

Please Note: This session completes Year One. Year Two will begin in mid-September 2007.

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

A new study is available every two months (September through May). 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:

Luke 2:1-7 *In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. ²This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. ³All went to their own towns to be registered. ⁴Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. ⁵He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. ⁶While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. ⁷And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.*

Luke 2: 22-24 ²²When the time came for their purification according to the law of Moses, they brought him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord ²³(as it is written in the law of the Lord, "Every firstborn male shall be designated as holy to the Lord"), ²⁴and they offered a sacrifice according to what is stated in the law of the Lord, "a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons."

Luke 2:25-38 ²⁵Now there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon; this man was righteous and devout, looking forward to the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit rested on him. ²⁶It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Messiah. ²⁷Guided by the Spirit, Simeon came into the temple; and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him what was customary under the law, ²⁸Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying, ²⁹"Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace, according to your word; ³⁰for my eyes have seen your salvation, ³¹which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, ³²a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel." ³³And the child's father and mother were amazed at what was being said about him. ³⁴Then Simeon blessed them and said to his mother Mary, "This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed ³⁵so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed—and a sword will pierce your own soul too."

³⁶There was also a prophet, Anna the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was of a great age, having lived with her husband seven years after her marriage, ³⁷then as a widow to the age of eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshiped there with fasting and prayer night and day. ³⁸At that moment she came, and began to praise God and to speak about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem.

Part One Christmas in May

Winter, spring, summer, or fall, it doesn't matter at all—I love Christmas! One of the things I enjoy about going to the Green Lake Conference Center (Green Lake, Wisconsin) or the Biennial celebrations of ABCUSA is looking at all of crèches from various parts of the world offered for sale by Worldwide Gifts in these locations. So let the thoughts and memories of Mother's Day just passed mingle with the joy of Christmas still to come and let's reflect together for a few moments upon the birth of Jesus.

Read Luke 2:1-7 The story of Jesus' birth reveals the poverty of his family. Joseph had no money or influence to use to provide housing for his family in Bethlehem. Instead, Mary and Joseph had to make do with a cave or rough shelter that normally housed animals as they prepared for Jesus' birth. The smells and surfaces of Jesus' neo-natal "birthing suite" were anything but sterile. A utilitarian feeding trough became Jesus' first cradle. Spend a few moments trying to go beyond the Christmas pageant picture of this birth and imagine what it would really have been like to give birth in such circumstances.

Read Luke 2:22-24 Weeks after his birth, Mary and Joseph took the infant Jesus to Jerusalem to fulfill the law of Moses concerning the purification rituals that followed childbirth. There they went to the temple to offer a sacrifice before God, and the sacrifice they offered once again reveals their poverty. The preferred sacrifice was a young lamb and a pigeon or turtledove. However, Leviticus 12:8 offers an exemption. It permits a poor mother to substitute another less expensive pigeon or turtledove for the young lamb, and that is the sacrifice that Mary and Joseph made that day. How do you think these two felt, to have to offer the "lesser" sacrifice following the birth of such a special child?

Reflection:

Think about the birth-stories of your family—your birth, your siblings, or your own child(ren). Pick one birth story to reflect upon in your journal or talk about in your small group. Where did the birth happen? Who was there? Were there complications? How were the needs of mother and child met? Who helped? Was there plenty of money to provide for maternity and infant care, or were sacrifices required of the family? What does it mean to you that the Word of God chose to be born in such humble circumstances?

Action Steps:

- Investigate the realities of childbirth in your area. What are the costs? What provisions are offered for low-income families? Do they have access to adequate facilities and necessary care, even without insurance? Are there programs in your area to help low-income expectant moms that your church or women's group could support?
- For an international perspective, read the summary article on the "Cost of Childbirth" as it relates to international aid and debt at www.oxfam.org.uk/what_we_do/issues/debt_aid/bp52_childbirth.htm.

Part Two Seeing the Potential

Read Luke 2:25-38 Joseph and Mary arrived at the temple with their baby boy Jesus. There in the Court of Women, they encountered Simeon, a man with a mission. He had been informed by the Holy Spirit that he would live to see the coming of the Messiah. Can you imagine him examining baby after baby, checking for the one who has been promised? Simeon was not like the “wise” men who ended up at a palace instead of an animal shelter when they let their preconceptions about where this special child would be born sidetrack them from following the star God had set before them. Simeon was an “equal opportunity” seeker. He peered into the baby blankets of rich and poor families alike, searching for the one who was to be a light for all peoples. Because of this, he didn't miss the moment of Jesus' coming. He could die happy! Anna, when she arrived, was also ready and willing to see the long-awaited Christ-child even though he was born to a humble family from Nazareth.

Simeon and Anna looked past the poverty of the parents to see the reality of God's promise coming true in the child. What circumstances make it hard for you to see the potential of children born in poverty? Are you stopped by prejudices about clothing or cleanliness? Does the possibility of drug abuse or graphic language make you unwilling to look closely into the eyes of God's chosen ones? Do you struggle with a tendency to blame poverty on the poor? After journaling or discussion, spend some time in prayer about your attitudes and ask God to help you believe with Simeon and Anna that the Lord is able to work in all families and circumstances!

Reflection:

Read one or two of the biographies found at the websites below. Journal or discuss as a group how God used these individuals to carry out the work of the Kingdom. Perhaps you can add a personal example of such a life from the people you have known. As you discover modern individuals with such success stories, post a thread on our website at www.abwministries.org/forums and share the news with other women!

Action Steps:

- Visit the following sites for biographical sketches:
 - http://www.bookrags.com/William_Carey—William Carey
 - <http://faculty.brenau.edu/lewis/tubman.html>—Harriet Tubman
 - <http://www.wholesomewords.org/biography/bevans2.html>—Christmas Evans
 - <http://www.distinguishedwomen.com/biographies/walker-ml.html>
<http://www.vahistorical.org/sva2003/walker.htm>—Maggie Lena Walker
- Interview one of the wise elders of your church who grew up in poverty, perhaps because of the depression. Ask them to tell you who encouraged them to believe that God could use them.
- Go to the National Ministries website and read carefully the bulletin insert found at www.nationalministries.org/cip/docs/Bulletin_Insert_07jan_color_ChristmasSpirit.pdf. Prayerfully study some of the scriptures mentioned in “Children Need the Spirit of Christmas All Year.” Ask your pastor to use this insert one Sunday this summer.