If someone had to sell their field a close relative, the kinsman redeemer was supposed to be the one who bought it. You sold your land first to your family. You also had the right to buy it back, Leviticus 25:48

Poor:	You sell a field.
Really poor:	You sell your land.
Really, really poor:	You sell yourself with your land.

Usually, you went into "slavery" with your land and worked it for the new owner.

The goal of all these laws was to create an open and fair society. To protect the poor, restrain the rich and prevent an underclass. It is a social vision.

Another big question is: did they do it? Probably in the early days, yes, but we know from the prophets (e.g. Isaiah 5:8) that later they mostly didn't. Greed is universal.

What might need to change in our society to create the same kind of society?

There exists a manuscript called the Book of Jubilees. It was probably written about 100 years before Christ. It claims to trace the Jubilee year throughout biblical history, basically stating that everything important that happened in the Bible happened on a Jubilee year.

Christians and Jubilee

When we talk about Jubilee in Church today, how do we describe it?

Not the way it has been described above. We talk about being spiritually released. Jubilee for us is the freedom Christ has given us in his death on the cross. Jesus is our Jubilee. There is a reason for this and it is Isaiah's fault.

Read Isaiah 61:1-3

The Bible was written over thousands of years. This means the human authors who wrote the bible also read the bible. So earlier ideas get restated and recycled. This is called intertextuality.

What freedom does Isaiah 61 describe?
It is a personal and spiritual freedom that God gives. The word freedom is the same one that Leviticus 25 uses of the Jubilee year. Isaiah has given it a new meaning. He has done this so well that most Christians today only think of it in Isaiah's spiritual terms.

Read Luke 4:14-21

This was Jesus' programmatic statement, His mission statement. If you read the next few chapters of Luke, you will find Jesus healing the blind, casting out demons and generally fulfilling this statement.

In what way is Jesus our year of Jubilee?
What have we been bought back from?
How have our debts been cancelled?
What has been restored to us?
In what way is this passage still our mandate?
How will we do it?

To what extent is this passage our mission statement?
How do we fullfil it?

Bringing life, hope and freedom to people, communities and nations.

FREEDOM
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The Year of Jubilee

The Sabbatical Year

Read Leviticus 25:1-6

The 4th commandment tells us to keep the Sabbath as a day of rest. Six days to work and one day of rest. This had a huge spiritual importance in the Covenant Moses made with the Children of Israel. It was the sign of that covenant.

It also had a physical purpose.

What happens if you work every day without a break?
Why did God give this command?
What does it tell us about God?

The Sabbath was not only for people, but also their work animals. This makes them part of the covenant.

The passage in Leviticus says that the same rule applies to the arable land.
What was the rule?

One year out of six, the land was to sit fallow. To rest. This means that the land was also in covenant relationship with God.

Does this seem like efficient use of the land?
Why did the land need rest?
Why did God give this command?

Agriculture today relies heavily on fertiliser and pesticides. In the past, if you kept cropping a field, you degraded the soil and sooner or later the crops failed. In Medieval England, a field was left fallow every fourth year. The other three years, the crops were rotated so that the same field only grew each crop every four years. This protected the nutrients in the soil and also helped control pest insects.

This was not a random command; it was essential for the community.
Leviticus, especially is a very green book, it is environmentally friendly. This is also important to many people in our society.

Are Christians today conscious of the need to care for our environment?
Do we take this seriously enough?
Why? Why not?

Our focus tends to be on other things, the Gospel! But this is an unfortunate consequence of our belief in the Second Coming: God will renew this world so we do not need to worry. This is bad thinking and a form of presumption. This is God's world and we should look after it.

Is it possible to take this too far?

What did you eat during the fallow years?
What does this tell us about God?

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You eat what grew by itself and what you had stored up for this year. Like famine years, people knew the Sabbatical year was coming and planned for it.
Having said this, it still took trust.
How?
What does this tell us about God?

There are lots of things we do not know about these commands. It is possible that the Sabbatical years were staggered across different areas or villages.

The theological reason for the Sabbatical year is not explored, but we suspect it is about maintaining the purity of the land, and reminding the people that it is God's land. It is about the purity and sanctity of the land.



Read 2 Chronicles 36:21
What does this verse tell us?
It has been suggest that this implies that the Sabbatical years had not been kept. However, as they were agriculturally necessary, this is unlikely.

This same law applied to people sold into slavery. Slavery was usually the result of bankruptcy. When people were sold into slavery, their debt was paid off, Deuteronomy 15:12. In the seventh year, they had to be released. Exodus 21:2. They had to be sent away with gifts, Deuteronomy 15:12-15. They had to be treated like a hired worker. Leviticus 25:39. If they did not want to be set free, they had the option of staying as a bond-servant. Exodus 21:5-6, Deuteronomy 12:These rules make biblical slavery more like indentured labour. They subvert the practice of slavery.
It would appear they were released after seven years, not on a seventh year.

What else happened every seven years? Deuteronomy 15:1-3

People did not borrow to buy consumer items; they borrowed to buy food or to plant their fields.



What effect will these rules have on poverty in the nation?
What effect would these rules have on the rich in the nation?

Effectively, it means that however bad things get, there is always a way out, always a future. This is in stark contrast to Canaanite culture, where permanent slavery and perpetual poverty were an accepted part of culture.

The rich were allowed to profit from a loan, just not at the expense of the poor. The way they profited forced them to be involved in whatever the loan was being used for.

Leviticus is also deeply concerned about the poor in a society. It has no problem with people being rich as long as it is not at the expense of the poor. Everyone in the book is equal. It is an egalitarian book. This is also important to many people in our society.



Are Christians today conscious of the need to have concern for the poor?
Do we take this seriously enough?
Why? Why not?

You will see from these rules that while people were expected to give to the needy, Leviticus emphasises a "hand up" rather than a "hand out."



What else happened on the Sabbatical year? Deuteronomy 31:11

How do you think these rules should influence us today?
Do we still do Sabbatical years?

Some universities, professions and churches give their workers a period of time free after a period of work. This is intended to enable them to develop new skills and to prevent burnout.

Does anyone know when the Sabbatical year was declared?

It was declared on the Day of Atonement by the blowing of a ram's horn. This suggests a link between the people being purified and the land and people being set free. Deuteronomy 31:10



The Jubilee

Read Leviticus 25:8-10
What got proclaimed?
How?

Every seven Sabbatical years, a Year of Jubilee happened (7x7+1). Jubilee comes from the word for ram's horn because it was announced with a ram's horn blast. The word is similar to the verb to go back; it has the idea of a home coming.
The same things happen at the year of Jubilee that happen at the Sabbatical year. The land lies fallow, debts are released, and slaves are set free. Jubilee was like a super version of the Sabbatical year.



What else happened on the year of Jubilee? Leviticus 25:13-17



All land returned to its original owner. The land had to stay with the descendants of the original people to whom it was given when Joshua divided the land. (Houses in cities were exempt from this rule.)

What effect would this have for the poor of the land?

They have a way out of debt and a way for their family to prosper in the future.



If there were 35 years before the next Jubilee year, what did the land cost?
If there were 5 years before the next Jubilee year, what did the land cost?

As the Bible points out, effectively, you are buying the number of harvests until the land reverted to its owners. As we understand it, in most cases the owner continued to work his own land, but as indentured labour.

This is a really important concept in the bible and is frequently referred to.
Why do you think it was so important?



Clearly, so that everyone gets a chance to prosper. But also because fundamentally, God owns the land. Its owners are His tenants. It also stopped wealthy land owners accumulating vast tracts of land, Isaiah 5:8. We know from the Amarna letters that under the Canaanites, almost all the land was owned by a wealthy minority.



Is this healthy?
What do you do if you are stuck in poverty with no way to get out?



An underclass is a dangerous thing; they tend to head to the hills and become bandits! We know this happened in Canaan. They were called the Hapurim and it looks like they joined forces with Israel in the invasion.

One of the difficult things here is to figure out how the year of Jubilee and the Sabbatical year worked together. It seems odd to need to cancel a debt at Jubilee that had already been cancelled the year before. There are quite a few possibilities, most of which seem unlikely. The most likely are that the Jubilee year coincided with the last Sabbatical year (the 49th year, not the 50th). Or, as mentioned above, that the Sabbatical year was staggered and only the Jubilee was fixed. Or that one was for slaves and one for slaves who worked the land. Certainly the Sabbatical focused on slavery and fallow years, while Jubilee focused on the ownership of land. We simply do not know how they worked together.