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What does the Bible say about hope for children in poverty?

An astounding 210 verses in the New International Version of the Bible use the words “poor” or “oppressed.” If our churches featured this theme with the same prevalence and passion as Scripture, how might God use the church to bring new hope to children in poverty?

GOD’S SPECIAL CONCERN FOR THE POOR

God loves all people equally. Yet the special place in God’s heart for the poor and vulnerable is evident throughout the Bible (for example: Exodus 22:21-27, Psalm 12:5, 140:12, 146:7-9, Proverbs 19:17, 21:13, Isaiah 3:14-15, 25:4, Luke 1:52-53, James 2:5). God’s compassion is most evident in tender attentiveness toward poor women and children: “You shall not abuse any widow or orphan. If you do abuse them, when they cry out to me, I will surely heed their cry” (Exodus 22:22-23). This comes to pass as God hears the cry of Ishmael, son of Hagar, Abraham’s abandoned and abused second wife, when they are near death in the wilderness (Genesis 21:17). Ishmael’s plea for help echoes in the experience of many poor children today.

God intervenes to uphold the cause of those who are impoverished and mistreated, as promised in 1 Samuel 2:8: “He raises up the poor from the dust; he lifts the needy from the ash heap.” The Bible also teaches that God sometimes judges and tears down the rich. Mary’s Magnificat highlights the social reversal associated with Jesus’ incarnation: God “has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty” (Luke 1:53). Later, Jesus



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preached, “Woe to you who are rich!” (Luke 6:24).

Yet it is not riches alone that provokes God’s wrath, but two dangers associated with wealth. First, Scripture harshly warns those who acquire wealth by exploiting the poor. “You who make iniquitous decrees . . . that widows may be your spoil, and that you may make the orphans your prey! What will you do on the day of punishment?” (Isaiah 10:1-4; see also Isaiah 3:14-15, Amos 2:7, Micah 2:1-5). Secondly, God’s anger is also aroused by people who have plenty, yet neglect the needy. In Ezekiel 16:46, God remarks on the destruction of the city of Sodom: “This was the guilt of your sister Sodom: she and her daughters had pride, excess of food, and prosperous ease, but did not aid the poor and needy” (see also Luke 16:19-31). In God’s eyes, ignoring the needs of the poorest is as grievous as idolatry and sexual abominations.

The biblical record demonstrates that ultimately, God judges societies by how they treat the people who are most vulnerable. That is how much God cares for the poor.

SHARING GOD’S HEART FOR THE ‘LEAST OF THESE’

In response to poverty, and in contrast with the ways of the world, the Scriptures repeatedly instruct God’s people to embrace compassion and justice (Exodus 23:6, Leviticus 19:10, Proverbs 14:21, Psalms 41:1, 112:9, Amos 5:11-14, Micah 6:8, Romans 12:13, 2 Corinthians 8:10-15, Galatians 2:10, Ephesians 4:28, James 2:14-16). After the Exodus, the Lord commands Israel not to treat widows, orphans and foreigners the way they had been treated by the Egyptians. Instead, God’s people are to love those on the margins, just as God has rescued them (Deuteronomy 15:15). God’s people are to seek the welfare of their community (Jeremiah 29:7), and to become a source of blessing to all people (Genesis 12:3).

God identifies with the poor so strongly that caring for them is akin to serving God. “Whoever is kind to the poor lends to

the Lord” (Proverbs 19:17). On the other hand, “Those who oppress the poor insult their Maker” (Proverbs 14:31). This theme reappears in Jesus’ parable of the sheep and goats (Matthew 25:31-46). Jesus surprises the righteous with his insistence that they had fed and clothed him: “Just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.” Since Jesus names the poor as part of his family, followers of Jesus are to show care to the poor and neglected as if they were serving the Savior himself.

Because compassion is a fundamental aspect of God’s character, there is a connection between knowing and loving God, and showing mercy to those in need. (See Deuteronomy 10:17-20, Proverbs 29:7, Isaiah 58:6-8, Ezekiel 16:49-50, 18:5-9, Matthew 22:37-39, 2 Corinthians 8:1-9, James 1:27, 1 John 3:17). In Jeremiah 22:16, God commends the upright king Josiah: “He defended the cause of the poor and needy, and so all went well. Is that not what it means to know me?” Bryant Myers summarizes this connection: “Loving God and loving our neighbor are two sides of the same gospel coin. They are inseparable, seamlessly related. ...At the end of the day, how we treat the poor is a measure of whom we truly worship.”¹

CONCERN FOR THE POOR IN JESUS’ TEACHING AND EXAMPLE

Jesus demonstrated his Father’s compassion for the poor and vulnerable in his teachings (Matthew 25:31-46, Mark 10:21, Luke 6:20-21, 10:25-37, 12:33-34, 14:12-14), and by his example (Matthew 9:35-36, 20:30-34, Mark 8:1-8, Luke 7:22, John 13:29).

In Luke 4:16-21, Jesus announced his mission by quoting from Isaiah 61:1: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.” Jesus lived out this mission by teaching, healing,

and breaking the oppression of evil (Matthew 9:35). He showed special attention to those on the social margins: women, children, the disabled, and the outcasts. Jesus' teachings underscored the dangers of captivity to wealth, and the blessedness of a life open to the needs of others.

After his resurrection, Jesus empowered his disciples to carry on this mission (John 20:21). We too are empowered by the Spirit of Christ to bring good news to the poor.

WHAT CAN GOD'S PEOPLE DO?

Matthew 26:6-13 tells the story of a woman who anointed Jesus with costly perfume. When the disciples protested that the perfume should rather have been sold and given to the poor, Jesus defended the woman's actions, saying, "You always have the poor with you."

Some have taken this statement to mean that social ministry is ultimately futile, and that Christians should concentrate on saving souls. But it is important to understand Jesus' words in the context of the Deuteronomy passage to which he was referring: "There will always be poor people in the land. Therefore I command you to be openhanded toward those of your people who are poor and needy in your land" (15:11, TNIV). Jesus' words do not justify sidelining poverty and focusing on the world to come. Rather, the overwhelming reality of poverty in this world is an urgent call for people of faith to open their hand freely to those in need.

The Bible indicates seven broad pathways of action in response to poverty. However we respond, we should immerse our actions in prayer, serving in "the strength that God supplies, so that God may be glorified in all things through Jesus Christ" (1 Peter 4:11). And we must work persistently,

trusting that "in the Lord [our] labor is not in vain" (1 Corinthians 15:58).

1. *Practice hospitality, live in solidarity.* The starting point is to make our homes places of refuge and care for neighbors in need (Proverbs 31:20, Romans 12:13, 1 Timothy 5:10), and to make all people feel welcome in our congregations, regardless of economic status (James 2:2-4). But who are our neighbors? Do our lives bring us alongside those who are suffering, or do they remain "other"? The incarnational ministry of relocation follows Jesus' example: "The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us" (John 1:14). We can show solidarity with poor children by choosing to dwell, work, shop, and make friends in their communities. Saying to the poor, "Your people shall be my people" (Ruth 1:16) gives us a personal stake in their well-being.

2. *Share resources.* In view of God's mercy (Deuteronomy 15:15), God's people are commanded to make their resources generously available to the poor (Deuteronomy 15:7-8): "Do not be hard-hearted or tight-fisted toward your needy neighbor. You should rather open your hand, willingly lending enough to meet the need." While this passage calls for voluntary charity, other passages point to more institutionalized mechanisms for caring for those unable to provide for themselves. For example, every third year, the people's tithe was to go to support poor widows, orphans, and foreigners as well as the Levites (Deuteronomy 14:28-29, 26:12). Both individuals and a society as a whole are responsible for the welfare of its most vulnerable members.

The early church practiced Jesus' teaching to give to the poor (Luke 6:30) by sharing with all who had need (Acts 2:44-45), and by taking a collection for famine relief (Romans 15:26, 2 Corinthians 8:1-9:15). As Paul reminded the early church,

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our compassion toward others is a reflection of God's compassion for us. Whatever we give to others, we can never match God's generosity in sending Christ while we were yet sinners (Romans 5:8, 2 Corinthians 8:7-9).

3. *Empower self-sufficiency.* One key way in which the law of Moses directed resource owners – which in ancient Israel meant landowners – to aid those in need was through the practice of gleaning. “When you reap your harvest in your field and forget a sheaf in the field, you shall not go back to get it; it shall be left for the alien, the orphan, and the widow, so that the LORD your God may bless you in all your undertakings” (Deuteronomy 24:19-20; see also Exodus 23:10-11). The story of Ruth shows the model of gleaning in action (2:8-17). By putting people's needs ahead of profit, Boaz kept a young widow's family from starvation.

As Amy Sherman points out, a core principle of gleaning is that it “gives the able-bodied poor an opportunity to meet their own needs through their own application of labor.”² Benevolence should affirm the connection between work and self-sufficiency. Whenever possible, Christian charity should affirm the dignity of those who are poor by creating opportunities for them to provide for themselves and their families, rather than perpetuating crippling dependency.

4. *Invest in development.* Internal or external barriers may hinder people from meeting this biblical goal of self-sufficiency. Development means generating change within people or their environment that brings life in the community closer to God's ideal. Isaiah 61:3-4 identifies the goals of development:

To provide for those who mourn in Zion – to give them a garland instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit. They will be called oaks of righteousness, the planting of the LORD, to display

his glory. They shall build up the ancient ruins, they shall raise up the former devastations; they shall repair the ruined cities, the devastations of many generations.

The first goal is personal transformation, helping people develop the character, identity, attitude and skills necessary to overcome life's obstacles. The call in Romans 12:2 to “be transformed by the renewing of your minds” produces change from the inside out, which leads to restored relationships.

The second goal is community development that renews the institutions, infrastructure and economy of a healthy



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community. As Isaiah 58:12 promises, “You shall be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of streets to live in.” Community development looks beyond individual well-being to lay a foundation of wholeness that can endure for “many generations.”

5. *Promote justice.* Because “the Lord loves justice” (Psalm 37:28), people of God are likewise called to “do justice” (Micah 6:8), particularly on behalf of the powerless (Deuteronomy 10:17-19). “Speak out for those who cannot speak, for the rights of all the destitute. . . . Defend the rights of the poor and needy” (Proverbs 31:8-9).

Many biblical texts call on political rulers to use their power to deliver the needy and oppressed (see Psalm 82:3-4, Proverbs 29:4, Jeremiah 22:2-3, 23:5, Daniel 4:27). Psalm 72 describes the role of the king in advancing economic justice: “May he judge your people with righteousness, and your poor with justice. . . . For he delivers the needy when they call, the poor and those who have no helper” (Psalm 72:2, 12). When selfish, powerful people deprive others of their rightful access to productive resources, the state must use its power to intervene. When individuals and institutions in the community do not or cannot provide basic necessities for “those who have no helper,” government has a God-given responsibility to save lives.

ACCOUNTABILITY

If government and other sectors of society fail to uphold justice, God’s people are to hold them accountable. The prophets confronted political leaders who oppressed the poor and failed to protect the vulnerable. Isaiah 10:1-2, for example, warns against rulers who use crooked laws to “make the orphans your prey” (see also Jeremiah 5:26-28, 22:13-17, Ezekiel 22:23-30, Micah 7:3). The prophets also confronted business leaders engaged in immoral and exploitative practices that hurt poor families (see Nehemiah 5:1-13, Jeremiah 22:13, Hosea 12:7-8, Amos 8:4-6, and Micah 2:1-2, 6:10-12). Jesus likewise spoke out against respected religious leaders who kept the letter of the law but neglected justice and mercy, and who out of greed would “devour widow’s houses” (Matthew 23:23, Luke 20:46-47). Promoting justice means protecting the vulnerable from those who abuse political, economic or religious power, as well as bringing victims of injustice to the attention of those with the power to defend their cause.

6. *Break the cycle of poverty.* The most radical concept in the Hebraic economic system was the Year of Jubilee. Every seven years, all debts were to be canceled (Deuteronomy 15:1-2). The 50th year was a

special Jubilee, in which all land was to be returned to its original owners: “You shall proclaim liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants. It shall be a jubilee for you: you shall return, every one of you, to your property and . . . to your family” (Leviticus 25:10).

This passage recognizes the self-perpetuating nature of wealth and poverty. Originally, the land was divided equitably among extended Israelite families. Over time, families that experienced a loss of resources became vulnerable to moneylenders, large land owners and powerful civic leaders who could take advantage of their struggle for survival. Families who fell into debt or lost their land passed these liabilities on to their children. The Year of Jubilee represented liberation from this downward spiral, bringing fresh opportunities and hope to each generation.³ Children would not be hostage to the sins of their parents (see also Ezekiel 18:2-4 on this principle).

The policy of Jubilee reflects the biblical ideal that in a healthy society, each family has the freedom and capacity to earn its own living and to participate with dignity in the life of the community. Because of human sinfulness and the fallen state of the world, however, people fall into the bondage of poverty and dependency. God’s plan is that society be structured in a way that gives each generation the chance to break free from the bondage of the past.

7. *Share good news with the poor.* Jesus’ first sermon announced that “the year of the Lord’s favor,” or Jubilee, had arrived (Luke 4:21). Like the year of Jubilee, the coming of Christ means good news to the poor and liberty to those in bondage – whether trapped by oppressive systems, disease and disability, unjust treatment at the hands of others, or their own sinful choices. In Jesus’ ministry, spiritual, physical, social and economic liberation go hand in hand.

Followers of Christ can proclaim the good news that those who are financially poor may be wealthy in spirit (Luke 6:20; see also Proverbs 15:16, 16:8, 19, 28:6; Luke

21:1-4; 2 Corinthians 6:10, 8:2,9). As James 2:5 points out, “Has not God chosen the poor in the world to be rich in faith?” Similarly, the gospel is good news to those who are poor in terms of power and prestige. In contrast to the low standing of children in society, Jesus declares that they occupy a special place in God’s kingdom (Luke 18:16).

We also share good news with the poor and vulnerable when we affirm that they are created in God’s image (Genesis 1:26), treat them with dignity and respect (Luke 18:35-42), and value their contributions (Luke 21:1-4). As the story of Peter and John’s encounter with the beggar at the Temple illustrates, we can extend people spiritual care and fellowship even when giving financial resources is not possible or appropriate (Acts 3:3-11).

CONCLUSION

People who love God can disagree on many points of public policy and social welfare. There can be no room for debate, however, on the Bible’s claim on Christians to care for the poor as a central expression of our faith.⁴ If we do not share God’s passion to uplift the poor, we cannot claim to know God in a biblical way. “How does God’s love abide in anyone who has the world’s goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help?” (1 John 3:17)

It is important not to be misunderstood. We dare not reduce knowing God to a concern for social justice. Nor can we earn our way into heaven by caring for the poor. The only assurance of salvation is to cling to the cross, trusting God to forgive us for Jesus’ sake. While God shows special concern for the vulnerable, God does not care more about the salvation of the poor than the rich. Jesus confronted the poor along with the wealthy for their sins. In fact, Scripture specifically forbids us to be partial to the poor (Leviticus 19:5).

When it came to children, however, Jesus’ arms were open wide. His instructions were clear: “Whoever welcomes one such

child in my name welcomes me” (Matthew 18:3). Our love of Jesus is to find tangible expression in the way we treat children. Jesus’ condemnation of those who abuse children was equally clear: “It would be better for you if a great millstone were fastened around your neck and you were drowned in the depth of the sea” (Matthew 18:6). Other passages suggest that neglecting the needs of poor children is a form of giving them offense.

If we love Jesus and seek to conform our lives to Scripture, we will care for children wounded by poverty – physically, emotionally, and spiritually – and promote a society which shares resources to meet their needs. We will prayerfully intervene to break the yoke of generational poverty and create fresh opportunities for families to develop self-sufficiency. We will protect children and their families from exploitation and advocate their cause to those in power. And we will offer them the hope of our faith in Christ, who shared in their poverty during his sojourn on earth so that through him all might live in abundance (2 Corinthians 8:9).

ENDNOTES

1. Bryant Myers, “Isaiah, Which Is It?” (retrieved from www.network935.org).
2. Amy Sherman, *ABCs of Community Ministry* (Hudson Institute, 2001), 13.
3. Ronald J. Sider, *Just Generosity* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999), 65-67.
4. For a more developed presentation of this claim, see Ronald J. Sider, *Good News and Good Works: A Theology for the Whole Gospel* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999).