

Exercise on the law as both 'prophetic witness' and 'instructive wisdom'**Overview**

Living in the good land God gave to Israel, every Israelite was intended to enjoy a share of the prosperity and blessing of the land which each family being allocated an inheritance in the land. However, given the realities of indwelling sin, it was inevitable that this equality would not be maintained. Some Israelites would prosper whilst others might fall on hard times. When this happened the rich would possess the power to oppress the poor. Those who became poor would fall into debt, borrowing from the rich, and even have to sell themselves into slavery.

This passage includes some of the laws establishing protection for the poor, to prevent them being unfairly exploited by the power of the rich. It establishes a pattern of regular release of poor Israelites from the bondage of debt and slavery. This would ensure that they were not trapped by poverty but were given the chance to make a new start.

Note that the slavery envisaged in this passage is not brutal race-based enslavement like that of the appalling 18th century African slave trade – these are debt slaves (bankrupts) who find themselves with no alternative but to temporarily bind themselves to work for a master to pay off their debts.

Context

Part of the exposition of detailed laws in chapters 12 to 26

Part of a structured section: 12:1-16:17

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| 12:1-32 | One place of worship
- not at the many pagan places |
| 13:1-18 | Protecting Israel from false worship
- dealing with those who advocate other gods |
| 14:1-21 | Preserving Israel's distinctiveness
- funeral rites; clean/unclean food |
| 14:22-15:23 | Provision for true worship
- consecration of tithes & firstborn – <i>generosity to the poor</i> – firstborn |
| 16:1-7 | Worship at the one place
- three annual festivals |

Overarching theme: The Preservation of Israel's distinctiveness among the nations (14:2), through...

- theological exclusiveness
- social inclusiveness
- corporate joyfulness

Note the fulfilment in the life of the early church – Acts 2:42-47

Content

v1-11 command the Israelites to observe a seven-year cycle of debt release

v1-3 makes clear that this command must be observed within the covenant community, but does not apply to foreigners

v4-6 set this command within the context of the LORD's promise of blessing to his people

v7-11 address the potential problem of unwillingness to lend to those in need as the end of the seven-year cycle drew near

v12-18 give a parallel command to release Israelite slaves after six years of service

v12-15 instruct that debt-slaves were not simply to be released but sent on their way with a generous gift enabling them to make a new start

Note: v15 provides the theological motivation, reminding the people that the LORD released them from slavery and bondage in Egypt

v16-17 allow for an Israelite slave to choose to stay with his/her master for life should they wish

v18 parallels v7-11 in encouraging the Israelites not to consider it a hardship to put the principle of release into practice

This part of the Law as *Prophetic Witness*

The principal of debt release and the release from slavery is fulfilled in our salvation. Picturing sin as creating a debt which incurs the wrath of God, the New Testament uses the language of debt release to describe our forgiveness (e.g. Matthew 18v21-35). Similarly, our bondage to sin is pictured as a slavery from which we cannot free ourselves (Romans 6v17). At great cost to the one, namely Christ, who bore the cost of our release we have been set free both from the debt of sin and bondage of slavery to sin.

It follows that since Christians have been released from their debt, so too they should release others by forgiving them (e.g. Matthew 12v12; 18v21-35). The principle of debt release thus points ahead to the obligation of Christians to forgive each other (Colossians 3v13).

At the same time, we have voluntarily become forever-slaves of Christ because we see in him a master that we have come to love deeply. As slaves of Christ we live to serve him by obeying his word, confident in his promises. As we listen to his word, we find teaching regarding poverty and riches that fulfils the law as we find it expressed in Deuteronomy.