

Children in Poverty: Can You See Them? A Bible study series

The Children in Poverty Bible study series is a free, web-based series of Bible studies on the three-year mission study focus on children in poverty of [American Baptist Women's Ministries](http://www.abwministries.org), ABCUSA. It supplements materials on the same focus also being produced by [National Ministries](http://www.nationalministries.org), ABCUSA.

A new study will be available every two months. Each study has two parts, enabling you to spread out each study over a period of time or to use it in one session as your schedule allows. Each study also has a variety of suggested action steps to take. These are to help spur your thinking about practical, hands-on things you can do related to children in poverty. You may do these action steps as written, or allow them to inspire you to other things.

Please begin and end your study with prayer. If you are studying in a group, read each section aloud and then stop and share your thoughts; if you are using this study as an individual, use the section marked "Reflection" to jot a few of your thoughts down.

In either case, consider designating a special journal for this study, perhaps one with pockets to hold things you may print off the web or other research as you progress through the study.

May God be with you in your study.

Session 2: 1 Kings 17:8-24

⁸ Then the word of the Lord came to him [Elijah], saying, ⁹ "Go now to Zarephath, which belongs to Sidon, and live there; for I have commanded a widow there to feed you." ¹⁰ So he set out and went to Zarephath. When he came to the gate of the town, a widow was there gathering sticks; he called to her and said, "Bring me a little water in a vessel, so that I may drink." ¹¹ As she was going to bring it, he called to her and said, "Bring me a morsel of bread in your hand." ¹² But she said, "As the Lord your God lives, I have nothing baked, only a handful of meal in a jar, and a little oil in a jug; I am now gathering a couple of sticks, so that I may go home and prepare it for myself and my son, that we may eat it, and die." ¹³ Elijah said to her, "Do not be afraid; go and do as you have said; but first make me a little cake of it and bring it to me, and afterwards make something for yourself and your son." ¹⁴ For thus says the Lord the God of Israel: The jar of meal will not be emptied and the jug of oil will not fail until the day that the Lord sends rain on the earth." ¹⁵ She went and did as Elijah said, so that she as well as he and her household ate for many days. ¹⁶ The jar of meal was not emptied, neither did the jug of oil fail, according to the word of the Lord that he spoke by Elijah.

¹⁷ After this the son of the woman, the mistress of the house, became ill; his illness was so severe that there was no breath left in him. ¹⁸ She then said to Elijah, "What have you against me, O man of God? You have come to me to bring my sin to remembrance, and to cause the death of my son!" ¹⁹ But he said to her, "Give me your son." He took him from her bosom, carried him up into the upper chamber where he was lodging, and laid him on his own bed. ²⁰ He cried out to the Lord, "O Lord my God, have you brought calamity even upon the widow with whom I am staying, by killing her son?" ²¹ Then he stretched himself upon the child three times, and cried out to the Lord, "O Lord my God, let this child's life come into him again." ²² The Lord listened to the voice of Elijah; the life of the child came into him again, and he revived. ²³ Elijah took the child, brought him down from the upper chamber into the house, and gave him to his mother; then Elijah said, "See, your son is alive." ²⁴ So the woman said to Elijah, "Now I know that you are a man of God, and that the word of the Lord in your mouth is truth."

Part One A Child in Need of Assistance (1 Kings 17:8-16)

How many times have you said, "I'm starving" because you had only eaten a light lunch or missed your afternoon snack? We throw words like *starving* and *hungry* and *famished* around, but almost none of us have experienced true hunger. This woman of Zarephath understood real hunger. In those days, as a widow without a male protector she already lived on the edge of society. In the midst of a long drought, she had faithfully sought to care for her son. But hunger and poverty had taken their toll. She had only enough supplies left for one sparse meal. Her plan was to eat that final meal with her son and then to wait, resigned, for death.

Along came a stranger, a foreigner, demanding water and food. She was gracious and patient in response. She didn't rage against his utter presumption; she just presented him with the facts. She was poor; she was without resources; she was facing death. When he persisted in his request, she took her precious bit of meal and her last drops of oil and baked him a cake. Perhaps she was too tired to fight this forceful stranger. Maybe she was willing to try anything to save her child. Or it could be that she simply didn't think it would make much difference to give him the last of her food instead of sharing a meal with her son. We aren't told her thoughts or feelings. We can only see her actions and their results. When that hungry woman took what should have been the last of her resources from the jar and gave them to a stranger, God restored what had been depleted, multiplied it, and so gave her back the life of her child.

This experience of prophet and widow calls us to consider the plight of the hungry around the world. There were plenty of widows in Israel (see Luke 4:24-26) during the time of that drought, but God sent Elijah to Zarephath, a city of Sidon, outside the land of Israel, to respond to the needs of the "other." And so it is with us. In the first study of this series, we considered the needs of children in the United States. Now God is sending us outside the borders of the United States to see the hunger of children who are not "our own," so that we might ultimately become the presence of hope to them.

Reflection:

Action Steps:

- Learn more about the reality and causes of hunger. Go to the United Nations World Food Program website at www.food-force.com/index.php/reality/wfp_site/ and click on the box labeled "*Counting the Hungry*." Watch the flash videos entitled "*What Is Hunger?*" and/or "*Why Does Hunger Exist?*" If you would rather, you can scroll down the page and click the links to read articles on the topics. (This is also an excellent resource to use with children or teens. Elementary aged children may need help with some of the vocabulary. The game "Food Force" makes an excellent learning tool as well.)
- Spend some time journaling about what you have learned. If you are part of a small group Bible study, you may want to each take a different topic to read and report on at a future meeting. Don't limit yourself to facts. Discuss your feelings about these facts.
- It is estimated that about 20 million poor children are born mentally impaired because their mothers did not have enough iodine in pregnancy. As you are learning about these and other hunger-related problems that children in poverty face, why not place a "Hunger Box" in your kitchen? Put a dime or quarter in the box each time you use iodized salt. Contribute the resulting money to a program seeking to meet the needs of the hungry.

Part Two A God Who Acts with Power to Save (1 Kings 17:17-24)

Most of us are familiar with the concept of “cliff hangers” at the end of a television season. The final episode of a favorite show ends with a dilemma or an unresolved problem to hook us and get us to tune in next season. However, there's no cliff hanger in 1 Kings 17:16. The story ends with the widow and her son well-provisioned; the future looks rosy. That's why we are so surprised when in the next verse the widow's child is once again in jeopardy. This time—perhaps emboldened by God's past actions on her behalf—the woman is not silently accepting. She rages against the injustice. She demands that the prophet be accountable. It's not enough that he has saved her child from a time of famine. The prophet must continue to stand as God's instrument in her son's life. She knows it; he knows it. And so Elijah once again takes action on behalf of this poor child.

In the previous session of this study, we learn that hunger is a complex issue. There are many interwoven causes and effects. Power structures, global economics, ecological changes, gender issues, and military actions are only a few of the factors contributing to hunger and poverty. We can respond with emergency supplies to immediate needs and feed a few children. And that's definitely important. But to truly alleviate hunger, we must go deeper.

This second episode in the life of the widow and the prophet reminds us that responding to the needs of children in poverty is not the work of one day or even one spectacular intervention. It is a call that requires commitment and ongoing involvement. Consider the situation of women in refugee camps in places like Darfur. Outside aid has provided some basic staples like food and water for these camps. But little has been done to address other threatening realities of the poverty they suffer as result of the violence there. When women and children go out from the camps to gather the precious firewood that is critical to their survival (remember the widow gathering her firewood?), they are greatly at risk. Children are often abducted and conscripted into the army. Women are raped/sexually assaulted. (For an example of this, see the article “In West Sudan, Women's Responsibilities Put Them at Risk of Rape”, www.sudantribune.com/article.php3?id_article=5855)

We who would respond with integrity to the needs of children in poverty must open our eyes to the depth of the problem. Our responses must go beyond distributing food aid in refugee camps. We must, as Elijah did (vs. 21), join our lives to theirs and repeatedly plead for their survival. We must meet the complex web of needs with appropriate, ongoing involvement if we are to hear the voices of the women of Darfur saying to us, “*Now I know that you are a woman of God, and that the word of the Lord in your mouth is truth.*”

Reflection:

Action Step:

- Learn more about the complex issues of hunger in different parts of our world. Go to www.food-force.com/index.php/reality/wfp_site/ and click on the link to the *Interactive Hunger Map*. Several countries are listed for your exploration and learning. After you have spent some time on the map reading the information given, choose one of the countries. Study the information given for that country. Make some notes and use them in your prayer time for a week. When you have finished the week, return to the map and select a new country. Begin again. Repeat as often as the Holy Spirit leads.