

Global Poverty Bible Study

A New Year in God's World

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

THIRD SESSION

This is the third 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."

Alexis Coleman, pastor of two United Methodist churches in Harpers Ferry, W. VA., is author of "A New Year in God's World." 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 Acolemand@umc-gbcs.org or Neal Christie at NChristie@umc-gbcs.org

Gathering and Introductions

Opening Prayer

Biblical Text: Revelation 21:1-6

¹Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more.

²And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband.

³And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them as their God; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them;

⁴he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away."

⁵And the one who was seated on the throne said, "See, I am making all things new." Also he said, "Write this, for these words are trustworthy and true."

⁶Then he said to me, "It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. To the thirsty I will give water as a gift from the spring of the water of life.

(NRSV)

Lectio Divina Shared in Community^[1]

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 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. Sharing aloud at somewhat greater length the results of each one'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: Eight Keys to Escaping Poverty Traps

In last week's study we examined 16 poverty traps in which conditions today make it likely that poverty will continue tomorrow.

According to Stephen Smith, author of *Ending Global Poverty: A Guide to What Works*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), there are keys to capability that "open the door to increasing income and wealth, which can in turn provided the means for building further capabilities and assets and resiliency to the many risks and shocks that people in developing countries face."^[2]

The keys to capability are interrelated, which means that unlocking one sometimes unlocks others. It also means that unlocking one is also limited if you cannot unlock the others.

The eight keys to capability are:³

- 1. Health and nutrition for adults to work and children to grow to their full potential.**
The poor do not need much to escape the under-nutrition trap. To end poverty we must address hunger. Food security, according to the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) has three components: food availability, food access, and adequate food utilization, (knowing and providing a proper diet, safe water, and sanitation). There is no shortage of food in the world, but ending hunger does not mean simply that we ship food where it is needed. This is generally not effective except in a crisis situation. Food shipments generally lower food prices in the cities, where better-off people tend to live. The lower food prices make conditions worse for poor farmers. Very little food actually reaches the rural areas where the chronically poor live. A more permanent solution is to increase the purchasing power of the poor. "As long as most of the poor remain farmers, it is vital to improve the productivity of their farms, along with ensuring their claim on the income from that productivity." Access to clean water and to basic sanitation are also critical. It takes an average two hours per day for poor women to fetch water. If the water is not clean, it must be boiled. This uses up scarce fuel wood and creates indoor and outdoor air pollution. And last, better health knowledge among the poor is critically needed.
- 2. Basic education to build the foundations for self-reliance.**
Tens of millions of people speak only indigenous and tribal languages that are different from the dominant language. Governments rarely make it easy to learn to read in indigenous languages, and reading materials are limited. To learn to read, you often must learn to speak the official language of the country, but learning a language you seldom have opportunity to practice is difficult. The opportunities of literacy include being able to read signs, fill out forms, use a telephone. Learning to count coins in the marketplace is an invaluable skill.
- 3. Credit and basic insurance for working capital and defense against risk.** For the rural peasant farmer, access to credit provides the chance to purchase tools, a draft animal or small tractor, fertilizer, and irrigation – all of which help a farmer improve productivity, diversify crops, and move towards commercial farming. For the rural landless laborer, credit can mean being able to purchase raw material such as cloth and tools such as a sewing so that a person can move from survival into business. For the poor urban peddler, access to credit means the chance to build a bigger inventory. Microfinancing is a way for the poor to borrow small amounts of money. You can be a microfinancier! Go to www.kiva.org for more information about microfinancing. This form of credit is expanding. Currently only 11% of the world's 240 million poorest families are being served. Insurance frees people from unnecessary worries. Small farmers try to minimize their risks from weather and price by diversifying their crops. In doing this they give up substantial profits that would come from specialization.

4. **Access to functioning markets for income and opportunities to acquire assets.** “The need of the poor for land is critical, and is also emblematic of problems gaining access to markets and productive resources.” The rural poor say that owning enough land to make a living, and owning it securely, would make the most positive difference in their lives. At least 100 million households depend on farming land that they do not securely own. When farmers have insecure land tenure rights, there is incentive to treat the land as a short-term resource. Large landowners often do not want to dilute their holdings. Therefore, they overprice the land. Poor farmers often cannot get the credit they need. Land reform could provide needed changes. But even with land reform, to be able to move beyond subsistence farming, farmers need to be able to sell what they grow. Many farmers live on paths miles from the nearest road. Roads give people essential connections to markets.
5. **Access to the benefits of new technologies for higher productivity.** In order to take advantage of market opportunities, raise productivity and escape from poverty traps, the poor must have access to useful knowledge and improved technologies. New technologies such as contraception, medicines, high-yielding crop varieties, and telecommunications have already benefited the poor. Specific job skills may become obsolete. The poor need to learn to learn, to learn how to adapt, and to learn to make use of new technologies.
6. **A non-degraded and stable environment to ensure sustainable development.** The poor are both victims and perpetrators of environmental degradation. The poor have a high rate of fertility, practice slash-and-burn agriculture in rainforests, overuse soil and overforage for fuelwood. Slum dwellers face environmental hazards that exceed those in rural areas. With increasing income and with the help of NGOs (non-governmental organization), the poor are able to improve their environment and get help with environmental protection when needed.
7. **Personal empowerment to gain freedom from exploitation and torment.** Personal empowerment can unlock the strongbox where the other keys are. Those without power find it difficult to get the power and resources they need to make a better life. “When elites benefit from others’ poverty or powerlessness, they often actively perpetuate both. They do this with coercive exploitation enforced with terror.”
8. **Community empowerment to ensure effective participation in the wider world.** The poor depend on their community’s security to survive, to defend their rights, and to preserve their opportunities to improve the lives of their families. Communities and social networks that are strong need to be protected. Communities that are weak must be developed.

Discussion

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

“Humans are social beings with a fundamental need to fit into the communities around us. To fit in requires consumption to a certain standard ... And as the standard consumption of communities rise and extends to new products such as initially shoes, then radio, and then televisions, the poor may feel under great pressure to acquire these symbols of minimum standing in the community. If a poor family has no other money for a radio, they may forgo food and medical attention to remain respectable and connected to society. The drive not to fall too far behind one’s peers seems as strong as the drive to eat high-calorie foods ... And owning a radio is observable to your peers in a way that the number of grams of protein you consume is not.”^[4]

1. What do you think about Smith’s observation?
2. Discuss in your group how Smith’s observation is true at all income levels in the U.S.
3. In the 8 keys to capability, Smith says that eliminating hunger is the first key to ending poverty. Do you believe that ending hunger is possible?
4. Which of these keys do you think would help the relative poor of the United States?

Applying the Biblical Text

Revelation is a book that is both apocalyptic and eschatological. Apocalyptic literature is that in which there is always a dualism of supernatural powers. In Jewish and Christian apocalypticism, the force of evil, sometimes referred to as Satan, opposes the righteous God. God is always superior to the evil opponent, although God allows evil to rule for a limited time. Apocalypticism “attempts to explain the age-long existence of evil, especially in the form of the afflictions and suffering of the righteous, and at the same time proposes a dramatic solution to the problem.” Eschatology is that literature which deals with the last things, with the end of this present age and with life in the age to come.^[5]

In the passage for this week, John describes the beginning of the new age, an age in which God descends from the throne to dwell with God’s people (the righteous). This text celebrates that all evil has passed and the reign of God has come. It is a great celebration indeed. Note God’s excitement in verse 6: “It is done!”

As Christians we believe in the reign, or kingdom, of God. This passage is a kingdom passage. It gives us a description of what God’s final reign will be like. In Christian corporate life and in our private prayers, we pray the Lord’s Prayer. We pray for the kingdom to come, and we believe that it will come in God’s time.

As Christians we also believe that we can see glimpses of the kingdom in our lives now. When we pray for the kingdom, we are praying that we would become kingdom people not only by claiming our own place in the kingdom, but also by claiming the kingdom for others and working towards it.

Read some other kingdom texts together: Isaiah 2:4; Amos 5:24; Micah 6:8; Isaiah 11:4-9; and Luke 4:16-21. Discuss together how ending extreme poverty now is a sign of the kingdom to come.

Leaving

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), 31.

³ *Ibid.*, 31-45.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 28.

⁵ *The Interpreter’s Bible*, volume 12, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1956), 347-348 and 529-530.
