

TRINITY LECTURE 2 - Bible Study

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[0 : 00] Each night we have a shortish Bible study and tries to pick up a Bible passage that has some relationship in effect with the lecture, but it's certainly not my intent to, in a sense, give all the biblical references to slavery or anything like that, but simply to look at one passage that has some relationship.

And Deuteronomy 15, of course, does that. And as a chapter as a whole, it's a chapter that has a very radical economic manifesto, we might say.

It's a passage that, in the first paragraph, establishes that every seventh year, all debts to fellow Israelites are to be wiped out.

Anybody who's borrowed money and hasn't repaid it in that time within Israel, their debt is cleared. And then the second paragraph, which Dorothy read for us, then deals with every seven years, all slaves are given the option of freedom.

That is, all Israelite slaves. So this is quite a strong economic and radically economic manifesto, in a way, thoroughly different from what we know from our own society, where interest rates are often a topic of discussion, where loans are hardly ever cancelled.

[1 : 26] You can't imagine the great big banks, I guess, writing you a letter telling you that since you've had seven years of your house mortgage, and you've paid off a small bit, but because it's seven years are up, we're wiping off the debt.

I mean, that'd be unheard of, I imagine. And if your bank has done that to you, please tell me.

Please tell us all. Well, inevitably in Israel, even though it's the promised land, a land flowing with milk and honey that Israel is about to enter into, even though it's a land that is blessed by God, a land that's described in chapters 6 and 8 and 11 in terms almost like the Garden of Eden, a land that is bountiful and full of all of God's blessings in crops and animals, even though that's the case, Deuteronomy 15 understands that for various reasons, there will be individual Israelites who, for whatever reason, fall into debt.

It may be poor management on their part, it may be laziness on their part. It may be circumstances beyond their control through ill health, bereavement. It could just be that their bit of land somehow hasn't quite done as well as somebody else's, or their animals have sort of come down with equine influenza or some ancient equivalent, or whatever it is.

And so they borrow from their fellow Israelite. This is in the first few verses of Deuteronomy chapter 15. They're to borrow without interest, or at least Israelites are to lend to fellow Israelites without interest.

That law is established in the book of Exodus in chapter 22. And even that's radical enough, no interest rate. And the idea behind this is, in a sense, the protection of those who are impoverished, but also an element of preventative measure that poverty does not become too dire, in a sense.

[3 : 25] So chapter 15 begins, every seventh year you shall grant a remission of debts, and this is the manner of the remission. Then every creditor shall remit the claim that is held against a neighbour, not exacting it of a neighbour who is a member of the community, that is, a fellow Israelite.

This only applies within the fellowship of Israelites. It doesn't apply to foreigners or people from other nations. Verse 3 makes that clear of a foreigner. There's a level of generosity in this, of course, because somebody's in need.

Do you lend them money or not? If it's the sixth year of the seven-year cycles, the temptation would be, well, I'm not going to lend them money because I'm not going to get it back. But all through this chapter, even though there are, in a sense, specific laws, there is a strong and very clear undercurrent of generosity and provision that in one sense can't be legislated for.

So later on we'll see being generous and giving liberally. How much is that? That's part of the dilemma that's not answered, in a sense, in this chapter.

As I said, this radical economy, this interest-free and wiping out debts after seven years, is strange from our point of view, but is certainly trying to stop those downward spirals of poverty that nobody can ever get out of.

[5 : 00] So it's, in a sense, limiting the poverty that could happen. The ideal in verse 4 is expressed, there will, however, be no one in need among you, because the Lord is sure to bless you in the land.

It's a great claim, if you're a member of Bob Hawke, in one of those elections back in whenever it was, the 80s, I guess. There'll be no child poverty in Australia by, well, it doesn't matter what year, because there's still child poverty in Australia, and there probably always will be.

Sadly, Bob Hawke didn't keep reading this verse and see about God's blessing, and God's blessing being contingent on obeying God, something that Bob Hawke was quite clear that he did not do.

Now, how do we apply this sort of thing?

Australia's not Israel. Should we dismiss this and say this is an ancient primitive economy that we're not part of? Should we, in a sense, therefore ignore it as made redundant somehow?

How? Well, it still seems to me that that would be throwing out too much of Old Testament law to do that. And though the continuity from ancient Israel does not lead us directly to Australia, rather, I think the continuity of Israel leads to the church.

[6 : 12] That is, the people of God was Israel in the Old Testament is the church in the new. And it's quite striking, I think, that in Acts chapter 4, in the new church, in the days immediately after Pentecost, everybody was giving so there were no poor in their midst, as mentioned in Acts chapter 4.

The ideal that's expressed in verse 4, there shall be no poor among you, of course, was not met in reality. Israel had been disobedient. And Jesus picks up on that in some of his teaching in Matthew 26, for example.

And even later in this same passage, there's tension within the passage. Because in verse 7, if there is among you anyone in need, then some measures are to be taken in verses 7 to 11.

Measures that are striking in their generosity again. You're not to be hard-hearted or tight-fisted in verse 7. Rather, open your hand, willingly lending enough to meet the need, whatever it may be.

Be careful that you don't entertain a mean thought, thinking the seventh year of the year of remission is near, and therefore view your needy neighbor with hostility and give nothing. Your neighbor might cry to the Lord against you, and you would incur guilt.

[7 : 25] An expression we saw last night as well, when we looked at chapter 24, dealing with aliens and their workplace treatment as well. Verse 10, give liberally and be ungrudging.

When you do so. And again, this is telling us something that is clearly flowing from the heart. It's not something that's simply legislated for.

What does give liberally mean? How much do I need to give in order to give liberally? In one sense, it's the wrong question to ask. There's a sense in which, within us, in our heart and conscience, as we give and give significantly, we'll know that we're actually giving liberally.

And that will mean different things for different people, depending on how the Lord has blessed us as well. Notice how the whole person's involved in this generosity.

The hand is not to be tight-fisted. Clutching your money is the metaphor that's there. But rather open-handed. In verse 11, verse 2 as well. The eye, you're not to eye your neighbor with hostility.

[8 : 27] Verse 8 or 9, rather, literally says. And the same eye is used, picked up again in verse 18, about not being hard of eye as well. But, of course, it all comes back to the heart.

And Israel is not to be hard-hearted. They're not to have mean thoughts that come from the heart in verse 9. The ungrudging nature in verse 10 again flows from the heart in the way the Hebrew is written.

So it's the heart that is to be generous and not stingy. The heart that's to give liberally, not reluctantly. Paul, of course, picks up on quite a bit of language from this chapter in 2 Corinthians 9.

Giving cheerfully. I remember somebody saying to me, how much should I give to give cheerfully?

And if you're not cheerful when you're giving, the answer is not to give less, but to give more until you're laughing about it.

Well, there we are. There's a challenge to those of you who are not giving cheerfully in your regular giving. When the second part, the part that was read, we, in a sense, move to the second stage of poverty.

[9 : 30] The first stage is to do with debts and people coming into debt. But even then, without interest and with limit on the debt, it may be that somebody's plight for a time is still dire.

And they're still stuck in their debt. And so it seems that the situation envisaged in verse 12 through to 18 is of a person, an Israelite, who, in a sense, sells themselves into slavery in order to cope economically with their poverty.

Now, when we think of slavery here, we ought not to be thinking in terms of Uncle Tom's Cabin and the slavery of the American blacks in the 19th century, which was so brutal and harsh, or so often it was.

One of the difficulties of slavery is that the word *evad*, which is the basic word that's used, can mean servant or slave. So some people are slaves of God, or is it servants of God?

I mean, there's an ambiguity, an overlap between the terms. And we have to be careful when we read, I think, in the Old Testament to see what's the nuance or the context for the word.

[10 : 45] Is it at the extreme level of being virtually somebody's property? Or is it the sort of other end of the spectrum or in the middle somewhere that's really like being a servant?

And an Israelite is not to be a slave in the sense of personal property or being a chattel of the master, but rather at the level of being a servant is probably a little bit better.

That is not at the level of being absolutely at the beck and call and like a 19th century black American slave, but rather somebody who is very much a servant of the master.

So therefore, yes, they are working for the master. They are, in a sense, under the master's domain more than, say, a simple employee. But it's not at the level of simply being regarded as property at that extreme level, it seems.

That's for an Israelite who's, in a sense, a servant slave of another Israelite. It does seem in some of the laws that foreigners could be slaves, and they're regarded more like property than people.

[11 : 58] And the way they're treated in the law, I don't mean treated by their master necessarily, but the way they're treated in the law, whilst not brutal or harsh, is certainly at the level of being more like property, rather than, say, an Israelite who sells themselves into slavery for a time.

So the law here about seven years of slavery maximum, notice verse 12, if a member of your community, that is, a fellow Israelite, if they, whether a Hebrew man or a Hebrew woman, is sold to you, or sells themselves to you even, and works for you six years.

So this law of setting slaves free after seven years applies to Israelite slaves. It limits their slavehood because of their economic plight, just like the debt release in the previous paragraph after seven years.

It doesn't apply to foreigners who might be slaves. There's an element of perhaps perpetuity in that. But there's certainly great limits on both the treatment of slaves and the length in which that an Israelite could be a slave.

The reason why I think this is so clear and strong goes back to, in effect, the Old Testament gospel. That is, God has redeemed Israel from slavery in Egypt.

[13 : 20] And that's a very big theme through the Old Testament, and not least through Deuteronomy. We saw it last night as well. And so the liberation from slavery in Egypt for Israel is meant to mean that no Israelite should be a slave again.

The reality is there will be times temporarily when an Israelite might, in a sense, sell themselves into slavery for the sake of dealing with their economic poverty.

And that's what's being dealt with here, but so limited here as well in this seven-year rule and so on. Slaves, elsewhere we see, they participate in the feasts.

They're explicitly mentioned as being recipients of the meals that would be celebrating the Israelite feast. They're to rest on the Sabbath day. If you look back to Deuteronomy 5 and the Ten Commandments and so on, etc.

So there's quite a deal of protection for slaves as well. Now, notice then that they have the right of freedom after seven years.

[14 : 23] This seems to be a fixed period of seven years, not like the debt, which seems to have a seventh year. So 2007, 2014, and therefore when you borrow money, might be influenced by how soon the debt release is.

The slavery thing here seems to be simply a seven-year period, not a fixed year of release, quite possibly. And notice that they have a right for freedom.

But notice too, when they've given freedom, they're not just kicked out. They're actually provided for significantly because the idea is that they don't keep going back into those patterns of slavery and poverty.

So verse 13, when you send a male slave out from you, a free person, you shall not send him out empty-handed. Provide liberally out of your flock, your threshing floor, your wine press, thus giving to him some of the bounty with which the Lord your God has blessed you.

Now, in this time of, say, seven years, this slave has been provided for by the master, fed and housed, maybe paid something, maybe not clothed in all of that time, but they may not have made money.

[15:39] They haven't accumulated something to get themselves on their feet. This liberal provision, which has not specified how much, is not insignificant out of flocks and crops.

To give somebody even a sheep is probably a significant cost to the master of the slave setting them free. The right is the slaves to choose freedom, but they're provided for so that they've got something by which they can, in a sense, put themselves back on their own feet once they're free. All of this comes because of the Lord's blessing, the end of verse 14, and a recognition that for the master, the slave has contributed to the blessing that the master has received. Exactly the same principle in the New Testament.

Give us, God has blessed you, in 2 Corinthians 9 again. And again, in verse 15, the motivation comes from the Exodus. Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the Lord your God redeemed you.

And for this reason, I lay this command upon you today. Remember, of course, how the Egyptians actually gave them some of their treasures as Israel left. So, in a sense, that's the model that's behind here of giving liberally to the slaves as they have their freedom.

[16:53] Furthermore, notice that some slaves may not want freedom. There may be a variety of reasons for that. Some may be quite comfortable and well cared for. They might be quite happy being, in effect, the employees of the master.

It shows us that the slavery pattern here is not the brutal chain gangs of America, but something much more like being a hired labourer or a sort of servant on a farm or an estate, in effect.

Some, of course, may be old or frail and think they don't have much chance of looking after themselves or being looked after, and so they decide to stay with their master. Verse 16 then says, if he says, I will not go out from you because he loves you or your household since he's well off with you, then you shall take an awl and thrust it through his earlobe into the door.

Now, that may seem an odd way to treat somebody who's just said, I actually love you and I like being here. But the idea is that it's a mark of ownership, a piercing of the ear, in effect. Some say, actually, that when Paul says in Galatians, I think it is at the end of Galatians, about carrying around the marks of Christ, that it's something like that as his mark of being a slave of Christ, a servant of the gospel, may be in mind here.

And then in verse 18, a reminder to the master, don't consider it a hardship when you send them out from you a free person, because for six years they've given you services worth the wages of hired laborers.

[18:23] And the Lord your God will bless you in all that you do. So often in Deuteronomy, but not only there, this future blessing that's promised is motivation of obedience.

That is, we act in trust, or we are to act in trust, that in obeying God, God will provide. Now, how easy it would be for a master to think, I can't do without this slave. I'm going to keep him.

I'm going to stop him from going free. But in liberating them rightly, obeying the law, that person is actually exercising faith that God will keep his promise of future blessing.

Well, this is radical economics. I doubt that it would win an election later in the year, whenever that will be. But on the other hand, we can't dismiss it simply, I think, as Old Testament idealism, as something that's fanciful, as I said yesterday, the way we're to read Old Testament law is to recognize that not every situation is dealt with in Old Testament law, not even for ancient Israel, let alone for us.

But not to dismiss and say, well, this is all old, we're in the New Testament, we're out of this, but rather to recognize what principles are here that ought to guide our own behavior as the people of God.

[19 : 41] For the trajectory of Old Testament law leads not to sort of national law so much as to the behavior of churches and Christian communities of God's people. The church is actually the continuity of ancient Israel.

What are the principles here? Well, certainly principles of generosity, not a legislated generosity that you must give X amount or X dollars or whatever, but giving liberally, especially to fellow believers.

That's the immediate context. Our generosity is not limited to that, but there is a priority for that. And for those of us in the eastern suburbs in one of the wealthiest countries on earth, in one of the wealthiest eras on earth, our generosity probably, I think I can say in all honesty, ought to be much greater than it is collectively.

And our generosity is not just to our immediate brothers and sisters in our own church community, although we must not overlook them because they're most immediately our neighbors, but our generosity beyond that to believers in the western suburbs or in other countries where poverty is so great and so oppressive in so many ways.

Maybe it's right that we should contemplate that we give without interest to our fellow believers in some way when they are in need. That is, maybe as we recognize believers in need, we as churches ought to be more proactive in providing ways to help them deal with their financial crisis that will not see it in a sense get beyond their control by having to go to institutions to borrow to help themselves now and end up in a sort of situation of almost hopeless debt as well.

[21 : 33] certainly this passage is guiding us to see that what we do have is God's blessing and not something that we greedily hold on to at any cost.

Of course, while slavery in one sense is not our experience in Australia, it certainly is the experience of many countries of our world, but periodically we find that in effect there is slavery in our own country as well.

The people who are poor, especially people who are immigrants, people whose English is poor, we periodically read this in the media, I'm sure there are more cases that never come to light, find themselves in terrible abject poverty and slavery in effect.

So for those who are employers, there is obligation here, I think, to be generous, fair, and just in our dealings with all those whom we employ.

And I think as Christians to be advocates on the part of those who have little voice, but who are treated badly. In the end, my final comment is this passage also reminds us of the place of our heart.

[22 : 39] It's not just about a system of laws, but actually about a heart that is generous, a heart that loves the poor, a heart that wants to be like the character of God, a heart who, like God, has liberated and brought out of slavery his people.

Our hearts ought to be ones that long for the liberation of others, whether we know them or not, a heart that's generous, a heart that is cultivating a love for the poor, a heart that is budgeting, in effect, in our personal and church budgets, and perhaps advocating more for national or state budgets to be more generous as well for the sake of the poor.

The theology of the Old Testament, which some wrongly see as a prosperity gospel, is actually, in fact, a sufficiency gospel. And it's the theology or the economics of Deuteronomy is of wealth and abundance, but not prosperity gospel, it's a sufficiency one.

There is sufficient for all of God's people, provided that God's people are obedient, and that means being generous and sharing. These laws are just a small part of that, but it reminds us that we ought to be people who trust in God's sufficiency for us, and that will, I mean, I suspect for most of us, mean that we ought to be far more generous with our surplus, which is usually far bigger than we ever realize.

Christmas. Christmas.