

Bible Study

Human Trafficking for Labour (guide for leaders)

Introducing the Topic

This study examines the economy of ancient Israel as envisioned in biblical precepts. The provision of jubilee in Leviticus 25 offers liberty to those who are disenfranchised. It also challenges followers of Christ to be faithful to God's will in the midst of the contemporary reality of human trafficking for labour.

Review some of the following information with your study group.

Human trafficking is the exploitation of a vulnerable person for profit. Those who traffick in labour – individuals, gangs, corporations and even states – prey on people in situations of poverty. They coerce or force them to work under inhumane conditions for little or no compensation. Trafficked persons work in manufacturing, construction, agriculture, service industries and domestic work. They can be victims of deception, intimidation, isolation and violence.

Tens of millions of people are bonded labourers. They are forced to work off some initial “debt” they assume at the beginning of their employment. Targets for bonded labour include refugees and migrants seeking out better lives for themselves and their families. Debt bondage can be inherited from one generation to the next.

The global economy relies on trafficked labour. Manufacturing in rich countries is often outsourced to countries with poor labour regulations. Trafficking also yields greater savings for consumers in more developed nations.

Take a few minutes to discuss additional factors that feed into human trafficking for labour.

- lack of access to education, decent employment or legal protection
- isolation due to xenophobia and other forms of social marginalization
- fragmentation of families as children and adults are forced to leave their kin

Studying the Scripture: Leviticus 25

Read Leviticus 25 aloud as a whole. Take a few moments for silent reflection.

Read verses 1-12. Notice the rhythm of the cycle of years.

Israel's economy was based on the value of both land and persons. According to what is set out in Leviticus 25, God's plan for Israel is for everyone to live a good life by the fruits of their labour. This is accomplished in part through the year of jubilee that is to be observed every 50 years. The purpose of jubilee is to correct cyclical or inherited poverty.

Read verses 13-22.

What does the year of jubilee mean for Israelites? (liberty or freedom: land is restored to original owner and Israelites are restored to their families)

Consider the situations of debt that an Israelite might face:

- verses 25-28 (being forced to sell a portion of one's land)
- verses 35-38 (forfeiting all of one's land and working on it)
- verses 39-43 (hiring oneself out as a servant or bound labourer to another Israelite)
- verses 47-55 (selling oneself as a slave to a non-Israelite living in Israel)

Read these portions of scripture again. What provisions are set out to *redeem* Israelites who are in deep difficulty because of debt?

- verses 25-28 (a relative may buy back the sold land)
- verses 35-38 (a relative must support the debtor and not seek to make a profit from the debtor)
- verses 39-43 (a relative must not treat the bound labourer harshly or like a slave)
- verses 47-55 (Israelite slaves may be bought back either by themselves or by a relative)

What role does the year of jubilee play in each situation?

- verses 25-28 (if not redeemed before jubilee year, land is returned to the original owner)
- verses 35-38 (if not redeemed before jubilee year, land is returned to the original owner)
- verses 39-43 (labourer is freed and returned to original land)
- verses 47-55 (price of redemption is affected by timing of next jubilee year; labourer is freed)

Now consider the relationship *God* has with the Israelites and the land. Spend some time discussing what the following portions of Leviticus 25 reveal.

- verses 23-24, 55 (the Israelites have been redeemed *from* slavery in Egypt; the people and the land belong to God)
- verses 20-21 (the Israelites have been redeemed *for* freedom and secure living; blessing is connected with trust in God)
- verses 17-19, 36-38, 42-43 (Israelites must not take advantage of each other for profit; security is connected with obedience to God)

Jubilee offers a divine promise in return for obedience: the Israelites will eventually be liberated from debt, poverty, servitude and slavery. It tells us something of what God wanted for Israel. Spend a few minutes discussing what this might be (e.g., security, redemption, blessing, responsibility for others).

Read verses 42-46.

The jubilee redemption of land and persons every fifty years is not a perfect system. It still presumes that slavery will be present in the land, even making space for it. Take some time to discuss what these verses indicate about how slavery will be practiced in the land of Israel.

- Who may be slaves? (non-Israelites, including resident aliens or foreigners living in the land)
- How may slaves be treated? (as property to be bought, sold and inherited; with harshness)

We know that Christians abhor the enslavement of anybody. How is slavery disrupted elsewhere in the scriptures? (Note especially what Jesus said in the synagogue in Nazareth, recorded in Luke 4.)

Applying the Scripture: Human Trafficking for Labour

In Christ we are not only servants of God but also children of God. We are called to recognize *all* people as loved by God. We are called to be responsible for *all* people, especially the marginalized. We are called to act in the best interests of others. A big part of this is jubilee, liberation or freedom. (If there is time, read Romans 8:12-17 and Philippians 2:1-4.)

How can we act in the interests of people who are trafficked or vulnerable to being trafficked for their labour?

- pray for them
- increase awareness about human trafficking for labour
- stand up for those who are socially and economically marginalized in your neighbourhood, city, region, nation
- educate ourselves about the supply chains of products we purchase
- improve our purchasing habits
- advocate for a more just economy, including stringent labour regulations and legal recourse for trafficked persons

References

If you are interested in learning more, the following websites offer information and advocacy tools regarding human trafficking for labour, debt bondage, bonded labour and product supply chains.

Jubilee Debt Campaign: <http://jubileedebt.org.uk/>

Jubilee USA Network: <http://www.jubileeusa.org/>

Made in a Free World, "How Many Slaves Work for You?": <http://slaveryfootprint.org/>

Free2Work: <http://www.free2work.org/>