

## **Children in Poverty: Can You See Them?**

### **Year Two, Study 1**

#### **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, ABCUSA. It supplements materials on the same focus also being produced by National Ministries, ABCUSA.

During this second year, a new study will be posted 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.

#### **The Text:**

**Matthew 2:16-18:** *When Herod saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, he was infuriated, and he sent and killed all the children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had learned from the wise men.<sup>17</sup> Then was fulfilled what had been spoken through the prophet Jeremiah:<sup>18</sup> "A voice was heard in Ramah, wailing and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be consoled, because they are no more." (NRSV)*

## Part One Herod's Indifference

Last May, before we took our summer break from this Bible study, I encouraged you to reflect upon the birth of Jesus and sent you to texts in the Gospel of Luke. As we "reconvene" our study, we have moved to the post-Christmas text in the Gospel of Matthew that is most often referred to as the "slaughter of the innocents." In this text we find a study in contrasts—Herod's indulgent indifference versus Rachel's compassionate engagement.

**Read Matthew 2:16-18.** Spend some time reflecting on the response the enraged Herod had to the thwarting of his plans. It may seem extraordinary to believe that Herod would actually order all of the children under the age of two in and around Bethlehem to be killed in order to eliminate a threat to his power. However, this was actually quite in keeping with his character. He was known for such violent, irrational acts. He had his wife strangled and put to death three of his sons. A reported pun from Herod's time was that it was better to be one of Herod's sows (Greek "huos") than his son (Greek "huios."). The historian Josephus reported that Herod even ordered that a group of nobles be executed at his death in order to ensure that there would be a period of mourning when he died. (They were released instead, producing celebration!)

Herod had the power to end the lives of innocent children or to save them. His own ego and power needs left him with an indifference to human life other than his own. He chose their deaths. We also have power to affect the lives of the children of this world. Although we tend to think that our country does well by children, a recent radio news article reported that we as a nation are on UNICEF's list of *worst* countries for kids. According to UNICEF, an examination of 40 factors, such as poverty, deprivation, happiness, relationships, and risky or bad behavior puts the United States near the bottom of a list of 21 economically developed nations. It doesn't take the rage of a Herod for innocent children to die. Our own indulgent indifference—marked by complacency, materialism, and apathy—can produce the same result.

### Reflection:

### Action Steps:

- ◆ Go to <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=7407245> to read or listen to the NPR article **U.S. on List of UNICEF's Worst Countries for Kids**.
- ◆ On that same webpage, click on the link that says [An Overview of Child Well-Being](#). This will take you to a clearly written document about the welfare of children around our world.
  - Commit to read two pages of this document each day this month (14 pages a week).
  - If you are a member of a study group, divide into pairs and check in with each other once a week to talk about what you are learning and how it can have an impact upon your community. You can do this in person, by phone, or through e-mail.
  - If you are doing this study on your own, write in your journal at least once a week about what you learn. Prayerfully ask God if there is someone with whom you should share your discoveries.

## Part Two

### Rachel's compassionate engagement

**Read Matthew 2:16-18** This text has traditionally been called the "slaughter of the innocents." However, if we change our focus from Herod to the figure of Rachel, it might as easily be called "a lament for the innocents."

To understand what the text means when it speaks of "Rachel weeping for her children" we must turn to the Old Testament. Rachel's story is found in the book of Genesis (beginning in Genesis 29:9). Rachel was the much loved wife of Jacob, who bore him two sons: Joseph and Benjamin. When Rachel died, she was buried near Bethlehem by her devoted husband. Her son Joseph also had two sons—Ephraim and Manasseh—whose descendants became the tribe of Israel. And so over time, Rachel came to be known as the mother of Israel.

The prophet Jeremiah (31:15) used the image of Rachel weeping in Ramah for her children to put a face on the overwhelming grief felt by the women of the northern kingdom of Israel as their children died under siege or were captured and taken into exile. (Ramah was another small town near Jerusalem.) As Matthew writes the story of Jesus birth, he connects that image of sorrow with the grief cries of the mothers of Bethlehem who had lost their infant sons to Herod's raging indifference. Even from her tomb near Bethlehem, Rachel again has reason to mourn the death of God's children.

Many biblical commentators suggest that because of the size of Bethlehem, there were probably no more than 20 children killed in response to Herod's command. But no matter the number, when God's children are lost, there is a need for lament. In the face of indulgent indifference, there is a need for compassionate engagement and true mourning. Spend some time this month studying about childhood mortality rates, lamenting the unnecessary deaths of children. Ask God to give you a compassionate as deep as Rachel's—one that refuses to be comforted by empty words or a pretense of action, but will only be satisfied when children stop dying unnecessarily.

#### Reflection:

#### Action Step:

- Explore links to *The World Health Report 2005 - Make Every Mother and Child Count*. This informative World Health Organization document is at <http://www.who.int/whr/2005/en/index.html>.
- In some southern states the infant death rate is rising. Read about this trend and the five leading causes of infant death at <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=11158569>.
- Prepare a brief program to share what you have learned with other Christians. Volunteer to lead it for a Sunday school class, a circle meeting, a women's Bible study, etc. Education is the first step to community action.