

JUBILEE

50 BIBLE STUDIES
ON POVERTY
AND JUSTICE

tearfund LEARN

Jubilee: 50 Bible studies on poverty and justice

Tearfund is celebrating 50 years since the organisation was founded. We are reflecting on the biblical concept of jubilee and what it means for Tearfund's work.

This book contains 12 new reflections on what the Bible tells us about jubilee by theological thinkers from different parts of the world, and 38 Bible studies published by Tearfund over the years that are relevant to the theme of jubilee.

Acknowledgements

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Tearfund partners with the local church to empower communities to lift themselves out of poverty, live transformed lives and reach their God-given potential.

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JUBILEE

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FOREWORD

In many places countries are rich and yet so poor. There are many people teaching prosperity and peace but few link these to the jubilee as a means of resetting the social structure of society to ensure mutual peace and prosperity. This omission is likely due to reluctance by many to seriously read and understand what the Bible is saying.

The crescendo in the discourse involving jubilee, justice and poverty is indicative of the global concerns these issues have become. Many people from unlikely places are reiterating the concept of jubilee in addressing the socio-economic woes of peoples and nations. The concept has pervaded the religious sphere, and is now becoming a political and socio-economic concern in addressing global poverty and deprivation.

Every society is maintained by its laws, cultures and values. Any time those laws, cultures and values are abused, the outlook of that society becomes skewed. The same applies to the community of biblical Israel where the concept of jubilee was revealed, if not practised. God intended that society should be one of shared prosperity, characterised by justice and righteousness. The concept of jubilee was instituted to effect God's intentions for a prosperous community. In Deuteronomy 15, where jubilee is celebrated in the release of slaves and debts, God promised the children of Israel that if they obeyed the laws of the jubilee, there would be no 'poor' among them because he would bless them abundantly.



Photo: Guatemala. Jim Loring/Tearfund

**THE CHURCH IS ALSO
CALLED TO BE PROPHETIC,
MODELLING TO SOCIETY
WHAT RECONCILED
RELATIONSHIPS
LOOK LIKE**

In much of the majority world, the path to prosperity involves selfishness, corruption and injustice. On the contrary, God is asking us to live selflessly, to release our assets, to forgive debts and to release slaves. We are only able to do these things if we accept that whatever we have belongs to God, and so when we release the land to allow it to rest, when we release the self to rest and when we lift the burden of slaves by releasing them, we are releasing back to God. When we release to God, we make the palm of our hands open not only to let go, but to show God that we are ready to receive more. This is the secret behind the jubilee and prosperity.

Tearfund is a trailblazer in seeking jubilee as couched in the biblical text. It has taken the discussion a notch higher by allowing voices from across the globe to contribute to the discussions and inviting them to do an authentic study of the Bible. Further, it is encouraging writers to not only speak to the issues, but to engage in meaningful dialogue with others on these issues, knowing that all Christians constitute the body of Christ and hear from God. The African adage says 'it is good to always dive deep into the pool, but it is wise to come up to the surface periodically to see who else is in the pool.' Tearfund's work on the jubilee does not only allow us to go very deep both theologically and biblically on the issues, but is also creating the platform to engage with others. This empowers all of us to have an integrated perspective and live a life of jubilee as God intended. Consequently, this work becomes a valuable resource for theological discourse on poverty alleviation and the socio-economic and political implications for the prosperity of our nations.

John Jusu, PhD

**Regional Director for Africa
Overseas Council**



HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

This book contains 12 new reflections on what the Bible tells us about jubilee. We have asked theological thinkers from Latin America, Africa, Asia, the Middle East and North America to reflect on one of four passages: Leviticus 25, Isaiah 61, Luke 4 and Romans 8.

The book also includes 38 Bible studies that Tearfund has published over the past fifty years, many of them coming from Pillars Guides for community development and our magazine, *Footsteps*, which provides practical information to bring about positive change. These provide a snapshot of the insights and inspiration that have encouraged churches and communities for many years.

Each of these studies can be done on your own or with a group. We recommend that you start with prayer, asking God to open your heart and mind to his Spirit and word, before reading the Bible passage, and responding to the questions that are asked. We would love to hear what God says to you during these times and to share this with others on our Tearfund Learn website. Please email us at publications@tearfund.org if there is anything you would like to share. Above all, may these studies inspire and bless you as you seek to serve God and see his kingdom come.

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1968

It was the year of the Prague Spring, the year Martin Luther King and Bobby Kennedy were assassinated, the middle of the Vietnam War and the Cold War.

In the UK *2001: A Space Odyssey* hit the cinemas and the rock band Led Zeppelin hit the stage. There were tensions in the UK evangelical church between those who wanted to stay in the historic denominations and those who wanted to establish an independent evangelical denomination; and in the global evangelical church about the importance of social action. René Padilla was travelling secretary in Latin America for the International Fellowship of Evangelical Students and was developing, with others, the theological concept of *misión integral*. And in Nigeria, there was civil war and famine.

In the UK, as coverage of the Nigerian crisis hit the media, churches began to respond: many were sending money to the Evangelical Alliance to pass on to the church in Nigeria. The EA was not involved in overseas aid or development work. It began to distribute the money through existing evangelical agencies, and eventually appointed George Hoffman, a former curate, to develop the work of the Evangelical Alliance's Relief Fund. And so Tearfund was born.

2018

Tearfund is turning 50! I wasn't born in 1968 but I am thrilled now to be joining this story. As an organisation, we have grown beyond our wildest imagination and ambitions.

We respond to disasters and crises and pursue long-term community development, working in partnership with churches all around the world and rooted in our faith. We have become known for great learning resources that equip local communities and churches to participate in transformative work. We seek to be bold advocates and campaigners: we played a part in the campaign to cancel overseas debt for the millennium in 2000, the Make Poverty History campaign in 2005 and the If campaign in 2013. Today, we are working to see people live in ways that are environmentally and economically sustainable, and that allow individuals and communities to flourish in all areas of their lives.

We have also become known for our commitment to holistic mission and our strong theological grounding. We believe that the salvation Jesus makes possible offers us liberation from brokenness, poverty and injustice in all areas of our lives, and for the whole of God's creation. While the Bible tells us that we live in a broken world, we believe that God's mission is to redeem and restore all that he has made. An end to extreme poverty is possible, and Tearfund's vision is to pursue this in the places where the need is greatest. Jesus called and commissioned the church to participate in God's mission, seeking his kingdom in all spheres of life, and we seek to support the church in this mission.

For many years, we were guided by the Welsh theologian Dewi Hughes, the author of *God of the Poor* and *Power and Poverty*, and we continue to be advised by a theology committee, whose members come from around the world, and by many friends and allies whose great wisdom we value. As we approached our fiftieth birthday, we began to reflect upon the biblical concept of jubilee and to ask ourselves what this means for Tearfund and the work we do. As we worship God and follow his call, we are transformed to be more like Christ and to do the things he did, through the power of the Holy Spirit. In Luke 4, Jesus declared that he was the fulfilment of the jubilee laws given to Israel as they entered the promised land. If we are following Christ, then it is important that we think about what jubilee is, and how it calls us to live.

We believe that the essence of jubilee is its provision of a way of life for God's redeemed, liberated people, enabling us to flourish and thrive through the restoration of our relationships with God, with an understanding of ourselves as God's children, with one another, and with all creation. We want to see Christians and churches all over the world thinking about what this means as we participate in mission, and to hear from each other – sisters and brothers – as we are inspired and challenged about what biblical jubilee means to us.

Dr Ruth Valerio
Director of Advocacy and Influencing, Tearfund

IF WE ARE FOLLOWING CHRIST, THEN IT IS IMPORTANT THAT WE THINK ABOUT WHAT JUBILEE IS, AND HOW IT CALLS US TO LIVE

STUDY 1

How does God practise jubilee?

In Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy, God established detailed laws to ensure fair practice and justice concerning property and freedom. He knew that, over time, people would exploit each other and the land, but he established laws to ensure that things would be restored at certain times to their original state. These laws ensured that people who were poor or slaves had the hope of future justice.

These laws are based on the principle of the jubilee. They prevent land from becoming exhausted and infertile. They give freedom from debt and slavery every seven years and ensure the redistribution of wealth and land every 50 years. These laws are explained in three different books of the Old Testament. We don't know to what extent the principle of the jubilee was practised in Old Testament times. However, these principles, of preventing the rich from becoming richer and the poor becoming poorer, remain at the heart of God's desire for justice.



DISCUSSION

Read Exodus 23:10–11, Exodus 21:2–6, Deuteronomy 15:1–18 and Leviticus 25

- These laws look at several different things: the freeing of slaves, care of the land, the forgiveness of debts and the redistribution of property and land. What would be the consequences if the jubilee laws were still in use today?
- What can we learn from the jubilee laws about God's plan?
- Do your national laws try to ensure that wealth is distributed more fairly in your country? How effective are the laws concerning this (for example, paying taxes)?

*This study first appeared in Pillars:
Seeking justice for all*



NOTES

STUDY 2

The jubilee principle

Read Leviticus 25:8–31

Leviticus is the third book of the Old Testament. It provides guidelines for our relationship with God and our neighbours. Chapter 25 talks of two major festivals, firstly the Sabbath year when land was left fallow to rest every seventh year and, secondly, the jubilee year which occurred every fifty years. The jubilee was God's answer to long-term poverty. People become poor for all kinds of reasons; they struggle to improve their situation. However, the jubilee allowed for a new beginning in every generation. For people caught in the poverty trap, it gave hope and new opportunities as land was restored to its original owners, debts were cancelled and slaves were set free. Land, slaves and loans were all to be valued based on their nearness to the jubilee year. No-one is sure if the radical principle of the jubilee year was ever carried out, but when Jesus read from the book of the prophet Isaiah in Luke 4:18–19, he proclaimed that the year of the Lord's favour – the year of jubilee – had come. In Jesus we can experience a 'jubilee'.



DISCUSSION

- What was to happen when the trumpet sounded to mark the start of jubilee?
- Who does the land belong to (v 23)? How did this affect how the Israelites used the land?
- What does the jubilee principle tell us about God's concern for the poor and the oppressed?
- What are the differences between God's answer to poverty and injustice and the world's answer?
- Who benefited from the jubilee?
- How might we and our neighbours benefit from a jubilee? What would be the main difficulties in actually carrying out the jubilee principle?
- In what ways can we practise and experience a jubilee now in Jesus?
- Pray for those living in poverty and oppressed by injustice, that they may be able to experience God's jubilee in Jesus.

*This study first appeared in Footsteps 31:
Readers' feedback issue*



NOTES

STUDY 3

God's vision for our society

For very many people in our world today, life is very difficult. They may have problems in their family lives, with lack of money, food, work or housing. Poor health may be a concern. They may have lost loved ones. They may be living in fear of abuse or violence. They may have lost their homes as a result of conflict, disaster or famine.

It is helpful to remind ourselves that however difficult life may be now, God has a perfect plan for our world. We read in Isaiah 65 and Revelation 21 that God has planned a new earth and a new heaven where Jesus will live with his people as our King. He will bring comfort to the sad, healing of pain and an end to death and mourning. There will be no place in this new earth for those motivated by evil. It will be a place of wonderful beauty. There will be no need for people to build churches to worship God in, as his presence will be everywhere.

What a wonderful vision to encourage us today, whatever our situation!



DISCUSSION



NOTES

Read Isaiah 65:17–25

- This is how God would like things to be now, if everyone was responsive to his will. What will happen to this present world with all its difficulties (v 17)?
- What are the first concerns of God mentioned in verses 19 and 20? Consider our own lives now. Would these be your first concerns too?
- Verses 21 and 22 describe a situation where each person will have their own home and their own land. No-one will be exploited in working for others. What difference would this make in our own situation? How would this change life?
- What kind of stability is described in verses 23–25?
- Read Revelation 21:1–4 and 21:22–27. What else do these passages add to the verses in Isaiah 65?
- Reflect on these wonderful pictures and pray for their fulfilment when Christ returns. Contrast our present situation. Is there anything we could do to play a part in bringing some of this to fulfilment in the lives of those around us?

*This study first appeared in Pillars:
Seeking justice for all*

STUDY 4

The misuse of power

Most situations today where people suffer injustice and are not allowed to live with dignity are the result of power being used for the wrong reasons. People who are given power and authority have special demands placed upon them to use their power for the benefit of others. However, power can be used poorly or abused – through lack of care, corruption or for personal gain. Injustice can occur when those with power neglect to carry out their responsibilities, or force others to act in certain ways.

People who are poor often feel completely without power. Yet each person can have some influence. By working together, that influence increases. People who are poor and who suffer injustice need to be supported in gaining confidence to challenge the misuse of power. In doing so, they will gain some power and influence.

Seeking justice is a slow, often painstaking process. Sometimes it can be almost impossible within countries where deception and corruption are common. But no suffering goes unnoticed by God.



DISCUSSION



NOTES

Read 1 Kings 21:1–16

- This is the story of Naboth's vineyard and of how power was misused with terrible consequences. Why did King Ahab want Naboth's vineyard? Why did Naboth not want to sell the vineyard?
- Why did Jezebel go to such trouble with her plans to kill Naboth? Was it legal? Was it just?
- What was God's response and judgement on these actions? Read verses 17–24.
- How did Ahab respond to this judgement in verse 27?
- Why did God decide to postpone his sentence in verse 29?
- Can you think of times when you have been persuaded to do something you know is wrong – like Ahab in this story? If so, take time to reflect and to ask forgiveness. Is there anything you can do to put things right?
- Can you think of ways in which just laws in your own country are not put into practice? What are the consequences?
- What can we say to comfort those who have bravely tried to seek justice but have failed because of corruption?

*This study first appeared in Pillars:
Seeking justice for all*

STUDY 5

What does it mean to bring justice?

God has a passion for justice. We read about this in many parts of the Bible. He cares deeply about the suffering of people who are poor. God's commandments, given in the Old Testament, are intended to bring freedom for all people.

Jesus summarised many of the Old Testament laws in two commandments that sum up all of his teaching, in Matthew 22:35–40. He tells us to love God with all our hearts, souls and minds and to love others as we love ourselves. Loving other people as we love ourselves does not just mean thinking good thoughts. It means ensuring they are able to live fulfilling lives, free from oppression. We should seek justice for others so that they can live life in all its fullness as God intended.

Poverty and oppression take away people's dignity. Only when people have access to the natural, economic and political resources they need, are they able to live with dignity, and to begin to establish good relationships with each other and with their natural environment.



DISCUSSION



NOTES

Read Luke 4:18–21

- Jesus read this prophetic passage from Isaiah 61:1–2 before he began his public ministry. How much did his life reflect this prophecy?
- Jesus commands us to follow his example. How much do our lives and our work reflect this amazing example?
- Who are the prisoners in our society? Who are the blind? Who are the oppressed? What would the Lord's favour bring?
- What steps could we take to bring good news, freedom, healing and release to those whose human rights are not being met?
- What is our government doing to help those whose human rights are not being met?

*This study first appeared in Pillars:
Seeking justice for all*

STUDY 6

The right to live in freedom

All societies need to protect innocent people from those who seek to do them harm. This usually means a legal system with prison as a punishment. When justice is practised fairly, this system can be an effective way of protecting ordinary people from harm. However, it can be abused in a number of ways.

Someone accused of a crime should not be imprisoned unless there is enough evidence. Witness evidence or other kinds of proof are required and the matter should be brought before an independent court. Anyone accused of a crime should be considered innocent until they are proved guilty in a court of law. However, poor people may have no access to legal representation in court.

People may be falsely accused of crimes and be unable to defend themselves. Prison can be used as a way of silencing people with opposing political, social or religious views (often called prisoners of conscience). Courts may not always uphold justice if officials are open to bribery. Sentences may be unfairly long and, once in prison, prisoners can be forgotten by officials and remain there for many years.

In an ideal situation, prison can provide a time to reflect, a time to learn new skills and ways of thinking so that prisoners can change their lives for the better. In the Bible we are told to visit those in prison. This would encourage prisoners and help to ensure they are well treated.



DISCUSSION



NOTES

Read Acts 16:16–39

- This story describes in verses 16–24 how Paul and Silas suffered when they were falsely accused, beaten and imprisoned unjustly. What was Paul and Silas's response to this treatment (v 25)?
- What was God's response (v 26)? Have you ever experienced God's intervention in difficult circumstances?
- Imagine the situation in the prison just after the earthquake. Why do you think none of the prisoners escaped?
- Paul knew his rights. He and Silas could have escaped when they had the opportunity. But he knew they had been falsely mistreated and imprisoned. Why did he not want to leave at the first opportunity (v 35–37)?
- What injustices are you aware of in your community? What could you do to highlight them more?
- What action could you take to support people you believe have been unjustly imprisoned?

*This study first appeared in Pillars:
Seeking justice for all*



REFLECTION:**A generation's quest****Luke 4:18–21****JEAN VALERY VITAL-HERNE**

He is 30 years old and grew up in a single-parent family. His mother can barely read, but did all she could to send him to school with the meagre revenue from her candy business. Though he's known poverty all his life, he is optimistic that things will turn out well for both of them. He is full of hope but still troubled by the fact that less than 15 minutes from his home there's unimaginable wealth while few people have access to it. Furthermore, with all the violence, teen pregnancy due to rape and drug lords ruling his neighbourhood, he can't understand why the concepts of justice and freedom he's been studying and hearing about in school are not applicable to his context. Yet he is still looking towards a better future, even if sometimes that future is cloudy.

This dream of a better future belongs to Albert. He lives in Jalousie, a poor community in Pétion Ville, one of the luxurious towns in Haiti, but his dream is no different from the dreams of many in the nation of Israel in the first century. A young man of Albert's age was living in a context of great pain and expectation.

People were exploited economically and experienced a strange kind of peace called *Pax Romana* (Roman Peace) where entire populations were besieged against their will by Roman power and forced to pay allegiance to the emperor. The religious and moral system sometimes colluded with Rome to keep its privileges. Those who lived in this situation could be tempted to say, 'If the Lord is with us, then why has all this happened to us?' (Judges 6:13). However, in this raging sea of helplessness, a wind of hope was constantly blowing over the nation's heart as the Messiah, the deliverer of Israel, was expected to come and bring freedom.

It was in this unsettling atmosphere that the young Jesus received the text of Isaiah the prophet. He read from it the proclamation of good news to the poor, the release of captives, the recovery of sight to those who are blind, the liberation of those who are bruised, and the acceptable, the favourable, the welcoming year of the Lord. The most stunning declaration was made by this man, Jesus: 'Today this Scripture is fulfilled in your

hearing'. That is, deliverance had come. The long-awaited saviour had made his entry into human history to offer a way of living opposed to the present system, where the poor and the afflicted would find the safety they longed for. Those oppressed by the *Pax Romana* would experience true shalom, that is, 'a divine break in, when heaven breaks into the human condition and becomes visible' (a wonderful description from Street Psalms' Incarnational Training Framework). The intellectually, physically, economically and spiritually blind would see the light and walk in straight paths. This jubilee brings abundance instead of scarcity and exuberance in the heart instead of tears and sadness.

More than 50 per cent of Haiti's population is less than 35 years old, and the words Jesus read are what they are longing to see in their daily lives: true freedom that will unlock the shackles of systemic and generational poverty; freedom to be young and welcomed; freedom from fear of not getting a job or of being sexually and politically exploited because of their youth. They long to live in cities of joy, where enemies are embraced as friends, ghettos become places of hope and guns are replaced by books and food. They yearn for an economic system that will enable them to stay in their country instead of risking their lives in

the Amazonian forest out of desperation. They're hungry for freedom to explore the depth of God's grace, breaking down the dividing walls between churches. They ache to live Christ's abundant love through the lens of Christianity's rich diversity, knowing that the God who worked in the heart of the apostle to the Jews is the same God who blessed the work of the apostle to the gentiles.

They aspire to experience true jubilee.

QUESTIONS

- What would be the best way young people can foster a spirit of jubilee in their communities?
- How can the church encourage young people to embrace their faith holistically?
- What are three things adults can do to integrate young people into society?



REFLECTION:

Seven themes in Leviticus 25 and our call to jubilee

Leviticus 25

R. SCOTT RODIN

Tearfund's mission is to help communities around the world escape the very worst effects of poverty and disaster. How might this mission be tied to the biblical concept of jubilee? In Leviticus 25 are seven themes that depict a twofold movement of God's acting and our responding, releasing us to the better life God has for us.

1. God's ownership and our stewardship

Leviticus 25 opens with, 'When you enter the land I'm going to give you...'. From the outset, God declares this is his land to give. He defines the rules for those who receive it. The Israelites had only temporary custodianship of Canaan. They were to be stewards, caring for the land according to the wishes of the owner, but never absolute owners themselves. We, too, are to be stewards of what God has entrusted to us, whether much or little. Stewardship is a disposition of the heart before it is an outward work of our hands. It is our statement of faith that everything belongs to God.

2. God's provision and our trust

In Leviticus 25:20–22, God promises a miracle every sixth year; an abundant harvest that will feed them for the next three years of jubilee, planting and harvesting. God asks his people to trust their lives to this miracle. He would provide as he had in the wilderness. It was a foretaste of the bread of life that would come down from heaven. The Israelites were not to fear, but trust his provision for their needs.

3. God's justice and our obedience

The jubilee year declares God's justice and call to obedience despite the economic questions it raises. In God's justice, no-one should grow exorbitantly rich by amassing land and hoarding profit and no family should be condemned to perpetual poverty. God blesses industriousness, but abhors exploitation and consumerism. In God's economy, the jubilee year sets things back in order and assures that the needs of all will be met.

4. God's mercy and our care for the poor

In Leviticus 25:6–7, and 25:38, God displays his mercy and requires his people to show the same, especially towards the poor. They are to leave crops for all to glean in the jubilee year, and lest they be tempted to hoard for themselves, he reminds them twice that they belong to him. As his servants, he commands us to have the same care for the poor that he does, showing mercy because we have been shown mercy.

5. God's protection and our confidence

In verses 18 to 19, God promises his people safety from outside oppressors, and inward security born of confidence of spirit. His people should not fear evil but be at peace. Safety also implies provision, for they will 'eat their fill'. If they will obey him, God will provide their needs, protect them from their enemies, and let them live at peace in his land.

6. God's priorities and our rest

While the seventh-year jubilee rest was for the land, in verse 11 God proclaims that the fiftieth year was a rest for the people of God. Genesis teaches that we were created to rest in God; six days to work and a seventh to rest. And rest requires faith. When we cease working we proclaim that God will provide for us even as we rest. God's priority is that we seek intimacy with him as our highest calling.

7. God's holiness and our worship

Finally, in verse 12, God declares that the jubilee is holy. God has consecrated this year for his people and his purposes. It is a holy rest because it is rest in a holy God who works in and through us by way of the Sabbath rest. He draws near to us, restoring us for the work to which he calls us. Our response should be worship, praise, adoration, prayer, meditation, and the cultivation of the spirit that rejoices in abiding in him.

These seven themes of sovereignty, provision, justice, mercy, protection, rest, and holiness can equip us to serve God in our work of caring for the poor and seeking justice for the oppressed. As you consider their role in your life and work, here are three questions for deeper discussion.

QUESTIONS

- Which of these themes gives you the greatest joy, and why?
- Which of these themes is the most challenging for you, and why?
- What one thing might God be calling you to change in your life in response to this study?



STUDY 9

What is the church?

To many people the word 'church' means a large building where Christians meet. To Christians it usually means the place where they gather with other believers to worship God. This may be in a home, a school, a church or under a tree. But the word also means a group of believers, and can refer to a much larger grouping of churches, all believing the same things and worshipping in a similar way. There is also a third meaning, when the word refers to all Christian believers.

Jesus first used the word that is translated 'church' in Matthew's gospel (Matthew 16:18). He used it to describe the gathering of people who believed in him – his followers. The first disciples believed that Jesus was the long-promised Christ and the Son of God. After the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus, these disciples – inspired by the Holy Spirit – played a key part in establishing the early church with the community of Jesus' followers.



DISCUSSION

- What do you think of when someone says the word 'church'?
- In 1 Peter 2:4–8 Jesus is referred to as the cornerstone or foundation. What is the significance of the cornerstone when building a house? What does this tell us about Jesus' place in the church?

Read Matthew 16:13–18

- What did Jesus mean when he talked about 'my church'? Remember that at that time there were no church buildings. The early Christians sometimes gathered to worship in the temple at Jerusalem and probably in Jewish synagogues, but mainly in private houses.
- Jesus himself never mentioned the idea of a building or a denomination. Why do Christians today seem to think these are so important? How much value do we give to our buildings and denomination?

Read John 17:20–23

- Unity was very important to Jesus. How effectively do all the different denominations and groups that make up 'the church' work together in unity? What could we do better? How would this affect the witness of the church?

*This study first appeared in Pillars:
Mobilising the church*



NOTES

STUDY 10

The role of the church

God sent his son Jesus to establish justice in the world. Churches need to share Jesus' concern for the poor and the oppressed. The Bible makes it clear that as Christians we should share God's passion for justice. This does not just mean that we should live good lives as individuals. We should also try to correct what is wrong in our society, bringing about righteousness.

Church leaders can speak out with considerable authority about many situations. They can challenge unjust laws and promote and defend the rights of poor people. Through their example and leadership they can inspire, direct and encourage their churches to take action to promote justice. This may be through prayer, through giving, through practical caring, through speaking out and through different approaches to advocacy work on behalf of those who are suffering. Usually it will be a combination of all of these.

God wants righteousness to flow from his church, just like the water in a fast-flowing river. The church should provide leadership and inspiration for a wide range of social actions that aim to bring justice into our hurting world.

DISCUSSION

Read Amos 5:1–24

We read in the book of Amos about the injustice of that time. Poor people's rights were not respected (v 11), bribery was common (v 12) and those who fought for justice and truth were despised (v 10).

- What do verses 7, 10, 11 and 12 say about the way the people behaved towards their neighbours?
- What does God condemn in verse 21? What did it mean for an Israelite of that time to carry out religious festivals? Are there similar situations today in the way we practise our faith?
- What does the prophet suggest will be a true and acceptable action towards God in place of these 'religious festivals' in verse 24?
- Does our worship lack concern for those who suffer or are treated unfairly? Christians frequently think that such problems have nothing to do with their faith. How could we answer them?
- How can we include our concern for social justice in the heart of our worship?
- Challenging injustice requires considerable courage and persistence. What strengths does the church have to equip it to take action?

- Read Micah 6:8. What does God ask of us? How effective are we in carrying out these three commands? Which do we find the most challenging? Let us make them our prayer for future direction.

This study first appeared in Pillars: Seeking justice for all



STUDY 11

How does Jesus see the church?

At the start of his ministry, Jesus read a passage from Isaiah 61:1–2 in a synagogue. The passage described the work of the redeemer in preaching good news, freeing captives, giving sight to the blind and bringing justice to those who were oppressed. Jesus said that this prophecy was now fulfilled by his arrival.

In the gospels we learn of how Jesus carried out his ministry. He went out to people in the towns and villages, with his eyes open to their needs. He brought healing and released people from the power of demons. He challenged the authorities over unjust or hypocritical practices and preached the good news of the kingdom of God. He sent out his disciples to do the same with little formal training and no resources.

Jesus spent a lot of time with the 12 disciples, teaching and training them and showing them how to live through his own example. He equipped them to continue his work on earth. Jesus' challenge to the disciples (Matthew 10 and 28) was to 'go and do the same'. We are challenged in just the same way by him to share in his work of caring for the needy, to teach others about all that he has commanded, and to make new disciples.

DISCUSSION

Think about your own church. Describe what your church is like, using a picture or symbol.

- What is traditionally seen as the main role of the church worldwide?
- What does your church congregation believe is its most important role?

Read Luke 4:14–21 and Matthew 9:35–10:1

- Discuss the different roles that Jesus came to fulfil. What do each of them mean in our community today?
- How did Jesus put his words into action?
- Does his way of life differ from our present way of thinking about the work of the church? If so, why?
- How can your church respond to his challenge to the disciples and to us?

There are many ways in which a church affects the wider community. Some are open and obvious, while others are more hidden, particularly in countries where believers face opposition. These may include practical caring, visiting schools or hospitals, or meeting with community leaders. Think of all the different groups of people in the wider community who do not belong to your church. Discuss what each of these groups of people might think about the church.

- What opportunities does your church have to be a positive influence in your community? How could you be a more positive influence?

A version of this study first appeared in Pillars: Mobilising the church

NOTES

Good laws, poor practice

The written laws and constitutions of most countries seek to provide the basis of a just society. Over time, and often in response to particular situations, changes are made to the law and constitution, usually to improve them. However, good laws are not always put into practice. This may be for all kinds of reasons:

- People may be unaware of them.
- There may be no organisation which ensures that laws are carried out. For example, indigenous people may be exploited or lose their land because there is no organisation supporting and protecting them.
- People may not speak the national language in which the law and constitution are written. They face huge difficulties in claiming their rights.
- People who are poor may have no money either for a lawyer to represent them or to take a long journey to court to claim their rights. They may also be fearful of the financial consequences if they lose a court case.



DISCUSSION



NOTES

Read Luke 11:42–46

- What was Jesus criticising – the law or the practice of the law? What specifically did he criticise?
- Who represents the Pharisees in today's society? How do we learn about God's law today?
- What examples can we think of in our society where the law is good but not carried out? What are the consequences?
- What could we do to help enforce good laws that are not always followed in practice? What action could we take?
- Some countries may have different systems to provide poor people with legal representation. This usually involves legal aid of some kind. Do we know of any systems like this in our own country? Where could we find out more?

*This study first appeared in Pillars:
Seeking justice for all*

STUDY 13

God of justice and mercy

Read Micah 6:1–8

The writer speculates on how God is to be pleased and considers the value of burnt offerings and sacrifices. The reply is simple and clear – that God's basic requirement is none of these things. Instead of making ritual sacrifices, God requires his people to act with justice, mercy and humility. Verse 8 says: 'He has shown all you people what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.'

This verse motivates us to show compassion after a disaster has happened and to make efforts to stop disasters happening by pursuing justice. Disasters are often made worse by greed, inequality and exploitation. Christians can start advocacy projects which challenge these unjust relationships and make people less vulnerable to hazards.



DISCUSSION

- What issues of injustice contribute to people's sufferings in times of disaster in your area?
- What advocacy initiatives could be developed to help bring greater justice?
- God calls us to show compassion for those who are suffering. We should be merciful towards people regardless of their ethnicity, religion, sex, age or ability, remembering that all people are equally valuable to God.

*This study first appeared in Roots 9:
Reducing risk of disaster in our communities*



NOTES

STUDY 14

Provision for the poorest

Each person, however poor, has a right to live with dignity and to have their basic social and economic needs met. People should have access to water, sanitation, housing and food, however basic. Governments have a responsibility to ensure that these basic human rights are available to all their people.

We have a responsibility to make sure that certain people or groups of people are not ignored. People with disabilities, those with serious illnesses or very old people are often easy to overlook, but their need for support is considerable.

Jesus encouraged his followers to share material possessions to ensure that each person had enough to live. In the book of Acts, we see this happening in wonderful ways in the early church, as people shared what they had. Often one person's generosity will encourage others to share.



DISCUSSION



NOTES

Read John 6:1–15

- This is a very well-known Bible story of an amazing miracle that Jesus did to provide enough food for 5,000 people. We read about the boy who had brought his own food in verse 9. What might have encouraged him to let Jesus take his food?
- The willingness of the young boy to let Jesus take his food meant that 5,000 other people were fed. We are often overwhelmed by the size of the needs around us. This story is a wonderful reminder of how God can use a little faith to bring huge results. When we share the little we have with others, God may bless this beyond our expectations. Are there ways in which you could put this into practice in your own life?
- How effective is your government in meeting the needs of the poorest groups in your country? Are there minorities who lack support? What can you do to help meet their needs?

*This study first appeared in Pillars:
Seeking justice for all*



REFLECTION:

Unconditional love and the jubilee

Romans 8:35–39

SAS CONRADIE

One of the most common objections to the biblical message and Christianity is the question: 'Why does a loving God allow suffering and pain in a world that he is supposed to have created to be good?' While I was working on this Bible study, my brother broke his neck in a bicycle accident in South Africa, when he cycled into the back of a truck that was standing illegally in a cycle lane. The accident was not his fault – the truck was parked in such a way that my brother could not see it. There is little chance that he will ever walk again or even use his hands. He has three young daughters. My other brother is also paralysed after he was shot in a failed robbery 22 years ago. How can a loving God allow this amount of suffering in one family!

How should we respond to pain and suffering, especially from the perspective of the year of jubilee that proclaims freedom and rest? The jubilee laws as described in Leviticus 25 reflected God's love, freedom and compassion. The jubilee was a reminder that the Israelites owed their lives to God and were subject to his sovereign will.

Only through loyalty to him could they ever hope to be free and independent of all other masters. That is why Jesus, when applying the jubilee to his ministry in Luke 4:18, said that he came to set the oppressed free. We can only experience full freedom in Christ! Christ fulfils and completes the jubilee through his ministry. As his followers, Christians have been set free and should live out this jubilee on a daily basis by setting others free.

But how can that freedom be a reality in the midst of suffering, especially the extreme suffering that goes along with violent brutality? Sharing from his own experience, the apostle Paul says in Romans 8:35–36 that nothing can separate us from the love of Christ – not trouble, hardship, persecution, famine, nakedness, danger, death or even being slaughtered like sheep. Paul uses a word for distress that conveys the meaning of being confined in a narrow, difficult place, being helplessly hemmed in by circumstances. It is impossible to escape what is happening – there is no way out. But God loves us in the midst of

what happens to us and the suffering we experience. Nothing in life's path from beginning to end can separate us from God's love. All space from top to bottom around us is covered with God's love! As Habakkuk says, though there is nothing to eat, he will still rejoice in the Lord and be joyful in God his saviour (Habakkuk 3:17–18).

Yes, even if we are crushed by circumstances, still nothing can separate us from God's all-encompassing love. Wealth and success are not an indication of God's love. Strange though it might sound, according to Romans 8:35–39, God's love is also expressed in his sustenance for us to persevere in the midst of suffering when we have a real threat to personal life or health. Yes, in the midst of suffering, we can experience the freedom as expressed in the jubilee. Having not been in the situation myself, it is difficult to even comprehend that. But this is exactly what Paul says.

My disabled brothers and others who go through painful experiences can experience freedom in the midst of their suffering because their present suffering does not compare to the future glory when creation will be finally liberated from its bondage (Romans 8:18–25). The jubilee provides temporal freedom and rest. This cycle of suffering-rest-suffering will finally come

to an end and the jubilee will reach its fulfilment when God makes the whole of creation new and restores it to his original intention. Then God's children and the whole creation will experience permanent freedom and rest. All hardship and suffering is temporary and will come to an end! As firstfruits of the future reality (Romans 8:23) Christians can work to end the suffering of others under oppression and help them to experience physical and emotional freedom. We can expose their oppression and advocate on their behalf to name but two areas of support.

QUESTIONS

- Each of us, sooner or later, will experience pain and suffering. It was once said that the way we face suffering, pain and illness is a measure of how we handle God's unconditional love. Do you agree with this statement in view of Paul's comments in Romans 8:35–39?
- One of the features of the year of jubilee was personal freedom from oppression. How can you help give freedom to people who are suffering?
- The year of jubilee was meant to give rest to the land and people (Leviticus 25:11). How can we find rest and peace in the midst of suffering and pain?



REFLECTION:

A call to action

Luke 4:18–19

ANATOLIY GLUKHOVSKYY

Let's study Jesus' first sermon, which is based on Isaiah 61. The title of his message could be 'A call to action'. It was a very dramatic announcement of his mission, and he was faithful to it until the end. This passage explains itself the best with the reference to 'the year of the Lord's favour', the jubilee year declared in the law (Leviticus 25:8–19).

Following Jesus where the need is greatest, Tearfund aims to make a profound difference in the lives of people spiritually, economically, and even sociologically. For this to happen, the ministry must be marked by the willingness to listen to the voice of God through the Holy Spirit. 'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me' is a foundational statement for the whole chapter in Luke. Jesus is 'full of the Holy Spirit' (v 1), following his return from the wilderness, and this seems important to his role in bringing jubilee. Let's try to visualise it: Jesus took a scroll and unrolled it. By reading this particular scroll, he communicated a very important statement: *I did not come with my power*

and my mission, but that of my Father, with the Spirit. In this statement he confirms freedom from the spiritual corruption of the Jewish spiritual leaders.

Later in the New Testament, Paul lists seven ministry gifts of the Holy Spirit (Romans 12:6–8). These enable his one body in Christ to prophesy/speak the truth with love, to serve others, to encourage others, to teach, to have money to give, to have leadership ability, and to show kindness. God uses the ministry gifts to accomplish through his followers what he intended through the jubilee as expressed in Luke 4:18 – preaching good news to the poor, proclaiming freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, and releasing the oppressed. Since God has given all of his children ministry gifts, every follower of Christ therefore has a role in the jubilee. It is inclusive for all!

Jesus Christ has declared 'The year of the Lord's favour' and made jubilee possible. Believers in Christ have not only a mandate to declare this, but also his power to be good communicators of the gospel, through

the Holy Spirit. God's desire is clear – to have mercy on all. It is the privilege and responsibility of his body to bring freedom to the poor, captives, blind, and oppressed, through word and deed, allowing his holy love to bring holy healing into people's lives, serving those who need to be covered by the love of Jesus and the power of the Holy Spirit.

Tearfund is known as a Christian relief and development organisation, fully dedicated to the mission of God, the Father, by releasing people from spiritual and material poverty. Empowered by the Holy Spirit, Tearfund is seeking to live out the jubilee as expressed in Luke 4. The DNA of God's kingdom as expressed in the jubilee is already incorporated in Tearfund's DNA. But this kingdom-minded DNA should not only be part of Tearfund. Since all Christians have spiritual gifts and a calling to live out the jubilee, all organisations and churches need to have such a kingdom-minded DNA as well – joining Jesus in proclaiming and living out the values and activities of the year of the Lord's favour.

After the fall of Communism in 1991, Ukraine became free from the Soviet system, but not from its mentality. It is hard to imagine that there could be poverty and hunger in Ukraine – a country called 'the breadbasket' because of the richness of the agricultural lands. However, the Soviet system caused a poverty mentality as people believe the

government should take care of their well-being, and this affected how they used their land. The Ukrainian church realised that this understanding needed to change. The church therefore called for action to bring freedom to the poor, prisoners, and the blind. This included freedom from a poverty mentality and from corruption that was in conflict with biblical values of stewardship and put chains on people in Ukraine and imprisoned them. It also included freedom from greed, including the teaching of the so-called prosperity gospel, which made people blind to discerning and following the will of God. When there is no understanding of the danger of prosperity, corruption and greed, then the world is right to wonder if Christianity makes any difference at all.

QUESTIONS

- How is Jesus' claim that the 'year of the Lord's favour' has become a reality revealed today through your personal life and ministry?
- How can we build a team under his leadership based on the gifts of the Spirit?
- How can you ensure that your church or organisation's mission is kingdom-minded in its DNA?



Our attitude towards possessions matters

Read Luke 12:13–21



DISCUSSION

- What does Jesus warn about in verse 15? How is this shown in the parable that follows?
- Look at how many times the rich man in the parable says 'I', 'my' and 'myself'. What does this say about his attitude towards his possessions?
- Do money and possessions help or hinder this man in his relationship with God?
- What does it mean to be 'rich towards God'? Are we?

Read Psalm 49

Summarise the Psalm in a sentence. How does this Psalm challenge us in the way we use our possessions?

How do these passages challenge you as you consider how you use your money as an individual, and how can they challenge us as an organisation?

This study first appeared in Roots 6: Fundraising

 **NOTES**

Stewardship: greed and generosity

Read Luke 12:13–21

Jesus warns us to avoid all kinds of greed. 'A man's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions.'

■ What happens to the rich fool in the parable?

The man had prepared many things for himself but was not 'rich towards God'. Similarly, Proverbs 21:13 tells us: 'If a man shuts his ears to the cry of the poor, he too will cry out and not be answered.'

We are encouraged to be generous with what God has given us. We should be open-hearted and willing to lend to the poor (Exodus 23:11, Deuteronomy 15:7–8). We are also told to be eager to share and give to one another (Acts 4:34–35, 1 Corinthians 16:2, Galatians 2:10).

Read 2 Corinthians 9:6–12



God loves a cheerful giver and we will reap what we sow. He promises us: 'You will be made rich in every way so that you can be generous on every occasion.'

- In what ways might this generosity be expressed (vv 11, 12)?

Jesus also says: 'Give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over, will be poured into your lap. For with the measure you use it will be measured to you' (Luke 6:38).

- Are you listening to the cry of the poor?
- How as a group could you do more for needy people, both within your community and outside your community?

*This study first appeared in Pillars:
Improving food security*

Treasures in heaven

Read Matthew 6:19–24 and 1 Timothy 6:6–10

Jesus himself tells us that rather than storing up treasures on earth, we should store up treasures in heaven:

- What happens to earthly treasures (Matthew 6:20, 1 Timothy 6:7)?
- What is the danger for those who are wealthy (Matthew 6:24, 1 Timothy 6:9, 10, 17)?

In Matthew 19:16–22, Jesus is asked by a rich man what he must do to get eternal life.

- The rich man is keeping all the commandments, but what else does Jesus tell him to do (v 21)?

We are told the man went away sad – it was hard for him to choose between his wealth and Jesus. Others, however, realise that nothing can be compared in value to the kingdom of heaven (Matthew 13:44–46).



Paul says in Philippians 4:12: 'I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do everything through him who gives me strength.'

And in Philippians 3:8: 'I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things.'

■ Where are you storing your treasures?

*This study first appeared in Pillars:
Improving food security*



REFLECTION:

Freedom for forgiveness

Isaiah 61:1–7

ROULA TALEB

In 2011, my husband Ramy and I decided to study about the principles of child and youth ministry. One of the teachers was praying for us as a couple, and saw a picture of us walking with lots of kids behind us, whom we had set free from captivity. In the same year, two more people who didn't know each other prayed for us and got the same picture. I got so excited that we would be working together towards that. But to my surprise, we ended up working in different ministries for several years. In that time I always wondered 'God, why? What are you waiting for? Aren't we your anointed ones, God? We dedicated our whole life to you.'

Five years later we finally started the ministry of forgiveness and reconciliation in Lebanon. Why did it take so long? It was because of me.

In Isaiah, the prophet talks about the Messiah bringing good news to the poor and setting the captives free. Before I could go and preach the good news to others and set people free, God had to set me free first. I had to be set free to forgive my dad, because he had physically abused me throughout my childhood. This had held me back from trusting God fully as my Abba (Father). It was a hard journey and took several years and a work of the Holy Spirit to replace the hatred toward him with sympathy and enable me to forgive him.

Now, Ramy and I teach everyone – especially children and youth – about forgiveness, telling them how forgiveness set us free too. It is just amazing to see so many of them getting set free from grudges, hatred, revenge, destructive anger, despair and other wounds, placing love, kindness and forgiveness in their lives as core values, and characterised by hope for the future.

Let me tell you one story of forgiveness and liberation.

Zahra is a 13-year-old girl who fled her country and came to Lebanon as a refugee with her family. We had worked with her and her class for a year when she shared her struggle with her dad with us. She told us how she had hated him, but had heard the idea of seeing the other person with the eyes of forgiveness by placing yourself in his shoes and asking questions about why he is acting the way he does, which we talk about. She said 'I started seeing my dad differently, I understood that because of our situation and his stressful work, he is always angry and he hurt us, so I forgave him. One day he started yelling at me so I looked at him and told him, "I know dad that it's because of your hard work that you are acting this way not because of us, let us sit together and read the Bible, that will help us."' They did this together and restored their relationship.

The ability to do this comes from 'the Spirit of the Sovereign Lord' (v 1), the gift that Jesus has given to all of us, it's a pure gift of love. He has anointed us to share the good news with others, he has sent us to bind up the broken-hearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and to release the prisoners from darkness.

Let us first stand up and ask God to set us free from anything that is still holding us back from being full ambassadors of his anointing. Secondly, let us start with those who are around us, by loving them, forgiving them (especially the people who have hurt us the most and are the closest to us), being kind to them, being present for them, and being Jesus in skin for them. Then we can go out and preach the good news to others, being a 'living testimony' and proclaiming the year of the Lord's favour.

QUESTIONS

- What is holding you back from being a living testimony to the good news?
- How are you treating family, friends, and your brothers and sisters in Christ?
- What decisions can you make today? Can you share them with someone else?



Fasting and feasting

God wants everyone in the world to have enough to eat and to be able to choose to fast or feast as part of their worship of him.

FASTING

Fasting is choosing to go without food or drink for a specific period of time. It is not the same as being hungry because of a lack of food, it is chosen freely. Throughout the Bible, God's people practise fasting to seek his face and become more dependent on him.

Read Matthew 6:16–18

- Who are the hypocrites trying to impress by fasting?
- According to the passage, what is the right attitude to fasting?
- Have you seen the benefits of fasting? Share your experiences with the group.

Read Isaiah 58:1–12

- In this passage, what is wrong with the way that the Israelites are fasting?
- What does God say 'true fasting' involves?
- What do you think it means to 'spend yourself on behalf of the hungry'? (v 10)

FEASTING

Feasting is celebrating with food. It is a time when we enjoy the abundance of God's provision for us together with others. There are many examples of feasting in the Bible, from Abraham's feast to celebrate Isaac being weaned, to the wedding supper of the Lamb when Jesus returns.

Read Luke 15:11–31

- How does the father celebrate his son's return (vv 22–24)?
- How does the older brother respond to the invitation to join the feast?
- Think about a time when you have felt angry or jealous at someone else's success. What does the passage show you about celebrating God's blessing in the lives of others?

Read Isaiah 25:6–9

In this passage the prophet Isaiah is looking forward to a time when God's people from all nations will celebrate a feast with him.

- Who is preparing the feast, and for whom?
- What is the feast celebrating?
- What can you celebrate in your family, community or country today? Thank God for these things.

This study first appeared in Footsteps 94: Valuing food



NOTES

Forgive as the Lord forgave you

Forgiving others is not optional for Christians; it is a command. In Matthew 6:12, Jesus taught us to pray, 'Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us'. He made it clear that God's offer of forgiveness is inseparable from our willingness to forgive others. So what is the nature of this link?

Read Matthew 18:21–35

First of all, forgiving others when they wrong us is part of our grateful response to God's forgiveness of our own sins through Jesus' death on the cross. His forgiveness is based exclusively on his unconditional love and grace. We do not deserve it. The Greek word for sin in Matthew 6:12 means literally 'debt'. Because we have broken God's law we have debts towards him that we can never pay back. If we ask God to cancel our enormous debts while we refuse to cancel the tiny debts that people owe us, then we act at best inconsistently and at worst hypocritically.

Read Colossians 3:12–15

Secondly, forgiving people is a powerful demonstration of loving them. As God is our loving father he wants to forgive our sins, to restore our relationship with him. Just as God requires us to love our neighbour, so are we to forgive them.

- Who is your neighbour?
- How does this passage challenge you in your relationships with people who have hurt you?

Finally, forgiving others what they have done to us is a reliable test for our faith. Does our faith make a real difference in our life? Forgiving others is not easy. It is not natural – our natural response is to want to take revenge. But Jesus forgave his enemies who crucified him – before he died he prayed, 'Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing' (Luke 23:34). You may protest that Jesus was the Son of God, and we are not, that it is beyond our sinful human nature to love our enemies as Jesus commanded us to do. However, if Christianity is about having a personal relationship with God, and if God is real and powerful, then surely he will empower those who trust in him to experience the power of his love and forgiveness in their own lives.

Without forgiveness there is no genuine peace. As all of us do wrong and hurt each other, we need to ask forgiveness as much as to forgive. Saying sorry and asking forgiveness from people we have wronged is sometimes even harder than forgiving those who wronged us. But if with God's help we decide to make forgiveness our way of life, then this way will lead us to peace – peace with ourselves, with others and with God. This peace is a great and wonderful blessing that God wants everyone to enjoy.

- How is Jesus unique in the way he addresses the issue of forgiveness?
- Are there any people that you need to forgive or to ask forgiveness from?
- What are the social implications of the Christian faith, in terms of bringing reconciliation between different people?

This study first appeared in Footsteps 68: Forgiveness and reconciliation



NOTES

Overcoming prejudice

**Look at Leviticus 19:18, Matthew 19:19,
Mark 12:28–34 and Romans 13:9.**

■ What do all of these verses have in common?

The parable of the Good Samaritan explains the command to 'love your neighbour'.

Read Luke 10:25–37

The important point that Jesus was making was that we should love each other even across cultural and social boundaries. When the lawyer asked Jesus 'who is my neighbour?' he was perhaps expecting Jesus to answer 'your fellow Jew'. But Jesus answered otherwise.

The victim in the story was a Jew; the hero a Samaritan. In the time of Jesus, Samaritans were despised by the Jews. Yet in the parable, it is a travelling Samaritan who sees the injured man and has compassion on him. Jesus' listeners would have been shocked and challenged because the Samaritan was showing kindness to a Jew.

- Jesus used the story to highlight the need for us to rise above prejudice and show compassion for those different to ourselves. He makes it clear that the command to 'love your neighbour' still applies, however great the historical, cultural, ethnic or religious differences may be.

 **DISCUSSION**

- Explore the reactions of the people in the story. Why did they do the things they did?
- Why do we sometimes ignore the needs of others?
- How might this incident have changed the traveller's life?
- In what ways do we, as a church community, feel and express prejudice? Are there subtle ways in which we are excluding people?
- In what ways can churches ensure they are meeting the needs of beneficiaries who represent different faiths and ethnic groups?
- What challenges face churches if they work alongside other faith groups, and how could these challenges be addressed so that they could work together effectively?

This study first appeared in Disasters and the local church: Guidelines for church leaders in disaster-prone areas

Servant leadership

Just before Jesus began his ministry, he was led into the desert, where he took time to reflect and consider his role. He was tempted to abuse his great power as a leader, but chose instead to become a model of servant leadership.

Jesus never looked for a comfortable home or wealth. He gave his life to serving others, through his teaching, healing and love for the people he met. Although the disciples made a lot of mistakes and often disappointed him, he continued to encourage, support and challenge them. His example of servant leadership should inspire, challenge and remain a goal for all who are in positions of responsibility.

Servant leadership puts the needs of others first and listens to their views. Some groups within the church, such as the elderly, those with disabilities, women or children, may have few opportunities to share their needs and views. Their views, opinions and contributions to the life of the church need to be valued. In this way, decision-making can be shared, owned and followed by all church members.



DISCUSSION

- How can you follow the example of Jesus in serving others? Why can this be particularly difficult to do in leadership roles?

Read John 13:1–17

- What model of leadership does Jesus show here?
- How would you have felt if you were one of the disciples at that meal?
- What should our response be to Jesus' action?

Ask people to physically wash each other's feet. Discuss how this felt for the person washing the feet. Discuss how it felt for the people whose feet were washed. What did it teach you about leadership?

- Leadership is never easy. Do you support and pray for your leaders as much as you should? In what other ways can you help and encourage your leaders?

Read 1 Corinthians 3:18–20

- In many situations it can be very hard for leaders or those in authority to 'look foolish' or let others take charge. How does Jesus' example of washing the disciples' feet challenge your views on leadership?

*This study first appeared in Pillars:
Mobilising the church*



NOTES

Fighting injustice

Read Nehemiah 5

BACKGROUND

The situation in this chapter occurred during the rebuilding of the wall of Jerusalem. It reminds us that even in a process of reconstruction and rehabilitation, the rich may use the situation to exploit the poor. As well as opposition from Sanballat, Tobiah and friends, the people were being badly treated by their own nobles and officials. After some thought, Nehemiah confronted them about their behaviour (vv 6–11) and was able to reform the situation. Nehemiah's leadership is an example to churches to speak out boldly against injustice and to raise awareness of the issues that are making people poor.



KEY POINTS

- The poor complained of being oppressed by the rich (Nehemiah 5:1–5).
- Nehemiah removed the oppression (Nehemiah 5:6–13).
- He set an example of compassion towards poor people (Nehemiah 5:14–19).



DISCUSSION

- In Nehemiah 5, how were the rich exploiting the poor? How did Nehemiah respond? In what ways could poor people be exploited even as we try to assist them in community or disaster response projects?
- The church can help to ensure that the poor are protected from exploitation and helped to find ways out of their poverty. What practical actions could your church undertake to ensure that poor people are not exploited?
- What does your church need in order to become more confident and effective in speaking out on behalf of poor people?

This study first appeared in Disasters and the local church: Guidelines for church leaders in disaster-prone areas



NOTES



REFLECTION:

Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?

Romans 8:35–39

REV DR LYDIA MWANIKI

The epistle to the Romans was written by Paul in around 58 or 57 AD. Paul was not the founder of this church and it's unclear who was. The church was composed of Jewish and Gentile believers, who are addressed in the epistle. The central message of the letter is in Romans 1:16, 'The gospel... is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes.' Paul argues that both Jews and Gentiles require this gospel; without it, both are morally bankrupt.

Paul supports his argument by first exposing the sinful nature of the Gentile world in 1:18–32, and then the Jewish world in 2:1–29, thus consequently emphasising the universality of sin in 3:23: '...for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God'. Paul does not stop at the point of condemnation, but goes further to prescribe the divine remedy for sin, as justification by God's grace as a gift, through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus (3:24).

In chapter 8, Paul explains how a believer's new life in Christ looks. It is a Spirit-led life, in which believers serve God with assurance that they are his beloved children. Romans 8:35–39 demonstrates this immeasurable and permanent love that God has for us, as God's children, as expressed by the question in verse 35: 'Who [or what] shall separate us from the love of Christ?'

This question is ambiguous. In our effort to understand this verse we need to ask: is it our love to Christ? Or is it Christ's love to us? In other words, is Paul asking, 'Who will separate us from our love of Christ?' Or is he asking, 'Who will separate us from Christ's love of us?' Both of these questions are very critical in this text, and for the rest of this reflection, we will focus on both.

The second version of the question is more accurate within the context – as we can see from the following verses. Our text, which is the climax of Romans chapter 1 to 8 (or even the whole Bible), talks about the eternal and immeasurable love that God has for us, as revealed by the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. We are beloved of God in Jesus Christ, through whom we who have received him have been given power to become children of God (John 1:12).

Yet, though children of God, we experience suffering. Paul gives his own example of suffering in 8:37, in which he quotes Psalm 44:22 to show that suffering for God is part of the Christian journey. However, no amount or kind of suffering can change God's love for us – not even when we go through distress, persecution, famine, nakedness, danger or sword.

Though there is nothing that can separate us from God's love to us, we also need to ask ourselves the other form of the question: 'What can separate us from our love of Christ?'

Today, as in Paul's time, there is so much evil in the world which violates human dignity, and which can be a threat to a Christian's faith and relationship with Christ. We live in a world where peace is fragile. There is political instability caused by conflict, and economic instability which leads to poverty, where human beings live in deplorable conditions, and sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV), just to mention a few. All these challenges can tempt us to give up on God.

Yet God himself helps us to stay strong and to win the battle for our hearts. As verse 37 points out, 'In all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us'. God's great love for us enables us through the power of the Spirit to triumph over temptations to give up our love for him. This is an assurance that God does not abandon us in difficult times but rather gives us grace to endure and come out successfully, and even more refined for God's glory. Through the power of the Spirit we are able to conquer the temptations to give up our love for him.

May this message of God's immeasurable and permanent love for us, encourage you to persevere in all these forms of suffering, and to reciprocate by loving God sincerely and unconditionally.

QUESTIONS

- How does sin contribute to human suffering?
- What insights can we draw from Romans 8:35–39 about the Christian jubilee mandate to encourage people who are experiencing various forms of suffering such as poverty and broken relationships?



REFLECTION:

Fifty years of freedom, grace and favour of the Lord

Isaiah 61:1–7

RUBIN POHOR

The work of freeing Israel and the nations, described in the text of Isaiah 61:1–7, is given to the messenger of salvation, called the Messiah, that is, the one who was anointed to fulfil a mission in God's name. This task, among other things, means announcing the good news to the poor, caring for the broken-hearted, proclaiming freedom to exiles, deliverance to prisoners, announcing a year of the Lord's welcome (favour) and consoling those who are grieving (vv 1–2). Five centuries later, Jesus Christ, in the synagogue, read this text aloud (Luke 4:18–20), breaking it up into five main objectives – bringing good news to the poor, proclaiming freedom to captives, proclaiming recovery of sight to the blind, releasing the oppressed, and announcing the year of the Lord's favour. He applied this to himself, and announced its fulfilment.

The blessings of salvation promised to Israel and the nations are represented by various symbols: *ashes* (a sign of mourning), *the broken spirit, mourning and afflictions* will be replaced by the *diadem* (a crown worn for celebrations), *the oil of gladness* (perfume on the heads of guests before a banquet, cf. Psalm 23:5; 45:8; Luke 7:16), *the garment of praise* (an emblem of joy), and *the oaks of righteousness* (trees with a vigorous trunk and foliage, from a sacred planting, see Isaiah 60:21; 6:13).

The text also describes the many different benefits expected of the Lord's grace and favour to Israel and the nations. These will be the rebuilding and restoration of cities, the presence of foreigners working alongside the people of Israel, and the restoration of the worship of the eternal one by a re-established priesthood that includes all God's holy people, so receiving abundant material, emotional and spiritual blessings (Isaiah 61:4–9).

Finally, we should mention the upheaval of the state of things experienced by the people of Israel (vv 4–9). In this new state of submission, those who oppressed or committed injustices become participants in the work of restoration; the poor, the vulnerable and the oppressed occupy a favoured place among them, like a family of priests living on gifts freely given for the service of God (Isaiah 23:18).

So the words of this text on the jubilee set out the link between the proclamation of the gospel for the salvation of souls, the conversion of hearts and the practice of good works (Ephesians 2:10; 2 Timothy 3:16–17; James 1:27), that is, caring for the poor, the vulnerable, the sick, and so on. It also involves fighting against all forms of oppression and injustice, as well as giving access to the land, that is, fulfilling a task essential to restoring dignity to those who have been oppressed and celebrating the right of all to share in social well-being (Leviticus 25).

As defined in this way, the missions of the Lord's messenger affect every dimension of the human person. They are, in their very essence, inclusive, global, integral. They argue for a correlation between Christian faith and social commitment, and involve Christian responsibility in the face of poverty and injustice, on behalf of vulnerable people.

Tearfund's jubilee year is an opportunity for thanksgiving and celebration of the Lord's favour or the grace of God for the vast amount of work this organisation has accomplished with the help of its partners throughout the world in the fight against poverty, injustice and oppression, as well as towards the restoration of the environment. This Christian NGO has led the evangelical world, especially in Africa, to question its theological, ethical and social options regarding its position and responsibility in society.

The next fifty years will certainly be decisive for the church's role as salt of the earth. Our wish is that these may be times of profound change in society, through a full engagement in all the social realities which are, under the lordship of Jesus Christ, called to renewal through Christian service. These include among others the family, the environment, work, human values, social networks, the state and so on. This rootedness in the example of Jesus Christ will find its meaning from its collaboration with the action of God in history, especially towards the poor, the vulnerable, the stateless and the oppressed.



QUESTIONS

- What does Isaiah 61:1–7 mean for Christians and the church today, in their fight against poverty, oppression and injustice?
- What lessons can you draw from these verses, to help you combine words (teaching), actions (what needs doing) and attitudes/behaviour to tackle situations of poverty and injustice experienced in the lives of Christians and non-Christians in your country?
- How can we make the Christian family (churches, Christian NGOs, Bible and theology institutions, etc) aware of the privileged position of the poor, prisoners, the oppressed, the sick and the weak? Share your stories about the ways you have seen God work to bring hope to the poor, the vulnerable and victims of injustice.



Christ triumphs over conflict

God loves diversity; he has created us all to be unique and this is something to celebrate. In Genesis 10 we learn about how different ethnic identities form part of God's purposes. In chapter 11:1–9 we discover what happens when people seek cultural uniformity in their attempt to dominate other people groups.

Throughout history ethnic identity has often brought conflict and tension. This is not the way it should be. The Bible tells us that human beings were created to live in a harmonious relationship with God and one another. The root of conflict is a broken relationship with God rather than any ethnic or cultural differences.

Read James 4:1–2; 1 John 2:9–11 and 4:20–21

- What do these passages say about where relational conflict begins?
- What helps us to prevent conflict?

Jesus came to reconcile us to God through the cross, bringing us into restored relationships with one another (Ephesians 2:16; Colossians 1:20). In Christ, ethnic identities and cultures are united without being destroyed; all people are seen as equal, with bonds far deeper than those which hold other groups together (Romans 10:12–13; 1 Corinthians 12:12–13; Galatians 3:28; Colossians 3:11). In light of this, the people of God are called to focus on the shared identity they have in Christ, which is more important than their ethnic and cultural ties.

Read Ephesians 2:11–22

- What does this passage say about reconciliation between Jew and Gentile?
- What does 'one new humanity' mean in this passage (v 15)?
- What does it mean for us to become a new unified people in Christ?
- How does this passage challenge you in your relationship with Christians from different cultures or ethnic groups?

By being placed together within God's new community we are brought into relationships with those who are different from us. These differences are intended to be a source of blessing, but they can often be a source of tension. The Bible tells us to make every effort to restore relationships where there is conflict (Romans 15:5–6; 2 Corinthians 13:11; Ephesians 4:1–6). This means we need to keep walking in repentance and forgiveness, and know that there are no cultural, ethnic or social barriers that Christ's love cannot overcome (Matthew 18:21–35; Luke 10:25–37; Colossians 3:12–15).

Read Luke 6:27–42; Romans 12:9, 21; Philippians 2:1–8

- What principles do we find in these passages for resolving conflict and making peace?
- What does it mean to love our enemies?
- What does the passage in Philippians say about unity?

The Bible also tells us that Christians are to play a role in society as peacemakers (Matthew 5:9). Firstly, as 'ambassadors of Christ' we are called to reconcile people to God through the 'gospel of peace', which will result in them being reconciled with God's covenant people (2 Corinthians 5:18–20; Ephesians 6:15). The church is also called to be prophetic, modelling to society what reconciled relationships look like. It should demonstrate the way of Christ in word, presence and deed, reflecting the coming kingdom where every tribe, language, people and nation will together worship God (John 17:20–23; Revelation 5:9).

This study first appeared in Footsteps 92: Conflict and peace



NOTES

Loving the outcast

This Bible study can help us to explore how Jesus interacted with those who were outcast because they were seen as unclean, immoral or unworthy. It can help our response to those who are rejected, particularly those who have experienced sexual violence or worked in prostitution, people who are living with HIV, or those who have resisted the traditional practice of female genital mutilation/cutting (FGM/C).

Read John 4:1–30

In this study, we see Jesus interacting with a Samaritan woman who is broken, full of guilt and rejected by her own people. The woman was shocked that a Jewish man was not only talking to her but also asking for her help, at a time when Jews despised Samaritans. In this simple act of asking for water, Jesus challenged many of the social customs of his day. Jesus showed that he regarded the woman as someone created and loved by God – not as a social outcast. He didn't condemn her as others did, but met her in her need and gave her worth and value.



KEY POINTS

- Jesus considers all people as equal. Like Jesus, we must not judge others, but rather change our own attitudes, and share his love that overcomes social, cultural and religious barriers.
- Our attitudes as individuals may prevent our church from being the safe and welcoming community that God intended it to be.
- Like Jesus, we have a responsibility to challenge oppressive social practices.



DISCUSSION

- How do you think this woman felt about herself at the beginning of the story? Do you know anyone in your community who might also be feeling like this?
- How did Jesus act towards her? How do you think she felt as he spoke with her?
- How did the woman respond? What did she do after speaking with Jesus? Why did she do this?
- How does the church respond to people who feel isolated and afraid? How does the church respond to people who have left their home as a result of being sexually abused or having resisted FGM/C? Do we respond as the Jews did towards the Samaritans – having nothing to do with them – or do we respond with love and understanding?

PRAYER

Give thanks that Jesus came into the world to save it, not to condemn it. Many women and girls who have experienced sexual violence or have not undergone FGM/C face a sense of exclusion within their communities. Pray for our attitudes to be changed and for the church to be a safe place for these women and girls.

This study first appeared in the Reveal toolkit



NOTES

STUDY 30

Caring for widows and orphans

This Bible study can help us understand our responsibility to help people who are poor or vulnerable.

Read Deuteronomy 10:12–22

Verses 12–13 echo the great commandment of Deuteronomy 6:5 that Israel should love the Lord their God with all their heart, soul and strength. In verses 14–19 this passage continues to remind Israel about who God is, what he does and what he wants those who believe in him to do. This is repeated twice – each time in a beautifully balanced series of three verses. Verses 14 and 17 remind us who God is, verses 15 and 18 tell us what God does and verses 16 and 19 tell us what he wants us to do. God is interested in justice. He is particularly concerned about people who are poor, weak, or vulnerable. He commands us to speak up on their behalf.



DISCUSSION

- What does verse 17 say about how great God is? What does it mean to say that God is 'God of gods and Lord of lords, the great, the mighty and the awesome God'?
- What does verse 18 tell us about what this great God does?
- Why is God so interested in seeing justice done for orphans, widows and immigrants? God's concern for widows and orphans is also evident in the New Testament. Read James 1:27. How can we look after orphans and widows in our community?

*This study first appeared in the
Reveal toolkit*



NOTES

Caring for children

The Bible highlights God's particular interest in children. We have a responsibility to care for and protect children so that they can use the gifts God has given them to their full potential.

The Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), passed by the United Nations in 1989, was a historic achievement in recognising that children have particular rights. This convention has been approved in all countries (except the USA and Somalia). It includes these rights:

- Children should have their basic needs for housing, food and health met.
- Children's development should be encouraged. They have the right to play, education, curiosity, information, freedom of thought, and religion.
- Children have the right to protection from every form of abuse, ill-treatment, torture, sexual exploitation, participation in armed conflict, child labour and discrimination.
- Children have the right to participate in decisions that affect them and their communities.

Each of us is responsible for making sure these rights are respected for all children.



DISCUSSION

Read Matthew 18:1–6

- The disciples wanted to know who would be greatest in the kingdom of heaven. Jesus responded by bringing a child into their conversation. What value does Jesus place on children?

Read Matthew 18:10–14

- In verse 10 Jesus emphasises the value of children. He then uses a parable about shepherds to explain his answer. He speaks about the work of shepherds who care for the sheep 24 hours a day in all weathers. Who do these sheep represent (see John 10:16)? What characteristics do they have?
- What does the shepherd do in verse 12? Why does he do this?
- What is the shepherd's reaction when he finds the sheep in verse 13?
- What did Jesus want to teach us through this parable? What is God's will for each of these little ones? Are there children who feel 'lost' in your society? What practical things would you have to do, in order to do his will?

*This study first appeared in Pillars:
Seeking justice for all*



NOTES

Gender and restoring relationships

In reading the Bible, we see that men and women are equally loved and valued by God. This study helps us to reflect on how men and women should relate to each other in a positive, interdependent and mutually supportive way.

Read Genesis 1:26–28

This Bible passage looks at the relationship between men and women in Genesis. It shows an equal partnership between men and women, with Genesis 2 showing that each has a part to play in the world God gives humanity. Many societies today are characterised by divisions between people, especially between men and women. These divisions have led to poor relationships between men and women. Over the centuries, throughout the world, women and girls have been discriminated against in many different ways. In most cultures, this discrimination is reflected in value systems where sons are valued more highly than daughters. The consequences of these divisions include oppression and violence against women, as well as the tendency for men to treat women and children as possessions. This is not what God intended. Men and women together need to work to restore relationships.



KEY POINTS

- God created human beings in his own image and likeness (Genesis 1:27). Women and men are different but both are created in God's image and are equal.
- From Genesis 1:26–28, we can see that the power to subdue and dominate is to be used in stewarding the earth and acting with care and justice, rather than trying to control other people.



DISCUSSION

- What does God empower human beings to do (vv 26 and 28)? What do men and women do?
- What does this passage reveal about the importance of men and women working together in relationships of equality?
- What does this tell us about the relationship between men and women in a marriage?

PRAYER

Pray for courage for both men and women to challenge unhelpful stereotypes about male and female roles and to encourage biblical reflection on the subject of gender. Pray that the gifts of women will be fully released to benefit our churches. Pray for wisdom and leadership in responding to issues around oppression of women.

A version of this study first appeared in the Reveal toolkit



NOTES

Challenging violence within families

There are several examples in the Bible of individuals (often women) being treated unfairly. However, Jesus teaches that all people, both men and women, should be valued as being created in the image of God and treated with fairness. As followers of Christ, we need to examine how family structures and cultures can put women in positions of vulnerability, where even the law may not help protect them. We need to reflect on how Jesus would have us treat other people, particularly those who are more vulnerable than us and are facing abuse, whether they are women, girls, men, boys, elderly or young. The church needs to address existing inequalities, particularly around gender, encouraging men to develop a positive masculinity which shows strength through protecting vulnerable people, demonstrating servant leadership and respect for women.

Read Judges 19:16–29

- What did the men who pounded at the old man's door want? How does the Bible refer to these men?
- Why do you think the old man was willing to volunteer the women in the house? Was this not an equally 'disgraceful thing'?
- What do you feel are the attitudes of the Levite and the old man towards women within their family?

- How does Jesus' attitude to women compare with that of the men in this passage? Can you think of examples (eg John 8:1–11, John 4:7–9)?
- What about the concubine? What would she have felt and how would she have reacted?
- Are there ways in which women in our community are valued less than men? Consider cultural practices: for example, early marriage or offering women's sexual services as a sign of good hospitality. How does this contrast to Christ's care and respect for women?
- How do these practices, and the inequality between men and women, increase women's vulnerability to violence and abuse within families?
- What can the church do to support married couples and families going through difficult times and help them address situations of vulnerability and abuse?
- What are our attitudes towards those who have been abused? Do we offer them our support or stigmatise and reject them?
- The church can support families facing difficult times, providing financial and emotional help and enabling a safe environment, free from abusive behaviour.
- An individual who has been raped or experienced sexual violence may need different types of support and care, including HIV testing, counselling, prayer support, acceptance, emotional support, reassurance and time to talk confidentially with an understanding person.
- Women are not expendable objects and deserve equal respect and honour (Ephesians 5:25).
- We need to challenge stigma and discrimination against individuals who have been abused, and instead offer them support in meeting their emotional, physical and spiritual needs.

A longer version of this study can be found in Hand in Hand: Bible studies to transform our response to sexual violence



KEY POINTS

- The church has a responsibility to protect the vulnerable, to speak up against injustice and provide care and support for those who have been abused (Micah 6:8), even when these situations are happening within families.



NOTES

Disabilities: Knowing your true value

At a consultation on disability in Oxford in 1998, it was said: 'We want our disabilities to be seen as part of the rich diversity that God has created. We want to be given the dignity that God has given us in our differences.'

Sadly, society in general so often overlooks the worth that God has given people with disabilities. In our planning, in our ways of working, we frequently fail to take into account the huge contribution people with disabilities can make.

Read Ephesians 2:10 and 1 Corinthians 12:7

We have all been made in the image of God – those with disabilities and those without disabilities. We have all been created for a purpose with something valuable to offer. All of us. God does not discriminate. People may discriminate, but God does not. People with disabilities have much to offer their communities, but like everyone they need an opening.

- In our church, in our work, in our everyday life, how can we encourage those with disabilities to best use the gifts God has given them?
- Do we sometimes discriminate without really meaning to?
- What things in our society, in our culture, make it difficult for people with disabilities to reach their full potential? What could we do to improve the situation?

Read Romans 5:1–11, 8:12–17

Jesus Christ died upon the cross so that we may be reconciled to God and know his perfect peace, whatever our physical condition. In Jesus Christ, all people can know their true value as sons and daughters of our living God.

This study first appeared in Footsteps 49: Disability

Ruth: restoring the victims of famine

Read Leviticus 25:25–28 and Ruth 3 and 4

Under Jewish custom there were several ways in which the poor were given opportunities to rebuild their lives. One was the custom of gleaning, another was the jubilee principle of forgiving debt and restoring property (Leviticus 25:8–22). Another custom was that if someone became poor and lost their property, their nearest family member should redeem the land and return it to them.

- Why do you think Boaz agreed to help redeem Naomi's land?

Discuss the traditional ways in which your society allows people who have become poor to rebuild their lives.

DISCUSSION

- Boaz's actions meant that Naomi would have descendants to maintain her family line. How important is this?
- How did God bless the lives of Ruth and Boaz?

This study first appeared in Pillars: Preparing for disaster



NOTES



STUDY 36

Fully known, fully loved

Read Luke 8:42–48

As human beings, we often know less about others than we think we do. Consider the story of the woman with the haemorrhage. What did the following people know about the situation described, and what didn't they know?

- the crowd
- Jesus
- the woman herself

The crowd had no idea what was going on. Had they known that a woman with a haemorrhage was among them they would have run a mile – away from someone they regarded as ritually impure. Religious leaders taught this as law (see Leviticus 15:25–27, 31). As Jews of Jesus' time, the crowd would see the woman as an outcast to be shunned. Her bleeding would have been seen as demonstrating in her own body her sinfulness and distance from God.

'Who touched me?' Jesus said. Even Jesus' knowledge was incomplete. While he knew that power had gone from him, he didn't know whom it had benefited. The only person who really knew what was happening was the woman. She alone knew her situation and need, and that she had reached out in faith to Jesus for healing.

Not only did Jesus heal her physically, he restored her emotionally, spiritually and socially by bringing her to the attention of the crowd and announcing she was healed.

We can often assume that we understand a situation when in reality we have very little information about it. Consider these questions:

- What do others really know about you?
What assumptions do they make?
- What do you really know about others?
What assumptions do you make?

Read Psalm 139

- What does this psalm say God knows about you?

When we consider our own lives, our thoughts and feelings, our hopes, fears, secrets and shortcomings, it is amazing to know that God loves us in spite of all that we are. Yet God does – so much so that he was willing to give his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not die but have eternal life. If God feels like that about you, and all that you are, might he feel the same for everyone else as well?

This study first appeared in Footsteps 86: Stigma



REFLECTION: Holistic deliverance

Luke 4:16–21

TEP SAMNANG

Jesus came into our world to deliver the whole person – spiritually, emotionally and physically. Luke 4:16–21 provides some insight about this deliverance. When we study this passage we should also understand its context.

Before the passage: In Luke 4:1–13, the gospel writer describes Jesus' temptation in the wilderness. The first temptation is about physical need. Jesus was tested because he was hungry. There was no food to eat, so the devil urged him to turn stone into bread. Jesus was able to do so, but he refused to give in to the devil. The second temptation is about who is to be worshipped (the devil or the Lord); it is a spiritual need. Jesus told the devil that the Lord alone was to be worshipped. The third temptation is about care and protection which is an emotional need. Jesus was tempted to throw himself down to prove the angels would protect him because of their emotional bond with him. He refused

falling into temptation. He overcame the holistic temptation of the spiritual, emotional and physical needs so that he would provide holistic deliverance.

The immediate context: Jesus went to Nazareth in Galilee in the power of the Spirit, and news about him spread through the whole countryside. When he attended the Sabbath worship service at a synagogue, he was invited to read a scroll from the prophet Isaiah (which we now know as Isaiah 61:1–2). After he finished the reading, the people's gaze was fastened on him. He then told them, 'Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing' (Luke 4:21). Here, the author wanted his audience to know that Jesus was the Lord who had come to deliver the people.

After the passage: Although people did not accept Jesus as the Messiah immediately after what he said (Luke 4:22–30), in the following verses the

author begins to show how Jesus brought holistic deliverance to many people. Jesus drove out the impure spirit from a demon-possessed man (Luke 4:31–37), giving him spiritual deliverance. Then he healed a high fever and various kinds of sickness (Luke 4:38–41) which brought physical and emotional deliverance.

Therefore, in the passage of Luke 4:16–21 Jesus proclaimed the fulfilment of the Lord's promise of release for captives, recovery of sight to the blind and freedom from oppression. This proclamation of deliverance would have evoked his audience's understanding about the year of jubilee which was the year of deliverance for the poor under the Mosaic law (Leviticus 25:8–17). Indebted people were declared debt free and would now have a new start in life. This would bring the meaning of delivering the poor from social and economic structural oppression. Reading this passage in its context, however, we can see that Jesus (and Isaiah) were not only talking about physical deliverance. We need spiritual and emotional deliverance too. Jesus has completed this holistic deliverance and commissioned his children (the church) to bring it to the poor.

I was brought up in a church and was trained by pastors and theological professors. I was taught to solely focus on spiritual deliverance, bringing people to Christ. I read Luke 4 seeing only spiritual deliverance, not seeing any emotional or physical deliverance. I judged people (even my theological friends and students) who were working with Christian NGOs. They were unspiritual, in my view, and mainly focused on physical need. Most Cambodian churches also saw things as I did. However, in 2008, during my studies at Asian Theological Seminary in the Philippines, I took a class on community development. My worldview and theology were changed and broadened. After returning to Cambodia, I began to interact with my theological friends and students working with Christian NGOs. They shared with me their holistic ministries and how they work with the poor in bringing holistic deliverance. I admired their work and commitment. Now, I am working at the Evangelical Fellowship of Cambodia (EFC) which has been ministering to churches and communities in bringing holistic deliverance. EFC has tried to bring change to the minds of church leaders towards holistic ministry by ministering holistically with churches and teaching about the role of the church in communities, in 2013 and again in 2017 at the annual general meeting with more than 200 Christian leaders from throughout Cambodia.



QUESTIONS

- Which of these aspects of deliverance does the ministry you are involved in tend to focus on the most?
- How can you teach your friends/colleagues/church about holistic deliverance?
- How can your church bring holistic deliverance to your community?



REFLECTION:

A radical vision of God's justice

Leviticus 25

NADINE BOWERS DU TOIT

Israel was an agricultural society, so land was seen as capital and the main way of producing wealth. It is clear from this scripture that at first land was divided more or less equally between the tribes and families. This is something that God wanted to continue so that every family could earn a decent living, which is why it was written into law in the form of the jubilee year. In this jubilee year (which was to take place every 50 years), several things were required of the Israelites: resting the land, remitting debt, dealing fairly with the buying and selling of property, allowing the poor to buy back land sold to reduce poverty, and freeing indentured labourers and slaves.

This passage talks about justice in a way that does not just see people giving 'handouts' or charity to those less fortunate. It is actually an example of God putting into place a structure that would promote just living in community. In the words of theologian Ronald Sider in his

book *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger*, 'Returning the land was not a charitable courtesy that the wealthy might extend if they pleased'. Although it is said that surrounding cultures practised something similar, the biblical jubilee was different: it was not dependent on a monarch's will, but was recognised on the calendar, applied to all of the population and was seen as a command of God himself.

This passage of scripture also poses a serious challenge to our understanding of money and possessions in a capitalist society, as Yahweh is understood as the true owner of the land (vv 2, 23). God is identified as the redeemer who brought the people out of the injustice of slavery and whom they were to follow in acting justly in relation to their fellow Israelites (vv 39–43). They were not to practise jubilee simply because it was an instruction or command, but as a response to a just and loving God who expected them to follow his example. Similarly, our just treatment of others is not enacted

only because it is commanded (and it is!), but as our response to that same just, loving God. Sadly, there is no evidence that jubilee was ever practised by the Israelites, and in the exile we see the consequences not only of their idolatry, but also of their unjust treatment of the poor and marginalised.

The year of jubilee was to be sounded with a trumpet blast, as on the Day of Atonement (v 9) – and some scholars believe that this is not a coincidence. The Day of Atonement signalled the restoration of just relationship with God, and jubilee the restoration of just relationships with others and nature. Of course, Jesus himself refers to the year of jubilee in Luke 4:17–19, which in turn is linked to both Isaiah 61 and Leviticus 25.

Despite the fact that we cannot just impose a text like this directly on our society today, this scripture presents a radically different picture of the way Israel was supposed to live and care for each other. In my own context of South Africa, this is a very challenging scripture as our country is still one of the most unequal countries in the world as a result of the legacy of Apartheid, which reduced many people of colour to virtual slaves

in their own land. This passage poses a challenge to the South African church to seek restorative justice for those who were stripped of both land and dignity, and not only respond with charity 'handouts'. It also challenges wealthy Christians across the world in terms of living and acting justly towards their neighbour, based on the understanding that to live justly is a gospel imperative.

QUESTIONS

- How are poor or marginalised groups treated unfairly because of unjust laws or structures in your context?
- Read verses 14–17. How do you treat people who have less materially than you? Have you ever taken advantage of someone else's vulnerability or lack of knowledge (eg paying less than a living wage)?
- What does the link between just relationship with God and just relationship with others and nature tell us about the nature of the gospel? (See also Isaiah 61 and Luke 4:17–19).



  
IHH İNSANI YARDIM VAKFI
Konum: Taingkhali
Rohingya Mülteci Kampı
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Being good Samaritans

Jesus had compassion for people with all kinds of needs, including disability, sickness, ignorance and injustice. Churches, too, should be willing to help meet all kinds of needs. Though a church may have few financial resources, it has people willing to pray and show love in caring for the needs of others.

Like the good Samaritan, Christians need to be ready to meet the needs of our 'neighbours', whoever they are. There are many needs around us but we should not feel so overwhelmed that we do nothing. Each of us can make a real difference to the lives of others.

Sometimes needs may be very practical. Widows, the elderly or those with disabilities may need help in their homes. The church may be able to encourage local government or organisations to help improve services, healthcare or education. Improving literacy skills may increase people's confidence. Young people under pressure to use drugs or to take part in sex for financial reasons may find discussion and support groups helpful in understanding their options.

Where people face injustice, such as over access to practical needs or exploitation at work, the church could find experienced advisers to help defend the rights of those with little or no power.



DISCUSSION



NOTES

Read Luke 10:25–37

- Who are your neighbours? What needs do they have? How does Jesus tell us to love our neighbours?
- What are the challenges we may find in loving our neighbours? How can we help each other overcome these challenges?
- Our upbringing can make it hard for us to relate to certain groups of people – those of different age, level of education, caste, tribal group, or those who are very poor. Who do you find it hard to relate to? How can you overcome those feelings? If you have children, how can you help them grow up able to relate to people of all kinds?
- Through prayer, God can give us real insight and wisdom into different situations. How can we know whether such guidance is of God, or simply our own thinking?
- What additional skills or resources do we need to enable us to help people?
- What difference can you make in helping people in your community without lots of training or hiring expensive 'experts'?

*This study first appeared in Pillars:
Mobilising the church*

STUDY 40

'I was hungry and you gave me food...'

Read Matthew 25:31–46

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

There is an increasing need for church leaders to understand the importance of supporting people in need within their communities. Not just people who have survived sexual violence, but also their children, their families, and their husbands or wives. These people have different practical, emotional and spiritual needs – all of which need different resources and responses from within our churches.

TIPS FOR THE FACILITATOR

Encourage people to see that everyone has the capacity to help each other. Even if we are poor or weak or sick, we still have something to offer. For example, even if we lack money, we could still give our time to sit and listen to survivors' experiences. We could also accompany an individual when they go to the health clinic, to provide emotional support.

IDEAS FOR PRACTICAL RESPONSE

This study encourages us not just to discuss situations and needs, but also to take direct action to meet those needs. Discuss who around us is hungry, thirsty, homeless, lacking adequate clothes or in prison – in both physical and spiritual terms. If no-one is adequately meeting their needs, what can we do ourselves?



DISCUSSION

- What does this passage tell us about how we as Christians should care for those in need?
- In our culture, who do we expect to care for the sick, and why? In this passage, whose responsibility is it to look after them?
- What are the needs of those who have survived sexual violence? Consider their physical, emotional and spiritual needs.
- How can we as Christians, both as individuals and as a church community, meet these needs and provide practical care and support for each other?
- How can we provide care and support for vulnerable children in our community, for example those who are orphaned or those who are caring for parents who are sick?
- We may feel we have little to offer to help others, but in this passage, Jesus calls everyone to account for how they have cared for others. Explore the ways in which we could use what little we do have to help others.



KEY POINTS

- Are there people in your community who are excluded, or whose needs are ignored – for example, because of their age, gender or life experience?

- What does our society lose because of the way we treat these people?
- How can you transform this situation, and ensure that all people can participate fully in the life of your community?

Versions of this study appeared in Hand in Hand: Bible studies to transform our response to HIV and Hand in Hand: Bible studies to transform our response to sexual violence



NOTES

Famine and a future king

Read Ruth 1–4

Background

The story of Ruth took place in the time of the judges, before Israel had a king. A man called Elimelech, his wife Naomi and their two sons lived in Bethlehem, in a fertile farming area. A famine occurred at that time, and Elimelech chose to migrate with his family to the land of Moab – surprisingly, because the Moabites (descendants of Abraham's nephew Lot) worshipped other gods and were sometimes hostile to the Jews.

Shortly afterwards, Elimelech died. His sons Mahlon and Kilion married Moabite women, Ruth and Orpah, but after about ten years tragedy struck again and both men died. Naomi was left with no husband, no sons and no grandchildren. On hearing that food was again available in Bethlehem, she decided to return home. She begged her daughters-in-law to stay in Moab and remarry. Orpah agreed, but Ruth insisted on returning to Bethlehem with Naomi. The chapters which follow reveal much about the ancient culture and customs of Israel. Naomi and Ruth, as poor returnees, were kept alive by the coping systems for the poor and by the intervention of a rich relative – 'a kinsman-redeemer' (Ruth 2:20). Ruth's loyalty and good character were rewarded. She married Boaz and became the mother of Obed – the grandfather of Israel's greatest king, David (Ruth 4:16–17).



KEY POINTS

- Disasters, such as famine, can cause migration and the breakdown of normal social life. Family members may be lost. However, God is faithful to his people, and his love does not change, even in times of darkness and despair.
- God has his own bigger plans and purposes for his people. Human tragedy and loss may slow down those plans, but God can use these setbacks to achieve his ultimate goals.
- Every society has mechanisms which enable people to survive in times of hardship. Any outside help in times of disaster must recognise and strengthen these systems, not undervalue or spoil them.



DISCUSSION

- The famine in Bethlehem caused Elimelech and his family to migrate to Moab. Why do you think he chose a land where other gods were worshipped, and a people who were sometimes hostile to his own? In times of hardship, how do people today decide where to migrate?
- What custom did Ruth follow which allowed poor people to share in the harvest (Ruth 2:2–7)? Does your culture have any similar systems for helping poor people?
- What evidence can you find of God's kindness to Ruth and Naomi, even though Ruth was a foreigner? How do we treat foreigners in times of disaster?

The story has a happy ending: Boaz buys Elimelech's land from Naomi and marries Ruth (Ruth 4:9–12). The couple have a baby son and name him Obed. How does Obed fit into God's bigger plans for the nation of Israel (Ruth 4:16–22)?

A version of this study first appeared in Disasters and the local church: Guidelines for church leaders in disaster-prone areas



NOTES

Assessing the city to rebuild it

Read Nehemiah 2–4

Background

The Babylonian army had besieged and destroyed the city of Jerusalem, including the walls, and the population of Jerusalem was displaced, largely to Babylon. Nehemiah was a Jewish captive in Babylon, working as a trusted servant of King Artaxerxes. In Chapter 1 news reached him that Jerusalem's walls and gates were still in ruins, even though some of the exiles had returned and were living there again. Deeply saddened by the news, he prayed fervently and began making plans to return to the city to rebuild it.



KEY POINTS

- Nehemiah got permission and assistance from the king, who was not a believer in God. This highlights the importance of working with secular authorities and the potential if we do so to access additional resources (2:4–9).
- Nehemiah assessed the damage to the walls, so the project was based on a clear understanding of the problem. Good assessment data is needed before a church and the community embark on community action work or disaster response projects (2:11–16).

- Nehemiah illustrates well an orderly approach to reconstruction, as each step was clearly laid out with plans and reviewed regularly (2:11–18). From the start, he experienced opposition, and people mocked and ridiculed him for what he was trying to do (2:19–20). He developed ways of countering and resisting this, depending on God.

DISCUSSION

- How did Nehemiah get permission to go back to Jerusalem? How much importance did he give to prayer (2:1–6)?
- How did he obtain the resources he needed to start his building project? What are the advantages and disadvantages of working with government authorities (2:7–9)?
- What did he do when he arrived at the city? Why did he wait three days before inspecting the walls? Why did he go at night with just a small group of people (2:11–16)?
- The building work was carefully planned. What are some of the points in Nehemiah's plan (3:1–32, 4:16–18)? How much time and effort do you give to praying and planning before you start a project?
- Why do you think some people opposed Nehemiah's building work? What sort of opposition might we expect when we engage in work in our communities or in situations of need?

*This study first appeared in *Disasters and the local church: Guidelines for church leaders in disaster-prone areas**



NOTES

Dealing with the whole person

Jesus gave us some clear guidelines for our work and he always emphasised the importance of meeting the needs of the whole person – not just their spiritual needs. However, many churches ignore his guidance and concentrate only on spiritual needs.

Read Luke 4:16–21

This took place at the beginning of Jesus' ministry after a time in the wilderness. He visited the synagogue in his home town and was given the scroll of Isaiah to read from. He read from Isaiah 61:1–3.

- What is the significance of Jesus selecting these verses to read?
- Discuss the five roles that Jesus said his coming was to fulfil.
- How many of these might involve a practical as well as a spiritual response?

Read Matthew 25:31–46

Jesus told his disciples about the end times and how God will look at their lives.

- What are the five areas of service for them that Jesus highlighted here?
- Are these all spiritual? What other kinds of needs are being met?

Read Luke 10:25–27

Here, Jesus expressed in just two sentences the challenge we should follow as Christians. He then went on to tell the parable of the Good Samaritan to show clearly how we are to put this into practice.

- How are we to love God?
- Are we to love God in just the spiritual sense?
- Is it possible to love our neighbours without meeting their physical, social and emotional needs?

The passages above highlight the challenge we have as Christians to meet the whole needs of people, not just to concentrate on their spiritual needs. Many times, Jesus emphasised the spiritual, physical, emotional and social needs that we are to meet in caring for our neighbours. Holistic development is the natural outworking of this.

This study first appeared in Footsteps 53: Holistic development

Remember the stranger

We live in a day and age where millions of people wander the earth in search of a better livelihood and hope. The Bible recognises this reality. It contains stories of war and triumph, displacement and pain, frustration and hope. Through it all we can see that God cares for migrants.

MIGRANTS IN THE BIBLE

The story of God's chosen people, Israel, is a story of wandering in many places. Joseph was sent into slavery in a strange land (Genesis 37–46). Moses fled to Midian and found shelter in the house of a priest (Exodus 2:15–22). Ruth accompanied Naomi to a foreign land and found favour in the eyes of Boaz (Ruth 2). Mary and Joseph fled to Egypt with Jesus as a baby. Later on, Jesus and his disciples travelled to many different towns during three years of ministry.

GOD'S ATTITUDE TOWARDS MIGRANTS

In the Bible we find God's concern for the well-being of migrants. Repeatedly, the people of Israel were instructed to remember the strangers among them and treat them with love, compassion and justice. God commanded the Israelites not to ill-treat foreigners in their midst (Exodus 22:21) and not to take advantage of them (Deuteronomy 24:14). God is concerned and cares for powerless and vulnerable people. Strangers are to be cared for (Leviticus 19:9–10), they are to be treated as fellow citizens (Leviticus 19:34) and given a share from the tithe

(Deuteronomy 14:28–29). In the New Testament, Jesus gave a new command to 'love your neighbour as yourself' (Matthew 22:39).

THE CHURCH'S RESPONSE TO MIGRANTS

Acceptance

The body of Christ should accept strangers with open arms (Romans 15:7–9) and treat them as equals (Colossians 3:11).

- What is your attitude to migrants? Do you accept them or reject them?
- What are some of the practical ways you can show love to migrants?

Hospitality

The church is told to welcome and offer hospitality to people in need (Romans 12:13).

- How could you show hospitality to people in need?

Care

Churches should care for and speak out on behalf of migrants and refugees (Proverbs 31:8–9). Such ministries are often challenging, but they can be an effective approach for transformation.

- Are there migrants or refugees in your area that you could reach out to?
- What action could your local church take to 'speak out' on behalf of migrants and refugees?

This study first appeared in Footsteps 78: Migration



REFLECTION:

God's dream of peace with justice

Leviticus 25

MAGALI DO NASCIMENTO CUNHA

In the third millennium AD, it sounds like an incredible dream to talk about a time when all debts will be forgiven and slaves will be set free. A time when all who have lost their land will have it restored to them, and when people will care for each other, including those who are not like us, in pursuit of wholeness. A time of new social relations, a new economy, a new reality. This was God's plan for the people who left Egypt as slaves, in search of freedom and a land to live in and cultivate (Leviticus 25), to inhabit in security and faithfulness to the Lord of life and the earth. A place to experience forgiveness, freedom, and the restoration of human relationships. As part of his plan, God established the jubilee year in order to lead his sons and daughters back to a faithful relationship with him, with one another, and with creation. Every fiftieth year, they were to: '...sound the trumpet throughout [the] land... proclaim liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants' (vv 9–10). Isn't this an incredible dream for our present time?

In this 'communication era' we can know what is happening both near to and far from us in real time. Every day, the world is becoming more like the 'global village' identified in the 1940s by communications technology researcher Marshall McLuhan. However, these means of drawing closer and communicating create few humanising experiences. Humanity appears more and more fragmented, made up of isolated, competing groups trying to demonstrate superiority over one another. Through mainstream and social media, expressions of racism, chauvinism, xenophobia, homophobia and all sorts of lies are spreading more forcefully.

Intolerance is growing at many levels, under the guise of 'freedom of expression', reaching the point where public personalities from politics and culture are coming out in defence of this kind of open hate speech.

Wars have spread across the world, as have terrorist actions, whether carried out by groups opposing regimes or by governments who, in the name of security, terrorise 'suspects' in their own countries and other nations.

In the name of this false security, sanctuary is still denied to masses of human beings who have been forced into migration and displacement in fear and desperation, faced with the effects of governmental abuses and inhumane economic globalisation.

Greed, extortion and exploitation imposed by world economic powers are also causing the devastation of the earth, a gift given by God to enable his sons and daughters to live.

It is a cruel time, one that fosters despair and unbelief... yet the word of God echoes through the millennia and comes to us: the dream of God persists! The powers of this world cannot crush dreams.

And who is it that renews the dream of God and makes his word become more and more alive? It is Jesus of Nazareth. During his ministry, Jesus reminded people of a dream that seemed to have been forgotten. One of good news for those suffering under an unjust and oppressive system; a dream

of freedom for those facing injustice and the segregation perpetuated by their own religious system, of physical and spiritual healing for all people oppressed by political, economic and religious powers.

Jesus made all of this a reality through his ministry: forgiving, including, healing, being a voice for the voiceless, denouncing injustice, loving unconditionally, giving his life in humility and service. The law announced in Leviticus, the mission proclaimed by Isaiah, remembered and made flesh in Jesus, is given to all of us today.

Are we ready to say 'the Spirit of the Lord is on me...?' To have the Holy Spirit upon us is to embody the year of jubilee! Are we ready to forgive those who owe us – whatever it is they owe? Are we ready to return that which was lost to those who have nothing – whatever that is? To care for the strangers? To set free those who are enslaved? This is what it means to be in the Lord's favour. This is what it means to be a Christian. And the time is now: 'sound the trumpet... proclaim liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants...'



QUESTIONS

- How can you apply the challenge of the jubilee year to your everyday situation?
What debts need to be forgiven today?
What should be given back to those who have had everything taken from them?
- What moral debts can you identify in your community – things that should have been done for someone or for a group of people but weren't?
- Within the ministries we are developing as a community, who do you think should receive forgiveness, freedom and care so that our actions are acceptable to God?



REFLECTION:

Using the land justly

Leviticus 25

KUKI ROKHUM

In a report published in January 2017, Oxfam stated that eight men own the same wealth as the 3.6 billion people who make up the poorest half of humanity. What has led to this inordinate imbalance in the distribution of wealth and property? Is it part of our sinful nature to want to hoard and keep whatever we can lay our hands on? Could it be that we do not trust in God to provide and hence feel the need to accumulate as an 'insurance policy' for ourselves and the future of our families?

The focus of Leviticus 25 is primarily on land and the people of Israel, and it deals with one of the biggest issues that we continue to face today: the equitable distribution of property. It gives clear instruction on the observance of the Sabbath year and the year of the jubilee, revealing the grace of God and his compassion and provision for the poor and the oppressed. The recurring theme is of 'setting free' what is bound and restoring what is oppressed. God reminds

the people of Israel that they were bound in Egypt and have been set free (vv 38, 55), using their experience of God and the knowledge of how he liberated them as an example and reminder of how they should respond and live.

Obedience and trust is crucial for God to be able to work: the Israelites experienced this in the exodus from Egypt. Leviticus 25:18 indicates that following his decrees guaranteed 'safety and abundance'. The focus during these holy years was only on God who is the provider of everything, not on the accumulation of wealth. God promised abundance, but it required faith from the Israelites to let the land lie fallow and trust God to provide for their daily bread. This focus, faith and promise are echoed by Jesus urging us to seek first the kingdom of God (Matthew 6:33) and to pray for our daily bread. God continues to promise that he will provide and that the provision comes out of obedience and trust and not hard work.

Leviticus 25 also reminds us that we are not owners but stewards of the land that God has given us and all that it produces. Equity in terms of ownership and stewardship is restored in the jubilee. All the open land was to be available to everyone – what a different picture from the way we are today. Our forests and their produce now belong to certain people – animals can no longer roam freely, communities in those areas are being threatened because there are regulations that restrict what they can do in and with the forest. On the other hand individuals possess vast areas of land, plundering and ravaging it for personal gain – even drilling deep into the earth as though all of it belonged to us. In today's world God seems to be taken out of the equation of ownership, particularly of land. I use, abuse, destroy, plant what I want, when I want, as much as I want and do whatever is necessary to get as much as possible out of the land, above and below the soil. The jubilee regulations are a reminder that how we use the land is related to loving our neighbours, and they show us how we might do this in practice.

Interspersed between all these regulations are God's reminders of his own generosity to the Israelites in liberating them from bondage as an example for the Israelite community to follow. The jubilee laws 'set them free' from need, worry about need, and the temptation to hoard which leads

to oppression of others. There is no direct evidence that the jubilee year was ever practised or observed, but love expressed in terms of caring for the impoverished was a tradition that was maintained in the New Testament (see Acts 4:34–35). Even if the jubilee year did not occur it does not mean that God overlooked that and excused his people. God's pronouncements on the Israelites regarding the accumulation of wealth and injustice, through the prophets, point to the fact that God continues to hold his people accountable today.

QUESTIONS

- Why was it necessary to have regulations for the Sabbath and the jubilee year? Do you see the need for it in your own context?
- The instructions given were for those who owned land – if these regulations were read by the poor what would it mean to them? Who are these people in your context?
- In what ways can you become a steward of God's land and in what ways can that bring restoration and liberation in your context?



STUDY 47

Life in all its fullness

Read Genesis 2:4–15

In the beginning, God created the heavens and earth, the plants, the animals, the people and all our ecosystems. And God saw that it was good.

God placed human beings on this beautiful garden planet, intending them to work the land and look after it (Genesis 2:15).

But then things began to go wrong. Adam and Eve were tempted by the serpent and disobeyed God's command. This is what we call 'the Fall.' We will now explore what happened after sin entered the world – relationships broke down in three significant areas.

GOD AND PEOPLE

How would you describe the relationship between God and humans when God first placed them in the Garden of Eden?

Read Genesis 3:8–11

- What was the relationship like between God and humans after sin came into the world?
- How do you see this breakdown in the community in which you live and work?

PEOPLE AND PEOPLE

Read Genesis 2:22–25, 3:6–7, 3:11–13 and 3:16

- What was the relationship like between Adam and Eve in the beginning?
- What was their relationship like after sin came into the world?
- How do you see this breakdown in the community in which you live and work?

In the very next generation, Cain and Abel brought jealousy, hatred and murder into human relationships.

PEOPLE AND THE ENVIRONMENT

Read Genesis 2:8–9, 3:17–19 and 3:23

- What was the relationship like between people and their environment in the beginning?
- What was the relationship like after sin came into the world?
- How do you see this breakdown in the community in which you live and work?
- How do you see this breakdown at a global level?

God was determined that the Fall would not be the end of the story of creation. He sent Jesus to save us from sin and to make it possible for the relationships between God, humans and the environment to be restored.

DISCUSSION

- What does it mean to have life in all its fullness?
- How does this study affect the way you think about the environment? What practical action can you take?

This study first appeared in Footsteps 99: Climate change

NOTES

Our stewardship of the environment

God created all things and there was perfect harmony between all creation and God. But as we read in Genesis 3:14–19, the Fall brought about sin and separation from God for both mankind and creation – breaking the perfect harmony that had existed.

However, the merciful and loving God started a process of restoration. Throughout the scriptures, the theme is that of God working through his people – priests, prophets and kings – to bring the creation back to what it ought to be. He still calls his people to be stewards of this creation.

In the Old Testament, God gave laws to enable us to live in harmony with each other and the environment.

Read Leviticus 25:2–7 and Exodus 23:10–11

- Discuss the significance of this law. How would it help protect the environment?

Read Leviticus 19:9–10

- What would be the effects of this law? Is it practised in your community? How should this affect the profit farmers make from their land?

Read Deuteronomy 8:7–9



- What was God's intention for Israel – and for us?

When we disobey God, many things (including the environment) go wrong. This is summed up by Paul in Romans 8:20–23. What do you see as the major problems facing the environment – both worldwide and in your own area?

OUR RESPONSE

The Bible does not speak about the present factors that have put the environment under pressure. However the Bible does give us the principles that will guide us in all we do. These principles are based on God's love. We cannot claim ignorance because, 'Since the creation of the world, God's eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things he has made...' (Romans 1:20 NRSV). Jesus is the ultimate demonstration of God's love to us. As Christians, we are God's stewards. As the salt and light of the world we should seek to salvage the environment. Jesus had many things to say to his disciples, but left them unsaid because the 'Spirit of truth will give guidance...' into all the truth. That Spirit is guiding us today to do something about the damage to our environment.

- What is the Holy Spirit prompting you to do to care for and restore the environment?

This study first appeared in Footsteps 15: Soil erosion

Conserving creation's fruitfulness

'How many are your works Oh Lord! In wisdom you have made them all; the earth is full of your creatures' (Psalm 104:24). God wants us to conserve creation's fruitfulness.

Read Ezekiel 34:17–19

- What does this passage reveal about how we should treat God's creation?
- How should we consider the needs of other people and other creatures?

Because God made all things and holds all things together through Jesus (Colossians 1:15–20), everything belongs to him. While God leads us to green pastures and pure water (Psalm 23), the earth belongs to God alone (Psalm 24:1). His are gifts we do not own. His are gifts that must never be taken from us or the other creatures!

- What are we doing to care for creation and God's creatures? Do we resist the desire to be greedy (Matthew 6:33)?
- Do we provide places for flowers and birds on our land or in our communities?

Keeping our places fruitful for all God's creatures brings praise to God, the creator and owner of all things!

TREES AND DIFFICULT TIMES

Read Deuteronomy

20:19–20.

- What commands are given here about the use of trees during war?

In war the rules of life change. People can forget to love in the same way. The environment suffers too. In those days, trees were cut down to use in attacking enemy cities. God knew that in times of war his people needed to be able to use trees to defend themselves or attack their enemies, so he didn't prohibit cutting them down altogether. Instead he tried to limit the damage by instructing his people not to cut down the fruit trees. Why? Because it was not in their future interests. No fruit trees mean no fruit, less food and hungry people. Here is plain teaching that even in times of great need, we must also be wise about how we steward the environment.

- Can you think of mistakes made in your local area, which have later meant less food (or worse health)?
- How could the authorities have responded differently, in a way that both met the immediate need and provided for the long term?

Versions of this study appeared in Footsteps 47: Biodiversity and Pillars: Agroforestry



NOTES



REFLECTION:

The Messiah and the jubilee year

Isaiah 61:1–7

FERNANDO ABILIO MOSQUERA BRAND, EDITED BY MA. ALEJANDRA ANDRADE V.

These verses from Isaiah 61 refer to the idea of biblical jubilee, or 'the year of the Lord's favour'. This jubilee is mentioned in several Bible passages and has its legislative basis in Leviticus 25, which describes the Hebraic law and includes provisions decreeing rest for the land and for its people, the exoneration of debts and the freeing of slaves.

When we compare Isaiah 61 and Leviticus 25 it would seem that, while Leviticus outlines the application of justice in relation to labour, social and economic issues, Isaiah is pointing to the eternal scope of the year of jubilee. In this sense, it could be said that the jubilee year of Leviticus, which is time-bound, serves the purpose of preparing humanity for the 'eternal jubilee', which will be ushered in by the Messiah and will involve the complete fulfilment and perpetuation of the year of jubilee.

According to Isaiah, it is the Messiah, the bearer of the Spirit of Yahweh, who brings in the 'eternal jubilee', since only God's Spirit can guide this sensitive mission. Far from being a promise of wellbeing in life after death, the eternal jubilee of Isaiah 61 has concrete implications for the 'here and now'. Below, I mention some of the implications of the 'eternal jubilee', based on the first verses of Isaiah 61.

The first implication of eternal jubilee has to do with the redemption of people who have been marginalised, and to whom consolation, restoration, justice and integration into society are promised. In this way, through the jubilee of Isaiah, those who have been excluded become part of Yahweh's blessed people.

Another aspect of the good news of jubilee is the healing of hearts broken ('broken into pieces', according to both the Hebrew and Greek terms) by pain and hurt. According to the Hebrew worldview,

the heart is located in the innermost part of a human being and is the source of all feelings, thoughts, reasoning, memories, and dreams for the future. This means that the eternal jubilee ushered in by the Messiah involves the total restoration of the human being.

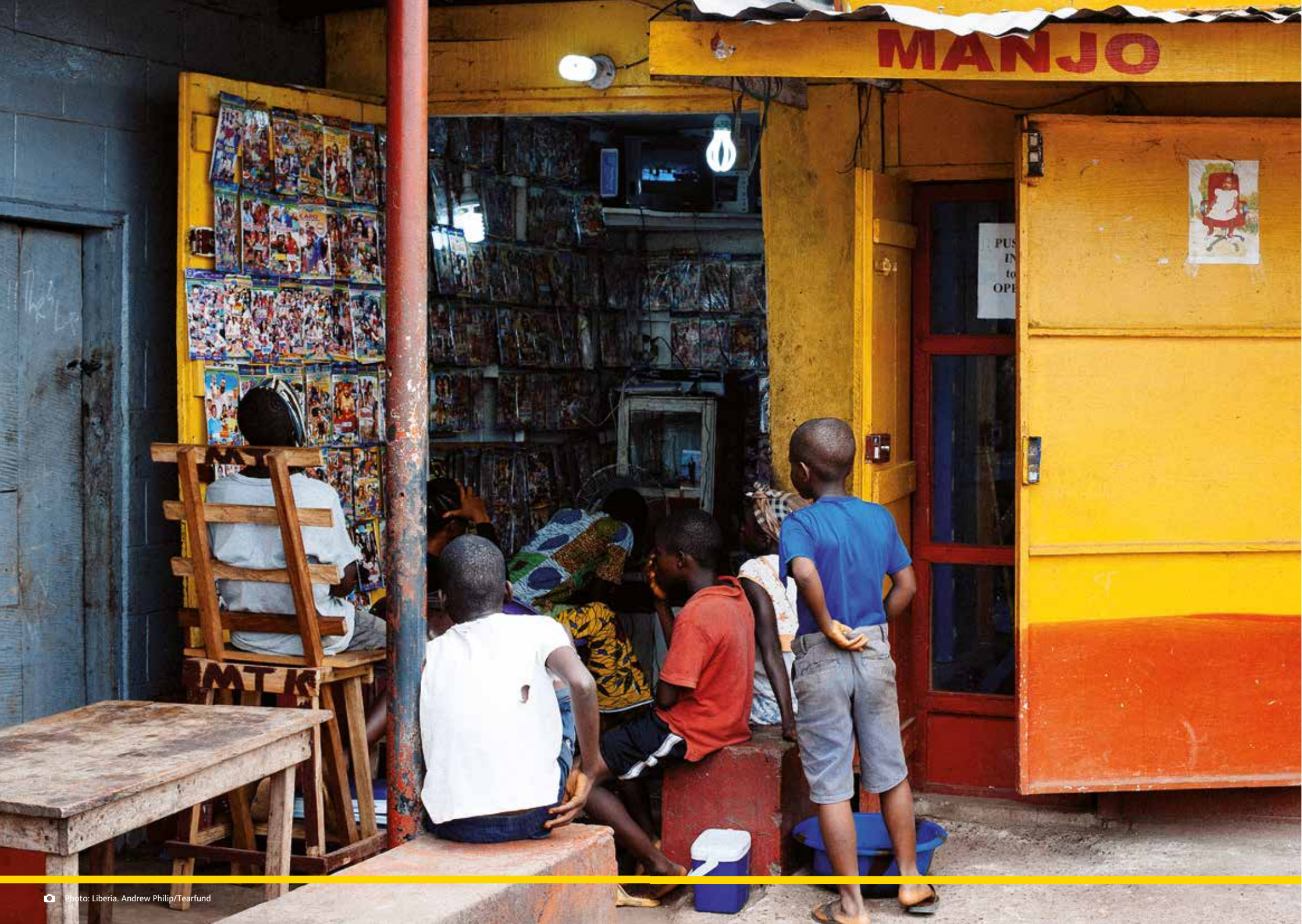
A third consequence of the jubilee year proclaimed by the Messiah is the freeing of slaves and the pardoning of prisoners. Freedom is a precious gift given by God to each individual; a gift so valuable that God not only upholds but also honours it. Eternal jubilee therefore signifies the end of everything that enslaves: both the arbitrary and violent deprivation of another person's freedom and the ways we can enslave ourselves. The fourth promise that eternal jubilee offers is at once a metaphor and real, and concerns the restoration of sight to the blind. This promise is metaphorical in the sense expressed in Isaiah 9:2: 'The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of deep darkness a light has dawned', but it also refers to physical healing of the kind widely reported in the gospels. Thus, eternal jubilee implies whole-life restoration: healing that is physical, but also spiritual, emotional, and of the mind.

In this way, the jubilee year announced by Isaiah presents us with a duality: it is both eternal and a reality for the 'here and now'. It is also both personal, in the sense that it promises wellbeing and justice for specific individuals, in their particular situations, and inclusive, since it is not limited to the Hebrew people but offered to all nations of the earth. Ultimately, the eternal jubilee extends to the whole of the universe, encompassing not only the people who live in it but all nature and living things created through Christ the Redeemer.



QUESTIONS

- Describe two main differences between the jubilee year of Leviticus and that of Isaiah. How do both interpretations of jubilee complement each other to provide a more holistic view of the year of the Lord's favour?
- In what way is the jubilee year of Isaiah significant for the mission of Christ's church?
- In what concrete ways can the eternal jubilee be reflected in our reality 'here and now'?



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HOW TO LEAD A PARTICIPATORY BIBLE STUDY

The purpose of participatory Bible study is to encourage a group to discuss a passage of scripture together, to reveal what it says to us, to hear from God and to take action.

You will need

- One or several Bibles, perhaps referring to more than one version (translation) so that you can compare between them.
- You may need a concordance, Bible dictionary or Bible study guide.
- www.biblegateway.com is an excellent website that allows you to look up Bible passages in a variety of different translations, and also has some free commentary materials.

Timeline

Typically around 30 minutes.

Keys to success

Before leading a group in discussing the passage together, it is important to spend some time in preparation. Although the authors in this publication have prepared thoughts and questions on the passages to be studied, you should make sure you are familiar with both the biblical text and the reflections before you begin. There are three key issues to consider while doing this preparation:

- **Observation** – looking closely at what you see in the passage.

- **Interpretation** – interpreting what the passage means, and ensuring you understand the prepared reflection on it.
- **Application** – applying the passage to your life or context so that you can respond.

What to do – preparation

Read and observe the passage

- Spend some time carefully reading and reflecting on it. Try to examine the main focus of the passage before looking at the detail.

Read the study materials

- Do you understand what the author is saying? Do you agree with his or her interpretation of the passage?
- Do the questions seem relevant for your context? Do you need to adjust any of them to fit your group or your situation?

What to do – during the group discussion

Start with an introduction

- Welcome people and make sure they feel comfortable. If this is a new group, make sure everyone is introduced to each other and has time to talk before the study begins.
- Introduce the main topic in the passage. Be clear about the main aim of the study.

- You may want to share some background about the passage that you will be looking at.
- Pray and ask for God's help as you study and discuss.

Read the passage

- Read through the passage slowly so that people have time to understand it and think about what it is saying.
- You may like to ask someone else to read the passage.
- You may want to read it several times.
- Invite the group to respond to the passage.

Read the study text

- You may like to ask someone else to read it out.
- Give everyone a few minutes afterwards to read through it themselves.
- Ask the questions provided. Encourage the group to discuss and share openly.

Conclusion

- Summarise some of the main points of discussion.
- Encourage participants to reflect more on the meaning of the text and to put what they have learnt into action.
- Finish in prayer, thanking God for what has been learnt and asking for help in applying the learning in everyday life.

Helpful tips for facilitating Bible study groups

- Try to keep the group size between 4 and 12.
- Try to make sure there is a good balance in the discussion between understanding what the passage is saying and applying the passage.
- Make sure that no-one dominates the discussion. Encourage those who are quiet to share their views, but recognise that some people may prefer to listen and think about what is being said rather than speak.
- Be encouraging and create a safe place for discussion. It is important that everyone feels able to share their thoughts on the passage. People need to know that they are valued and that what they say will be heard. This does not mean that each person's comments will be equally true and helpful. If the discussion moves too far away from engaging with the biblical passage then you need to steer it back.

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	TITLE	PUBLICATION	AUTHOR	Bible passage
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2	The jubilee principle	Footsteps 31: Readers' feedback issue	Isabel Carter	Leviticus 25:8–31
3	God's vision for our society	Pillars: Seeking justice for all	Alfonso Wieland	Isaiah 65:17–25
4	The misuse of power	Pillars: Seeking justice for all	Alfonso Wieland	1 Kings 21:1–16
5	What does it mean to bring justice?	Pillars: Seeking justice for all	Alfonso Wieland	Luke 4:18–21
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7	A generation's quest		Jean Valery Vital-Herne	Luke 4:18–21
8	Seven themes in Leviticus 25 and our call to jubilee		R Scott Rodin	Leviticus 25
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10	The role of the church	Pillars: Seeking justice for all	Alfonso Wieland and Isabel Carter	Amos 5:1–24
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12	Good laws, poor practice	Pillars: Seeking justice for all	Alfonso Wieland and Isabel Carter	Luke 11:42–46
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31	Caring for children	Pillars: Seeking justice for all	Ruth Alvarado	Matthew 18:1–6, 10–14
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