

Global Poverty Bible Study

A New Year in God's World

By Alexis Coleman, Pastor, Harpers Ferry, W. VA

SECOND SESSION

This is the **second session** of a five-week Bible-based study on the world's poorest people and our response to alleviate systemic suffering. We invite you to devote a few weeks to studying "A New Year in God's World."

"A New Year in God's World" author is Alexis Coleman, pastor of two United Methodist churches in Harpers Ferry, W. VA. She is a third-year practice in mission and ministry student at the General Board of Church & Society from Wesley Theological Seminary in Washington, D.C., and a certified candidate for Elders order in the Western North Carolina Conference.

This five-week congregation-based group Bible study is an invitation to deepen our awareness of Scripture:

- In the *literal* sense — How do we hear God's Word speaking for itself?
- In the *allegorical* sense — How do we receive and digest God's Word personally?
- In the *moral* sense — How do we respond to God's Word inviting us to take action?

"A New Year in God's World" includes five weekly Bible studies with short Scripture reading, questions for group reflection and action, facts on the state of the global poor and congregational prayers.

For more information on how to use this study please contact Alexis Coleman at Acolemamd@umc-gbcs.org or Neal Christie at NChristie@umc-gbcs.org

Gathering and Introductions

Opening Prayer

Biblical Text: Psalm 8

¹O Lord, our Sovereign, how majestic is your name in all the earth! You have set your glory above the heavens. ²Out of the mouths of babes and infants you have founded a bulwark because of your foes, to silence the enemy and the avenger.
³When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have established; ⁴what are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them?
⁵Yet you have made them a little lower than God, and crowned them with glory and honor. ⁶You have given them dominion over the works of your hands; you have put all things under their feet,
⁷all sheep and oxen, and also the beasts of the field,
⁸the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea, whatever passes along the paths of the seas. ⁹O Lord, our Sovereign, how majestic is your name in all the earth! (NRSV)

Lectio Divina Shared in Community¹

Listening for the Gentle Touch of Christ the Word (*The Literal Sense*)

1. One person reads aloud (twice) the passage of scripture, as others are attentive to some segment that is especially meaningful to them.
2. Silence for 1-2 minutes. Each hears and silently repeats a word or phrase that attracts.
3. Share aloud a word or phrase that has attracted each person. A simple statement of one or a few words. No elaboration.

How Christ the Word speaks to me (*The Allegorical Sense*)

1. Second reading of the same passage by another person.
2. Silence for 2-3 minutes. Reflect on "Where does the content of this reading touch my life today?"
3. Sharing aloud briefly: "I hear, I see..."

What Christ the Word Invites me to do (*The Moral Sense*)

1. Third reading by still another person.
2. Silence for 2-3 minutes. Reflect on "I believe that God wants me to _____ today/this week."
3. Share aloud at somewhat greater length the results of each person's reflection. (Be especially aware of what is shared by the person to your right.)
4. After full sharing, pray for the person to your right.

Note: Anyone may "pass" at any time. If instead of sharing with the group you prefer to pray silently, simply state this and conclude your silent prayer with "Amen."

Global Poverty: 16 Poverty Traps

According to Stephen Smith, author of *Ending Global Poverty: A Guide to What Works*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), “impoverished people frequently suffer from malnutrition, poor health and illiteracy; live in environmentally degraded areas; have little political voice; and attempt to earn a meager living on small and marginal farms or in dilapidated urban slums”

Smith says the poor are not lazy, but are caught in poverty traps. A trap implies there is a trapper, and it also implies a way out — mostly with the help of others.²

Poverty is not always a permanent situation, but a poverty trap is one that “keeps the poor enslaved to the vicious cycle of poverty.”³

The 16 major poverty traps are:⁴

1. **Family child labor traps.** Many families need the children to work, which means the children cannot get much needed education. In 2003 the World Bank estimated that 100 million children were unable to go to school due to poverty.
2. **Illiteracy traps.** Parents may not send their children to school because they cannot afford the transportation, school uniforms or school fees. The family often does not have access to credit to borrow needed money.
3. **Working capital traps.** In a working capital trap, microentrepreneurs must make do with an inventory too small to be productive. This means they will have too little net income to purchase more inventory.
4. **Uninsurable risk traps.** The people with the fewest assets face the greatest chances of losing what is most important to them. Farmers unable to get weather insurance will orient their farming approach to minimize the risk of catastrophic ruin. In doing this, however, it is unlikely that they can take advantage of opportunities to build assets that could lift them out of poverty.
5. **Debt bondage traps.** Moneylenders calibrate loan amounts and interest payments to ensure that a family can never get out of debt. Sometimes the rate of pay is too low to pay even the interest. Often the children of bonded laborers are born into bondage. This is slavery by another name. According to Free the Slaves, about 27 million people live in debt bondage and related forms of slavery today.
6. **Information traps.** The poorest of the poor work hard to put meals on the table. Even when other opportunities exist to make a higher wage, their employers have no incentive to help them learn what these are.
7. **Under-nutrition and illness traps.** Under-nutrition makes a person too weak to work productively, thus leading to wages too small to pay for sufficient food. Poor shelter from severe weather can also cause sleepless and prolonged illness, reducing earning power to afford better housing.
8. **Low-skill traps.** If no employers in an area are seeking skilled workers, there is no incentive for the poor to invest in higher skills; employers are unlikely to invest in areas with no skilled workers, though.
9. **High fertility traps.** Women continue to have children to increase the possibility that someone will have the means and willingness to care for them when they are too old to work.

10. **Subsistence traps.** Specialization can be a key to productivity, but one can only specialize if he or she can trade for other needed goods or services. If everyone in an area is subsistence farming, there is no one locally with whom to trade.
11. **Farm erosion traps.** The poor are so desperate for food that they knowingly overuse the land, reducing the soil fertility and productivity for the next year. In some cases they even eat the seed for next year. Any gains in farming productivity are lost due to poor soil quality. Buying fertilizer and other soil improvements are of no help if you cannot afford them or borrow for them.
12. **Common property mismanagement traps.** Lakes are overfished, forests are not managed, land is overgrazed. Once community management of common resources has broken down, it is difficult to restore.
13. **Collective action traps.** Often the poor could improve their circumstances by working jointly, yet this takes a leader to organize. The poor have neither the time nor the resources for this generally.
14. **Criminality traps.** Youths without work and education are often drawn to gang membership and other cultures of criminality. The costs to the community are great: Assets are destroyed, valuable resources must be diverted to security, and often the lives of able-bodied persons are taken.
15. **Mental health traps.** Depression and anxiety are pervasive among the poor. Not knowing where your next meal is coming from causes high emotional stress. Many poor are ashamed of their poverty. They feel terrible that they are unable to provide for their children. Poor women often face domestic violence and abuse. Drug and alcohol abuse becomes increasingly common.
16. **Powerlessness traps.** It is not only relatively impersonal forces such as the environment or even the market that keep the poor poor, but the connivance of the rich who benefit from low wages and subservience. Smith writes: "Poverty entrapment is poverty of, by and for the rich."⁵

Discussion

Read the following quotes by Stephen Smith and discuss the questions that follow:

"From the study of poverty traps we get confirmation that not only is poverty not the fault of the poor, neither are the things usually blamed on the poor, such as high poverty, the underlying cause of poverty — they are a result of poverty."⁶

"As the rich (and middle class) grow richer, those who remain in absolute poverty may feel even poorer. In fact, in a real sense they are poorer, since social standing and differences in capabilities are part of the multidimensional nature of poverty. And as the economy around you develops, the gap between the capabilities of the poor and what is needed in regular employment grows greater and can become more difficult to cross."⁷

1. In the United States we are often taught that poverty is the fault of the poor and that hard work can overcome poverty, but Smith disputes both of these. Do you agree with Smith or with common thought, or with both or neither?
2. Were you surprised by any of the 16 poverty traps? Which were most surprising for you and for your group?

3. Smith has keenly separated issues that entrap the poor, while noting that the poorest of the poor actually face several of these traps at once. Which of these traps would you be interested in learning more about and why?
4. Smith seems to place some of the blame for poverty on the wealthy. How do you feel about that? Do you consider your wealth to be part of the problem of the poor?
5. Which of these traps do you think the relative poor of the United States face?

Applying the Biblical Text

Psalm 8 begins by declaring the majesty of God. It is a hymn of praise for God and God's creation. The songs that humans can sing in praise of God are like the babblings of babes and infants. In verse 2, the bulwark referred to by the psalmist is the firmament. In one ancient creation myth the divine defeated the dragon of chaos and created the firmament as a fortress or bulwark that was impregnable against the enemy and the avenger. God's heaven is above the firmament. The psalmist is obviously outdoors at night (verse 3) contemplating God's creation, and then begins to think of our place in God's world (verses 4-6).

Note that the term son of man is a synonym for man. Both terms refer to the collective of humanity, not to one man.

The psalmist says that although we are insignificant, we are no accident. God has created us for a high purpose and function: to serve as God's deputy on earth. Our affinity is with the Maker, not with the made. Lastly, lest we become too boastful, the psalmist reminds us that all majesty belongs to God.⁸

1. The psalmist tells us that God is mindful of us; God thinks of us. What do you believe God thinks when God sees the huge stratification of wealth among us?
2. The psalmist says that God has given us dominion over creation. Remind yourselves of those things specifically listed in verses 7 and 8. Note some things that the psalmist has not included. Do we have dominion over these as well?
3. Do you think the psalmist would say that it is within our dominion to end extreme poverty? What do you say?
4. Why doesn't God simply end extreme poverty?
5. The breaking of the levies in New Orleans brought some of the poorest people in the U.S. into our public consciousness and consciences. Do you think that the poor of New Orleans have received too much media attention compared with the poor in other areas of the country and the world?

Leaving

Read Psalm 8 together.

Pray together: Our God in Heaven, in this New Year direct our paths to your will. Give us a heart for those who are poor, remind us daily that you mourn with them in their plight, and guide us in our quest to care for them. In Christ's name, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, we pray. Amen.

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¹ <http://www.rc.net/saginaw/srsclare/lectio.html>, accessed January 7, 2008.

² Smith, Stephen C. *Ending Global Poverty: A Guide to What Works*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), p. 11.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 12-17.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 19.

⁸ The Interpreter's Bible, volume 4, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1956), pp. 48-53.

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