



BIBLE STUDY – INTRODUCING ADVOCACY

“Who knows but that you have come to royal position for such a time as this?” (Esther 4:14). With those words a young Esther was convinced to approach a harsh king.

Living centuries before Christ, Esther was a teenager when her beauty was noticed and she was made part of the harem of the powerful King Xerxes. She soon won his favour and was promoted to the position of Queen.

When a plot to kill her people, the Jews, was discovered, Esther was urged to plead their case to the King. Yet this was no easy task. Although she was a queen Esther was by no means the King’s equal. She was valued for her beauty and nothing else, and should she displease the King, might be as quickly dispatched as Queen Vashti before her. She was to approach the King only when called for. Indeed, the law demanded that no-one, not even the Queen, approach the King on their own initiative. Disobedience was punishable by death.

So it was a courageous young woman who made her way into the presence of her King to challenge the genocidal plot hatched by one of the King’s most trusted advisors. Her advocacy was successful and her people were spared.

Esther’s story, told in the biblical book that takes her name, is a vivid reminder that advocacy is one of the most powerful tools God has given us to combat oppression and injustice.

1. Think of a time you spoke up on behalf of someone who was being unfairly treated. It may have been in your home, in the workplace, in your church, or somewhere else. What motivated you to speak up? Who did you speak to and why? What was the outcome?
2. According to Romans 13, governments are servants of God. Yet, like all servants, they can perform their duties well or poorly.
 - a. What do you think Australians see as the primary responsibilities of our Government?
 - b. Read Proverbs 31.1-9. What does this passage see as key responsibilities of kings? How does it apply to governments today, in both poorer countries and countries like Australia? How does it compare to your answer in 2(a)?
3. It is not only governments that have a responsibility to protect the rights and interests of the poor. The Bible calls all in positions of power and privilege to act to secure justice and wellbeing for the poor. Read James 5.1-6. Who is being addressed? What are they criticised for? What were they responsible to do?
4. God doesn’t leave the powerful alone. Scripture is full of stories in which God raised up people who challenged the powerful to live up to their calling to secure justice for the poor, the marginalised and the oppressed. We have already noted the example of Queen Esther. The Old Testament prophets are another case. Isaiah and Jeremiah called upon the powerful within Israel to do justice toward the poor. Jonah and Amos called the nations around Israel to act justly.

In the gospels we find Jesus seeking out vulnerable and marginalised people and defending them over against those who tried to exclude them. Make a list of examples of Jesus doing this. After you have completed your list consider John 8.1-11. Thinking back to the responsibility of leaders described in Proverbs 31.1-9, how does Jesus exemplify godly leadership? How did the Pharisees fail in their calling as leaders? Why do you think Jesus’ advocacy strategy was so successful?

5. Read the story below about the Jubilee campaign. What does this story teach you about successful advocacy?
6. Micah Challenge is just one of many advocacy opportunities for Christians and churches today. Campaigns like Micah Challenge equip Christians to learn, to act (e.g. write letters, visit politicians, raise awareness of the issues in our churches and communities) and to pray. On the lines below mark your current level of involvement in advocacy campaigns and your desired level of involvement. Do so for both yourself and your church. Discuss what you and your church can do to reach your desired level.

Me

Very involved

Not involved

My church

Very involved

Not involved

For more Bible studies about God's mission concerning poverty, justice and advocacy that you can use in your church and for more ideas about advocacy see the Micah Challenge website.

This study is adapted with permission from Baptist World Aid's 50/50 Bible Study Resource.

The Jubilee Campaign¹

During the 1970s, massive loans were extended to many poorer nations by mostly American banks who were cashed up with money from oil. However many of these loans were signed by corrupt, undemocratic rulers – Jubilee Australia estimates that over \$450 billion was loaned to dictators during the 1970s, 80s and 90s. Even where governments weren't corrupt, many loans were ill-advised and led to unproductive, useless development projects. This irresponsible investment of the loans, along with the oil shock, economic downturn and rising interest rates of the late 1970s meant many nations were saddled with debts so great that just the annual interest payments dwarfed the income they received in aid. The response of the International Monetary Fund and World Bank in the early 1980s was to reschedule the debts and advance new loans to enable the poor indebted countries to keep paying interest to the foreign banks. The "debt crisis" was created.

It was the poor in Latin America, Africa and Asia who continued to repay these debts. They suffered a disproportionate burden as the debt was being repaid through higher taxes and reduced spending on education, health care and infrastructure (e.g. for clean water and sanitation).

In the winter of 1996, Christian churches and aid agencies formed the Jubilee coalition to ask Western governments to forgive unmanageable poor country debts. They modelled their call on the biblical idea of debt forgiveness and a fresh start for the poor found in the Jubilee laws of Leviticus 25.

At first the campaign was dismissed as idealistic and economically unviable. Yet the campaign kept gaining momentum, growing from a small UK office with one staff member and 80 contacts into a movement that had national campaigns in sixty-nine countries.

In May 1998 the campaign burst onto public consciousness when 70,000 people from across the world formed a human chain stretching 6 miles around a building housing a meeting of world leaders. The protesters demanded the cancellation of unpayable third world debts.

Actions like these forced politicians to take notice and US\$100 billion in debt relief was announced. To date US\$88 billion of this debt relief has been delivered, which has freed up funds for poorer nations to spend on essential social services. Social spending across countries whose debts were forgiven has risen by 20%; Mozambique has been able to introduce a free immunisation program for children; school fees for primary education have been abolished in Uganda, Malawi, Zambia and Tanzania; and Uganda and Mozambique have been able to sustain economic growth rates of over 5% p.a.

How significant was the Jubilee campaign? In December 2000 Gordon Brown, then British Chancellor of the Exchequer (Treasurer) summed it up: "A coalition founded on a simple and straight forward conviction: that the burden of unpayable debt on the poorest in this world is morally wrong... A coalition of which the history books when they are written will say: 'they achieved more standing together for the needs of the poor in one year, than all the isolated acts of individual governments could have achieved in one hundred years.'

This coalition for justice now with this worldwide reach, has become itself living proof that we are not powerless as individuals, and that together we have power. A network of mutuality has bound together all of us: citizens and nations, rich and poor in one moral universe strong enough to change the world.

¹ Sources: Jubilee Australia (2006) A Case for Debt Relief; Jubilee Debt Campaign (2008) Unfinished Business; Gordon Brown (2000) Speech to Jubilee 2000 'Never Be the Same Again' Event.

