

**Viability and Vitality Study Committee Bible Study #1**  
**Israel's Jubilee – Isaiah 61:1-9**  
**Steven Schweitzer**

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Isaiah 61:1-9 depicts a new world, one radically transformed by the outpouring of God's Spirit on the prophet. This individual, as a result of the presence of God's Spirit, is to act in accordance with this mission of hope and restoration, using language common to the Jubilee celebration in the Torah, with the forgiveness of debts and the possibility of a different future for those who were marginalized and oppressed within Israel's economic system. The prophet is commissioned to "bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners, proclaiming the year of God's favor," bringing judgment, comfort, and rejoicing for those who mourn. These are the righteous who will be planted as oaks, building up the ancient ruins (v.3). They will enjoy the wealth of nations and their descendants will be known among the nations. Why is this the case? It is because they have followed the mission, of proclaiming and acting in accordance with God's message of liberation and hope, both through word and deed. They have acted in ways that promote Jubilee values, bringing into existence such a vision. Verse 8 states that God loves justice, hating robbery and wrongdoing. God desires justice. So too should God's people.

This Jubilee passage in Isaiah 61 is directly tied to the legislation in Leviticus 25, which commands the Israelites to observe a Sabbath year every seven years, followed by a special "year of release" in the fiftieth year. During this year, "liberty will be proclaimed" as property is returned to original owners, debts are forgiven, slaves are set free, and farmland will be uncultivated and allowed to remain fallow. The people and the land will experience the full extent of Sabbath. The people are explicitly told to not "cheat" when selling property, as they must take the time remaining until the next Jubilee into account when setting a purchase price (v.17). The treatment of slaves and their release from indebtedness is linked with Israel's own experience as slaves in Egypt and in God's redemptive activity in the Exodus event (vv.38, 42). That the proclamation of Jubilee is to occur on the Day of Atonement (v.9) further connects this celebration with a radical sense of forgiveness and redemption—just as Israel's sins are forgiven through the sacrifice on that holy day, so they experience economic and social justice on the holy day when Jubilee is proclaimed (v.12).

During Israel's history, there is no evidence—either textual or archaeological—that Israel ever practiced or implemented the requirements of the Jubilee. No biblical text mentions the practice. In fact, 2 Chronicles 36:21 presents the tragic event of the Exile with the forced removal of the people from the land as a time when the "land kept its Sabbaths" since it had not done so, echoing the language of Leviticus 25. This failure by Israel to keep the Jubilee likely lies behind the eschatological hope in texts like Isaiah 61, which envision a future in which the Jubilee is no longer what could be, but what is.

It is significant, of course, that this passage from Isaiah 61 is read by Jesus in his first sermon, at the synagogue in his hometown of Nazareth, in Luke 4:16-30. He chose this text that day (v.17), when he proclaimed, "today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing" (v.21). The crowd, at first, responded positively—they were amazed at the gracious words coming from his mouth (v.22). Could it be true? Would they soon experience this vision of a radically different future as their reality? But their affirmation soon turned into a desire to kill him. Why? Jesus went on to say that this grand vision of the future would include Gentiles (his examples of those included in God's blessing are the Syrian Naaman and the widow of Zarephath, in vv.26-27), those who were Other, who the people thought should be excluded from God's blessing. Rather, Jesus proclaimed that this Isaianic mission of Jubilee was his own and it would reach expansively to include outsiders. Now, this crowd wanted to throw him off the cliff

1 (vv.28-29). Why? Because this promise of Jubilee was not just for them; this future would be something  
2 much more than that, and they were not willing to live into it and all that it would mean for them to do  
3 so. They responded out of fear, anger, hatred, refusing to name and to work beyond their own  
4 prejudice. They could not envision this possibility, and they refused to join Jesus' journey to bring it in  
5 existence.

6 The call of Jubilee, this central message in Jesus' proclamation of the Gospel, is one of justice, release,  
7 forgiveness of economic debts, physical healing, and restored relationships. It challenges us, the Church,  
8 who continue to carry out Jesus' mission and follow him, to see and to live out a vision of reality. The  
9 Jubilee requires us to imagine a world that operates by different rules and different values, which are  
10 consistent with the ethics expressed by Jesus throughout the Gospels, and especially in the vision of the  
11 Kingdom of God presented in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7).

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13 **Questions for Reflection**

- 14 • What are the practical implications for those commanded to implement the values of the  
15 Jubilee in ancient Israel? For the debtors? For those who are owed debts?
- 16 • What does the Jubilee teach about our attachment to property, economic status, social status,  
17 and other markers of "success" in society?
- 18 • How is the Jubilee about justice?
- 19 • If a central aspect of Jesus' mission is to bring Jubilee to its fullest extent, how should the Church  
20 (local congregations/communities of faith and individuals) continue that mission in practical  
21 ways?
- 22 • What other New Testament passages affirm the importance of the Jubilee as a value for the  
23 Church?

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