other bulwarks against poverty. Persons falling into situational poverty as a result of financial reverses or illness were treated with dignity and equity. Intergenerational poverty that robs extended families of dignity and hope was rendered impossible by the Jubilee provision that all farm land would revert to its original owners every 50 years. Thus every family was provided with access to productive factors with which to earn a living.

If we substitute natural resources for land in the Jubilee equation, then we have a situation in which all natural resources would be used, not for the personal aggrandizement of a few powerful owners, but for all the people. If some person or business were allowed to develop resources due to their technological expertise or market position, they would be allowed reasonable profits as a return for their effort, but would also pay a resource depletion fee and reasonable taxes so as to distribute wealth among the people. They would also be required to pay living wages to their workers, and to take at least some responsibility for family health care and retirement provisions.

There is much more to be said on the application of Jubilee principles to the modern world. We will continue this study as time permits and the Lord leads.