

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 3: Deuteronomy 20:1-9

1 When you go out to war against your enemies, and see horses and chariots, an army larger than your own, you shall not be afraid of them; for the Lord your God is with you, who brought you up from the land of Egypt. 2 Before you engage in battle, the priest shall come forward and speak to the troops, 3 and shall say to them: "Hear, O Israel! Today you are drawing near to do battle against your enemies. Do not lose heart, or be afraid, or panic, or be in dread of them; 4 for it is the Lord your God who goes with you, to fight for you against your enemies, to give you victory." 5 Then the officials shall address the troops, saying, "Has anyone built a new house but not dedicated it? He should go back to his house, or he might die in the battle and another dedicate it. 6 Has anyone planted a vineyard but not yet enjoyed its fruit? He should go back to his house, or he might die in the battle and another be first to enjoy its fruit. 7 Has anyone become engaged to a woman but not yet married her? He should go back to his house, or he might die in the battle and another marry her." 8 The officials shall continue to address the troops, saying, "Is anyone afraid or disheartened? He should go back to his house, or he might cause the heart of his comrades to melt like his own." 9 When the officials have finished addressing the troops, then the commanders shall take charge of them.

Additional reference: Numbers 1:1-2

1 The Lord spoke to Moses in the wilderness of Sinai, in the tent of meeting, on the first day of the second month, in the second year after they had come out of the land of Egypt, saying: 2 Take a census of the whole congregation of Israelites, in their clans, by ancestral houses, according to the number of names, every male individually; 3 from twenty years old and upward, everyone in Israel able to go to war.

Part One Rules of Warfare (Deuteronomy 20:1-9)

The Old Testament passage that forms the basis of this study holds radically different values in tension.

- **On the one hand, it accepts violence and warfare as a given in human existence.** No question is raised about war's appropriateness or morality. The Israelites are expected to go to war against their enemies. They are told not to fear, for God will not abandon them in the midst of the conflict.
- **On the other hand, this passage recognizes and affirms the value of common milestones and celebrations in an ordinary individual's life.** The priest who speaks to the troops is told to encourage those who built a house but have not dedicated it and those who planted a vineyard but had not yet enjoyed the fruit to go home and enjoy life now. They are not to risk death in a war before they have a chance to experience the blessings of home and harvest. Those who are engaged are to go back to their sweethearts. Those who are trembling with fear at the thought of a battle are also encouraged to stay home, so that they will not infect others with their fears.

These "rules of warfare" reveal an acceptance of the complexity of human existence that is quite extraordinary. But there's one "rule"—a clear biblical declaration about who is to go into battle—that is not found in this passage. It is found repeatedly in Numbers 1. That chapter speaks of the need to take a census of everyone in Israel who is able to go to war. There the small but significant phrase "from twenty years old and upward" appears over a dozen times. In the Old Testament, warriors are expected to come from those twenty years of age or older.

Today, vulnerable poor children in war ravaged areas of our world do not have that biblical age buffer. In some cases, pre-teens are abducted and forced to serve as soldiers. In other settings, children are recruited into armies with the promise of a better future. Most will never experience the milestones and celebrations mentioned in Deuteronomy 20. They will not build houses or dedicate them. They will not plant fields or enjoy the fruit of the harvest or linger with a sweetheart. No matter how fearful they are, they will not be allowed to return home. The pleasures of ordinary life have been stolen from them. Whatever we believe theologically about whether Christians should participate in war, it is very clear that our Creator never intended children to endure such a burden.

Reflection:

Action Steps:

- Visit some of the following websites to learn more about the international scope of this problem.
 - Amnesty International: http://www.amnestyusa.org/child_soldiers/index.do
 - Human Rights Watch: <http://hrw.org/campaigns/crp/index.htm>
 - Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers: <http://www.child-soldiers.org/resources/news>
 - American Friends Service Committee: <http://www.afsc.org/issues/issue.php?id=315>
- Prepare a paragraph describing the situation of child soldiers and use it to invite the members of your church prayer chain to set aside a special time each week to pray for child soldiers around the world.
- Go to the website of the Children's Hunger Relief Fund (<http://www.chrf.org/childsoldier.html>). Read the feature article and journal your responses to the questions in the opening paragraph.
- Go to World Vision's site and sign the "No Child Soldiers Declaration". Encourage a friend to sign it, too. https://www.worldvision.org/Worldvision/guest.nsf/childsoldiers_done?OpenForm

Part Two Our Nation's Children (Deuteronomy 20:1-9)

After a month of learning about the child soldiers around the globe and praying for their desperate situations, you may be saying to yourself "Thank God we don't have that problem here." Yes, we can be thankful for that reality. But we cannot be complacent about our nation's children, for many of them are being recruited and drafted into a different type of violent warfare as they interact with and join gangs.

Look again at Deuteronomy 20:1-9. This time, instead of reading it as a list of rules for warfare, look for the unspoken assumptions of what life is like for the people of God. Do you see the list of blessing that is implicit in this passage? The list begins with a God who is greater than the biggest problem you'll ever face and who walks with you into every difficult situation. It continues with a community that cares for you, and with leaders eager to address your physical and spiritual needs. This short passage assumes a land that yields a harvest, homes that are dedicated to the Lord, and the right to find joy in the big and small experiences of life. Even in the face of war, such gifts offer hope and stability to God's people.

Many children who grow up in poverty in our nation's urban settings would not make such assumptions. They do not know of a God who loves them. Their homes are under attack; their families are fractured; resources are scarce. They feel powerless and even desperate as they look to the future. Yet they long for community, for leaders who care, for someone to offer guidance and hope. They are ripe recruits for the "family" the gang represents to them. They may become "child soldiers" for the gang, fighting for personal power and control in a society that doesn't seem to care about their needs or dreams.

Colossians 3:21 gives instruction to believing fathers about how to treat their children. It says "Fathers, do not embitter your children, or they will become discouraged." This command is not only for fathers. It is a sharp warning for all of us. If we abandon children in poverty, if we do not offer them the power-filled love of Jesus Christ and a place in the family of God, they will become discouraged and embittered. And they will turn to others who offer them a (false) hope of achieving their goals. Christians can make a difference in the lives of these "child soldiers," but only if we are willing to exchange our self-serving religious preferences for real relationships with these children for whom Christ lived and died.

Reflection:

Action Steps:

- Read and pray over articles in the 2006 Fall issue of *The Pebble* which addresses the topic "How Can Churches and Christians Connect to Inner City Witness and Outreach?" You may download *The Pebble* from <http://www.nationalministries.org/children/pebble.cfm>.
- Respond to a statement by Marian Wright Edelman of the Children's Defense Fund, when she was asked "What's wrong with today's children?": "...Parents letting children raise themselves or be raised by television. Children being shaped by peers and gangs, instead of by parents and grandparents and kin. Children roaming the streets because there's nobody at home or paying enough attention. Adults telling children to be honest while lying and cheating. Adults telling children not to be violent, while marketing a culture that glorifies violence. What's wrong with our children? We're what's wrong with our children." ("Marian Wright Edelman Keeps a Watchful Eye on America's Children," by Ted Landphair, Washington D.C., <http://voanews.com>, March 24, 2006.)