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Jubileum Part III: Hope for the Poor in Spirit and Wealth

By Wilfred Hahn

Who likes to have something canceled ... perhaps an appointment or an upcoming entertainment event for which tickets have been purchased? Or, to be confronted by a sign notifying one: “Canceled Until Further Notice.” Not many.



Yet, “cancellation” is one of the most redeeming concepts of all. Not only does it apply to eternal matters, but is also essential for human affairs on earth. As the Lord’s Prayer mentions, “[...] forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors” (Matthew 6:12). More than ever, the world is in need of “cancellations.” Around the globe, debt is soaring to unprecedented levels; more people are falling into economic oppression. While God put a plan in place that would redeem people from sin, there is also a plan to redeem the earth from debt.

The History of Debt Write-Offs

Cancellation of debts became a common royal practice in the old Babylonian period. Hammurabi, who was the Babylonian king early in the second millennium BC (around 1800 BC ... dating varies), founded the basic principle of ruler-mandated debt cancellation in the renowned Code of Hammurabi. It is very likely that Abraham, the Biblical patriarch, lived during the very same time as Hammurabi. In fact, some scholars consider that the account of Genesis 14 actually references this same king, though under the different name of Amraphel, King of Shinar. To recall, it was



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this king along with several others who had captured Lot, the nephew of Abraham. As it was, Abraham himself originally came from Ur, a location that by most accounts is on the southern extremity of Shinar.

Debt cancellation was one of Hammurabi's first acts when he came into power. He is recorded to have ordered debt cancellations on at least two occasions in his reign. As in our time today, overindebtedness was a major problem in Babylonian society. Citizens could easily become enslaved to the creditor class. Anyone falling upon hard times or not able to pay taxes would be forced to borrow. Interest rates were onerous ... commonly as high as 33% over the duration of the loan period (this sometimes being as short as a few weeks).

Once indebted, people were almost certainly doomed to even deeper debt or slavery. With such usurious interest rates, it would not take long for wealth distribution and concentration of land ownership to become extreme, this potentially also threatening the power of the king. It made sense to periodically decree an amnesty from all personal debts (this not including commercial liabilities in the case of the Babylonian system). This wiping out of debts rejuvenated society and served to maintain a sustainable wealth and power balance.

Biblical Foundations for Debt Cancellation

Down through history, philosophers and religious thinkers came to similar conclusions on the issue of repressive debts and wealth distribution. For example, more than two and a half millennia after Hammurabi, Islamic scholars began to develop principles that sought to achieve relief for the poor and sustainable wealth balance. Uniquely, their teaching of "al riba" served this end.

This is the doctrine that money is not allowed to earn income through interest. According to Islam, gain is only to be achieved through labor and trading. If money is allowed to earn income, though producing nothing, eventually it would lead to an imbalance of wealth distribution.

Originally, Mohammed's forbidding of debt interest was more likely rooted in the idea that a fixed rate of interest was an affront to Allah, as only he could determine and underwrite the certainty of future income, not mankind. Later, Islam further intellectualized its view on "al riba."

But much earlier than Islam (only some 500 years after the era of Abraham and Hammurabi), during the time of the 40-year wilderness journey of the Hebrews, God gave Moses the commands of the Sabbath. As already reviewed in detail in Part II, there were two ordinances with respect to debt and credit cancellation.

After entering Canaan, the Hebrews were additionally commanded to observe the Sabbath Year and the Jubilee Year. Moses codified the rules of debt forgiveness and the restoration of wealth distribution much more than the general haphazard concepts of debt forgiveness of the Akkadians 500 years earlier. These proved to be most wonderful ordinances for a number of reasons. Both practices of the Sabbath and Jubilee year were an effective means of ensuring that a permanent poverty class would not emerge; nor, that a society of a few ultrarich could enslave everyone for perpetuity.

Creation and Money

God has created the world for his purposes and glory. He made it so that the world could not function righteously without the concept of "cancellation." It



is not a coincidence that we commonly refer to the cancellation of debts as a “forgiveness” of debt.

The Creation deliberately included such human notions as property rights and justice, which could not be possible without the concepts of indebtedness and ownership, therefore the facility of mankind to use money. But the notion of money had to be subject to God’s glory. Therefore, the pitfalls of money are part of the created order. Any human society—indeed, any person—who places their hope, affections or worship upon money (Mammon), will suffer eventual eternal loss or destruction (not to mention its corrosive ramifications for society). It is unavoidable, because God is a just and “jealous” God. In fact, Exodus 34:14 declares that Jealous is actually a name for God.

We only briefly raise these points to better illustrate the wisdom of the Sabbath and Jubilee year. One of the pitfalls of money (this being a reflection of the nature of human lusts and affections) is its facility to become concentrated in the hands of a few. Anyone who has played the game of Monopoly will recognize this tendency. Eventually, one player wins all the money and the time comes to restart the game. Jesus himself so much as acknowledged this fallen state, saying, “You will always have the poor among you” (John 12:8).

This tendency of “wealth begetting wealth” today is viewed by economists as a “flaw” of capitalism. They observe that over time, the competitive economic arena leads to winners who then become very large or wealthy, in turn having the ability to suppress new competitors. (At times, the U.S. government intervened to



Abraham journeying into the land Canaan. Engraving by Gustave Dore from 1870.

break up companies that were thought to have become too large ...i.e. AT&T and General Motors). The point we wish to emphasize is that the laws of money, compound interest and relative advantage (everything else being equal) contribute to the tendency that the wealthy get wealthier, and the poor, relatively poorer. However, these very trends over time lead to instability and eventual destruction.

Just such a “late stage” situation exists in America and many other nations today. An extreme state of imbalance between the rich and poor is a worldwide phenomenon. An ever-smaller minority is becoming wealthier. Recent actions in the U.S. political sphere have signaled just how advanced and repressive this condition has become. Everywhere one looks in the world, a cry is heard for “debt cancellation.” The world groans for a Jubilee Year. As Apostle Paul says, “We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time” (Romans 8:22). Something else is needed to liberate the world, to free the economic captives.

Debt Forgiveness and the Prophetic Plan

The Lord’s Prayer, given to us in Matthew 6:9-13, has the statement,

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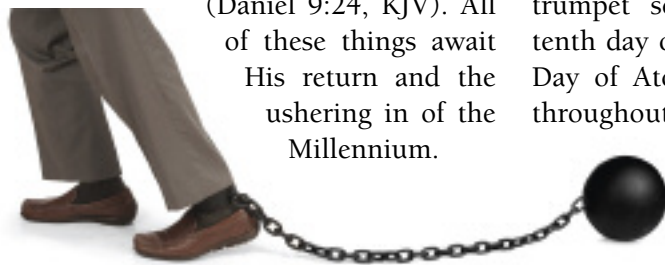


Jesus Christ quoted Isaiah's prophecy about Himself (Isaiah 61:1-2) when He said: "The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor" (Luke 4:18-19).

"And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors" (verse 12). However, Luke provides us a slightly different version of this prayer. He writes: "And forgive us our sins; for we also forgive every one that is indebted to us" (Luke 11:4, KJV). Here we note that Matthew refers to "debts" being forgiven, while Luke mentions "sins" being forgiven. Two different Greek words are used: "debts" (*opheilema*) and "sin" (*hamartia*), respectively. Are these two accounts therefore inconsistent ... one of them perhaps in error?

No. Both of these similarly involve indebtedness. Sin and debt are very closely related concepts. It is important to recognize that the Lord's Prayer embraces the entire cosmology of God's plan for the world and is therefore also prophetic in character. The statement, "Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven" (Matthew 6:10) will not happen until the Millennium at the earliest. Similarly, the full forgiveness of mankind's sins and debts, including that of the Hebrews (Daniel 9:24), will not occur at the earliest until the beginning of the Millennium. As such, the forgiveness of both debts and sins are in the spectrum of the Lord's Prayer.

Daniel was told that "Seventy weeks are determined upon thy people and upon thy holy city, to finish the transgression, and to make an end of sins, and to make reconciliation for iniquity, and to bring in everlasting righteousness, and to seal up the vision and prophecy, and to anoint the most Holy (Daniel 9:24, KJV). All of these things await His return and the ushering in of the Millennium.



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Why? Because these were things that would be completed at His Second Coming, signifying the arrival of the "year of the Lord's favor." While our Lord proclaimed "the year of the Lord's favor" during his first coming, it was not to occur until his second. The Lord did not rescue the poor at his first coming, rather the "poor in spirit" (Matthew 5:3 from the Beatitudes). The rescuing of all poor (Luke 6:20, Sermon on the Plain) will be fulfilled in the Millennium.

Prophetic Parallels to the Jubilee Year

Just what is meant by the Hebrew word for "jubilee"? It refers to the continuous blast of the silver trumpets that were blown as the Year of the Jubilee was ushered in by the priests. "[...] have the trumpet sounded everywhere on the tenth day of the seventh month; on the Day of Atonement sound the trumpet throughout your land" (Leviticus 25:9).

Ezekiel informs us that the "year of liberty" (year of freedom) will again be observed in the



Millennium. He describes a procedure that will apply to a prince during that time: “But if he gives a gift out of his inheritance to one of his servants, then it shall be his until the year of liberty [the Year of Jubilee]; after that it shall be returned to the prince; only his sons may keep a gift from his inheritance [permanently]” (Ezekiel 46:17, AMP).

While it is indeed remarkable that the Jubilee Year will again be reinstated, the prophetic parallels and symmetry of the 50th year of Jubilee to salvation and the Millennium we find to be the most inspiring.

To begin, the number 50 is the year that follows 7 weeks of 7. Therefore, the Jubilee Year was the 8th Sabbath in a 50-year period. The number eight in the Bible signifies a new beginning. The blasts of the Jubilee trumpets parallel or foreshadow the final trumpet of the Lord (for the Church, this being the final calling in the “Sabbath Rest”) and the last judgments in the Tribulation period, these being followed by the Millennial reign of Christ.

The precious year of the Jubilee can also be seen as the prophetic parallel of the Millennial “Year of our Lord.” That year is the Jubilee Year of the Lord. All sins and debts will be forgiven. They will be canceled.

We see that financial debt in the physical dimension is the parallel of spiritual indebtedness against our Creator. Both must be paid back. Both can be forgiven. There is only one difference: while mankind may be able to pay back debts on earth, he cannot pay back his sin debt. Only Jesus Christ could make this payment.

Thoughts to Ponder

What was the most common accusation of the legalistic religious leaders against Jesus Christ? This question brings us back to the focus of Parts I and II. Ten times in the Gospels we read of them

charging Jesus that he was breaking the Sabbath. Seven of these accounts involved Jesus healing someone. Indeed, the four Gospels provide multiple accounts of the same miracles. Two of them (involving the healing of the man with the shriveled hand, and the disciples husking grain to eat) are mentioned three times each. As such, there were six different acts of Jesus and his disciples on a Sabbath that attracted the ire of the religious leaders. It is astounding that the Lord—the Lord of the Sabbath Himself—should be accused of breaking its ordinance.

God has designed a plan for both heaven and earth. He sent his Son, Jesus Christ, to pay for the debts of mankind owed to God that he could not pay... a transaction that would be extended to all those who would believe upon Him. Just as in the Jubilee Year of ancient times, this opportunity to cancel all debt (sin) is open to all.

How wonderful then is “cancellation.” How many households today would dance for joy at the cancellation of their mortgage? Consider the word origin of “mortgage”—it literally means “death pledge”—a state of affairs that will find meaning to those in foreclosure proceedings. However, it is the cancellation of our sin and reconciliation to Jesus Christ that brings the greatest joy for eternity.

We have been given this great promise, “There remains, then, a Sabbath-rest for the people of God; for anyone who enters God’s rest also rests from his own work, just as God did from his. Let us, therefore, make every effort to enter that rest, so that no one will fall by following their example of disobedience” (Hebrew 4:9-11).

The trumpets of Jubilee are ever nearer! (MC)

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