

# MAKE POVERTY PERSONAL

**Taking the Poor  
as Seriously as the Bible Does**

**Ash Barker**



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ēmerision is a partnership between Baker Books and Emergent Village, a growing, generative friendship among missional Christians seeking to love our world in the Spirit of Jesus Christ. The ēmerision line is intended for professional and lay leaders like you who are meeting the challenges of a changing culture with vision and hope for the future. These books will encourage you and your community to live into God's kingdom here and now.

Ash Barker leads us on an important journey that is both personal and historical. ***Make Poverty Personal*** reminds us of the difference between personal and private. This book will inspire communities to put at the forefront of their efforts caring for the poor in ways that come from our normal, everyday lives. This call is to a real-life engagement with those who are in need not only for their benefit, but for ours as well.

Additionally, this book calls us to re-walk, with our words and our lives, the path of caring for the poor—a path walked by those of faith throughout history. Ash does not leave us simply with a call for better intentions, but a way forward for healthy engagement in our world.

This book serves communities of faith today as the kind of encouragement the Apostle Paul received in the early days of the church when he was called to “remember the poor,” which was the very thing he was eager to do (Gal. 2:10). This is a book that calls some to a new vision, and others to recommit to the path they have already been walking.



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# Foreword

Oh yes, God is moving in the world.

Across the globe there are signs of a church that is closer to the poor and further from the drums of nationalism and war. We can see an emerging church that looks more like Jesus than the evangelicalism with which many of us grew up. Ash Barker and the Urban Neighbors of Hope (UNOH) revolution invite us to hear, smell, and touch Jesus in his most distressing disguises: in the slums, with the poor, in the most abandoned places of the empire in which we find ourselves. In a world that has found it hard to hear the words of Christian preachers because of the noise and contradictions of their lifestyles, Ash Barker is one of those folks whose life reflects the things he believes. Ash's stories point us towards a new kind of Christianity for which the world longs—a Christianity that looks like Jesus, and whose gospel is actually good news to the poor.

I grew up in a Christianity that tried to scare the hell out of us, literally. It had little hope to offer this world and just tried to pacify folks with the promise that there is life after death . . . while most of us were really asking, “Is there life before death?”

I remember as a child hearing all the hellfire and damnation sermons. We had a theater group perform a play called “Heaven’s Gates and Hell’s Flames.” In this play, actors presented scenes of folks being ripped away from loved ones, only to be sent to the fiery pits of hell, where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth. We all went forward to repent of all the evil things we had done over our first decade of life, paralyzed by the fear of being “left behind.” Since those days, I have grown to love the kind of Christianity about which Ash writes—a Christianity that is about loving people out of the hells of this world, not just trying to scare them into heaven.

Have you ever noticed that Jesus didn’t spend much time on hell? In fact, there are really only a couple of times he speaks of weeping and gnashing of teeth, of hell and God’s judgment, and both of them are about “making poverty personal.” Both of them have to do with the walls we create between ourselves and our suffering neighbors. One is Matthew 25, where the sheep and the goats are separated; the goats, who did not care for the poor, hungry, homeless, and imprisoned, are sent off to endure an agony akin to that experienced by the ones they neglected on this earth.

Then there is Jesus’s parable of the rich man and Lazarus. In this parable, we hear of a wealthy man who builds a gap between himself and the poor man, a gap that becomes an unbridgeable chasm not only from Lazarus, but also from God. He is no doubt a religious man (he calls out for “Father” Abraham and knows the prophets), and undoubtedly he made a name for himself on earth. Now, however, he is a nameless rich man begging the beggar for a drop of water. Lazarus, on the other hand, who lived a nameless life in the shadows of misery, is seated next to God and is given a name. Lazarus is the only person named in Jesus’s parables; his name means “the one God rescues.”

God is in the business of rescuing people from the hells they experience on earth, and God is asking us to love people out of those hells. God is asking us to taste the salt in the tears of the broken, to hunger for justice with the starving masses of our world,

to groan with all of creation in the birth pains of the kingdom of God. God is asking us to make poverty personal.

I am convinced that the tragedy in the church is not that rich folks don't care about poor folks, but that rich folks don't *know* poor folks. Amid all the campaigns, issues, slogans, and political agendas, perhaps the deepest hunger in the world is: "Make Poverty Personal." The prophet Amos cries out that if our faith does not bring justice flowing like a river, then we should cease the clamor of all of our religious festivals and gatherings and songs, for they are noise in God's ears (Amos 5:21–24). And lest we let the liberals off the hook, I've met plenty of progressive "social justice" types who have shown that it is very easy to live a life of socially-conscious comfort that is compartmentalized and detached from any true relationships with the poor.

Mother Teresa once said, "It is very fashionable to talk about the poor . . . unfortunately it is not as fashionable to talk to the poor." Ash's message is simple—meet Christ in the least of these. Ash's vision is big—it is the vision of the kingdom of God coming on earth. But he realizes that the revolution begins inside each of us; as Christ said, the "kingdom is within you." The vision for changing the world must begin small, like a mustard seed. After all, when a reporter asked Mother Teresa how she had managed to pick up 50,000 folks from the streets of Calcutta, she said, "I began with one." Here is your invitation to begin with one.

As we enter these stories of God at work in the slums, it is like we are reading another chapter in the book of Acts—Acts 29. Ash and the folks conspiring with him are continuing to write the story of God's movement in the world. And they dare us to see ourselves as living epistles, people who can shout the gospel with our lives.

There's much work to do. The church is still a mess. As Augustine is said to have stated, "The church is a whore, but she's my mother." Or, as one of our pastors here in Philly said, "The church is like Noah's ark—it stinks sometimes, but if you get out, you'll drown." Ash's book is a reminder that there is new life emerging from the compost of Christendom. Every few hundred years it

seems that Christianity faces an identity crisis. The fiery revolutions of God become institutionalized and stale, infected by power and triumphalism, suffocated by materialism, and begin to die. Then another remnant of Christ-followers goes to the deserts, to the slums, to the forsaken corners of our world to practice resurrection. Ash Barker is one of the prophetic voices in the wilderness calling people out of the centers of power and privilege to meet God on the margins. It is a call to re-imagine church—outside the walls, buildings, and meetings—as a body living out God’s love across the globe. Through these pages we meet a creator who makes humanity from dirt, a Savior who enters the world as a baby refugee in the middle of Herod’s genocide, and a Holy Spirit who continues to dwell in the “least of these.”

There is so much noise and clutter in the Christian industrial complex, especially here in the West. Books line the shelves with advice on how to find our best life, how to live with purpose, and how to find God’s blessing and the secret to prosperity. Here is a book that flies in the face of prosperity Christianity. Here is a book that reveals the true secret to fulfillment: if you really want to find your life then you should give it away. The best thing we can do with the blessings of God is to share them with the poor. That’s not the message of the televangelists and prosperity preachers, but that is the gospel that rises from the ghettos, from a homeless baby with no place to lay his head, from the slums of Bangkok and Galilee, from which people say “nothing good can come.” Turn the page and get ready to meet a God with a special fondness for the badlands, a God whose kingdom is upside-down, a God who invites you to change the world with a love that does not conform.

Shane Claiborne  
The Simple Way, Philadelphia, PA  
Author of *The Irresistible Revolution*

# Preface

God's heartbeat for the poor is finding new ways of expression. One indication of this is the book you have in your hands. Written in regular snatches from our slum home in Bangkok, its publication is nothing short of miraculous to me.

In late November 2005 I had completed a draft of this book. At that point, I had an energetic phone conversation with my good friend, Mick Pilbrow, in Canberra, Australia. We were talking about the "One Campaign" (in Australia it is called the "Make Poverty History" campaign), and we realized we had something to offer the then raging debate about ending poverty.

In a sudden whirl of efforts in Bangkok (me, crazily re-writing my draft), Canberra (editor, Geoff Alves), and Melbourne (designer Nick Wight and proofreaders Naomi Dekker, Stephen Barrington, Mike Lane, Dean Hurlston, and Russell Kilgour), this book was fast-tracked into print. It was first made available through our community's publishing arm, UNOH Publications, in March 2006. I am grateful to all who weaved their magic on this project.

In my native country, Australia, the response to that first edition was overwhelming. The book was short-listed for "Australian

Christian Book of the Year.” It was then named “Best Christian Book Ever” in an internet poll by the Australian Christian web magazine. The book clearly seemed to make sense to all kinds of Christians. If God’s heartbeat was for the poor, then God’s people should step out and make poverty personal, too.

This edition would not be possible if not for the support of Mike Frost, Shane Claiborne, and Nick Wight. Their advocacy and solidarity was essential. I am so grateful for their support for this book and their friendship in life. I am also greatly appreciative of Bob Hosack and his team from Baker Books who believed this book should be made available to a much wider readership and had the patience and tenacity to see it through.

I especially want to thank my family. Having an absent-minded husband/father/son is not much fun at the best of times, and this was especially so around the first deadline for the Australian edition. They had to put up with my preoccupation on our first all-family holiday together in years as I fought with that first draft in Chang Mai. Their love, patience, and support of me in seeing dreams like this book come true fuels my life. I pray I can return the favor.

Finally, this book is dedicated to those gospel workers living out its key themes among the urban poor—both those who intentionally move into harm’s way and those who have little choice. I pray this book will do our Savior proud, and will enable more gospel workers to take poverty personally and share the work load in our ready and waiting urban harvest fields.

# Introduction

## Opening Reflection: Saw's Poor Threads

Saw awoke with a sharp pain running through his stomach. Sitting bolt upright, he looked over at his fellow workers, still sleeping, lined up on mats in three rows. The sunlight started to break through the gaps in the rusty corrugated iron ceiling. Soon, one by one, each weary laborer would blink awake to a new day and it would begin again.

Saw sighed, envious of their rest, however fleeting it would be, for yesterday they had worked almost eighteen hours straight to complete a set of rugs ready for export. Little sleep, a little rice and sloppy curry, then long hours of weaving. He might have lost track of the time if he wasn't counting down the days until he would see his wife and two daughters and all his family and friends back in his village on the other side of the border. Just thirteen days to go.

But even this brief thought of his family couldn't bring a smile to Saw's face this morning. He felt as though a tiny knife had entered his intestines and was filleting him from the inside out. Another eighteen hours in front of the machine just didn't seem possible.

The night before a friend had conjured up a mixture of herbs and green liquid, but rather than helping, it had kept him awake.

“What can I do?” Saw mumbled to himself. If he stopped work, he would not be paid for any of his last month’s work; and if he was not paid, his family would not be able to repay its debts back in the village. He couldn’t let them all down now. Saw staggered out the back of the laborers’ shed to the concrete squat toilet. He got dizzy as he peed and pooped out blood. Surveying the mess, Saw realized he just couldn’t keep going.

“Surely someone cares about what’s happening to us here,” he lamented to the small gecko climbing above the door. “It’s not just the craps—it’s the whole way we’re forced to live. Less than \$30 a month for hundreds of weavings. They sell them in the West for thousands each. It makes the boss’s family one of the richest in town. If I could just get a message out, surely somebody could do something? But what can an illegal migrant worker do?”

Just then a desperate idea came to him. “What if I were to weave a message, and pray that the boss doesn’t see it but that others do? Maybe someone would stand with us.” Saw knew it was a long shot, full of risk, but it was all he could think of in that blood-filled, agonizing moment. He knew he couldn’t last thirteen more days. . . .



John and Teresa were walking through a factory outlet that was having a closing-down sale. They had never seen such cheap floor rugs and wall hangings before. “What intricate and colorful weavings,” Teresa exclaimed.

They needed a wall hanging for their brand-new home and, after seeing the TV ad late the night before, they drove out the next morning, anticipating a bargain.

“What about that one?” John said, hoping to get it over with so he could get to his friend’s place to watch the soccer game.

“Won’t match the olive curtains, love, but I just adore that one,” said Teresa, pointing to a dark-green and maroon weaving hanging on the factory wall with a red sale sign saying, “Only \$99.” It

had an odd pattern up close, but they pulled it down from the wall before someone else did.

“I’m not sure it goes that well on the wall after all,” Teresa said. “It’s not the right shade of green.”

“What about on the floor of the kid’s bedroom?” John asked.

They took the weaving to Jody’s room, swept Barbie and her latest outfits out of the way, and whooshed the weaving down.

“Not bad. Not great, but it could protect the carpet a bit, and we can’t return it,” John said.

“It’ll do for now, I guess,” said Teresa.

Just then little Jody bounced in with a few friends.

“Wow, Mum! What a mat! It’s great. Barbie just loves it, too!”

Jody looked at the mat, fiddling with her blonde curly locks, then asked, “But Mum, what does ‘Please stand with me’ mean?”

“What?”

“‘Please stand with me.’ You know, what it says on the mat?”

## The Bible’s Concern for the Poor

We live in a world where this story could be a real-life parable and not just a figment of my imagination to help frame our discussions. The Bible is like a precious weaving made by God through oppressed people. Yet, its cry for help is mostly ignored. The call is loud and obvious, but people are so distracted with other agendas that those who need to hear it most miss it.

A remarkable confession was made recently by Rick Warren. Warren is a well-known Christian minister and author of *The Purpose Driven Life*, which has sold more than 26 million copies. *Christianity Today* magazine reported Rick Warren’s experience of poverty in Africa:

“Around this time,” Warren says, he was driven to re-examine scripture with “new eyes.” What he found humbled him. “I found those 2,000 verses on the poor. How did I miss that? I went to Bible college, two seminaries, and I got a doctorate. How did I miss God’s compassion for the poor? I was not seeing all the purposes

of God. The church is the body of Christ. The hands and feet have been amputated and we're just a big mouth, known more for what we're against." Warren found himself praying, "God, would you use me to re-attach the hands and the feet to the body of Christ, so that the whole church cares about the whole gospel in a whole new way—through the local church?"

Timothy C. Morgan, "Purpose Driven in Rwanda,"  
*Christianity Today*, October 2005

What is remarkable is not that such a well-credentialed minister missed God's message and heart for the poor for so long—surely this is to be expected in a success-driven culture. Rather, what is remarkable is that Warren had the humility to publicly confess missing the Bible's concern and was prepared to do something about it. But if someone like Warren has missed the message, how many others are there who have missed it too?

Jim Wallis, from the Sojourners Community in Washington, is one Western Christian leader who hasn't missed the Bible's concern for the poor. In the 1970s he and a colleague actually went through the whole Bible with a pair of scissors and cut out every one of the 2,000 verses that related to poverty and injustice. His was a very hole-y Bible indeed! People in pews were aghast as this cut-and-paste Bible was held up. But, as he pointed out, this is what most Christians do with this most holy book.

Some might say that ending poverty is really the domain of activists, economists, and politicians. What does Christianity have to offer to help end poverty? It is time that Christians reconsider what the Bible has to say about poverty. Specifically, what are its concerns about the nature of poverty, and what does God require of us?

This book is the result of my search for answers to these questions as a Christian who lives in a large, urban slum in Bangkok and, before that, lived for ten years in one of Melbourne's poorest neighborhoods. Since April Fools' Day 2002, our life here as a family in Klong Toey has disoriented me and driven me back to want to know what God has to say about poverty here.

For example, what about little kids like May? The normally well-kept little girl with a cheeky grin suddenly started to lose weight and came to our Klong Toey preschool with matted and dirty hair. Our experienced Thai teachers knew that both of May's parents died of an HIV/AIDS-related illness and that she was looked after by her remarkable grandmother. But when they went to visit May at home—a shack that hangs precariously over a stinking, dirty creek, with an on-ramp of a freeway for its roof—even they were shocked. May's grandma, who had been caring for ten other grandchildren and some other children, had died suddenly in her sleep. As the children awoke to a new reality, the older kids had to take care of the younger ones. There were two teenagers who were working to support all eleven of them. If ever there was a time for solidarity, to stand with a family, it was now. Being available and being a presence was as important as any material help.

What hope is there for May and the thousands of kids like her without solidarity? Her physical, emotional, economic, and spiritual start has been stunted. Can she ever fulfill the dignity God intended for her? Or will this little five-year-old become fodder for the prostitution and go-go bar scene, like so many of our neighbors before her? We organized a family scholarship for May via the center, the staff began to visit regularly with food and support, and I “hit the books” and pleaded for God's intervention for May and the bigger picture of poverty.

What does God have to say in the Bible about poverty like this? While there are differences between life in Bible times and today—global banking, travel, and commerce, to name just a few—what I found was that God reveals the very nature of poverty and sews a thread of response throughout the Bible. As I took time most mornings to trace and reflect prayerfully on this thread, I better understood what our response to poverty can be if we take poverty as seriously and as personally as God does.

The Bible too often has been reduced to children's entertainment, rather than the greatest revealed response to poverty and injustice ever written. For when it comes to understanding and responding to poverty, the best book to read is still the Bible.

Taken collectively, its concerns show us how to respond to the suffering and tragedy that causes and leaves humans in poverty, both in Bible times and today. Yet this library of insights and pleas is rarely appreciated, and even more rarely acted upon. This can be attested to by the fact that 99 percent of Western church income is spent on itself.

If you take the thread of this message out of the Bible, the Bible will quickly unravel. God's special concern for the poor is developed as a stronger and stronger theme as the revelation of God's will becomes clearer. Will we read God's Word with eyes wide open? Will we allow Scripture to inspire and inform what we do with our lives? Will we hear the pleas from the Saws and Mays of the world?

### **Making Our Lives Count in a Fragile World**

While few Christians know the Bible well enough to see its real answers to poverty, the world in which we live is becoming more aware of its precarious situation and the desperate need to take poverty seriously. If the people of our volatile world are to have a common future together, then poverty has to go. If you need a reminder of how fragile the world is, remember Boxing Day 2004. I was in a food court not far from my home in Klong Toey slum, my bleary eyes trying to focus on a Bono quote in a *Bangkok Post* article above the din of the lunchtime crowd.

"We have the cash. We have the medicines. We have the technologies. But do we have the will? Do we have the will to make poverty history?"

My mind was drifting, however. "One more church service and we're off on holidays." Although we had planned to go on holidays that day, Anji had managed to get \$15 flights to Phuket for the next. My whole body seemed to ache to get off concrete and collapse into the sand and salt water. "I guess my will to end poverty will have to wait."

When I arrived home, our neighbors told us there had been some kind of storm in Phuket. It was a bad one. Apparently, there

had been some flooding and windows broken. However, the BBC and Reuters websites reported deaths from an earthquake and a tsunami. Numbness overwhelmed me, and I soon fell asleep on our couch. Anji, of course, was in fast mode and chased up every lead as to what to do about our holiday. (They say opposites attract!) She booked a cheap guesthouse at Pattaya, near Bangkok, arranged to borrow a friend's car, and cancelled our hotel and flights. "So travelling tomorrow isn't convenient for you?" the Air-Asia receptionist asked Anji.

In our room at Pattaya the next day we saw our first full TV report. It felt like we were watching *Schindler's List*, as bodies of children were dragged from beaches and piled up next to each other. Within a week over 150,000 were reported dead, including around 6,000 people from around Phuket.

While I was reading Bono, one of the worst natural disasters in recent history had occurred.

Bono's question finally got my attention. Would the will to respond come? A strangely united world answered by pledging two billion dollars within a week. Ships, helicopters, and volunteers were mobilized to bring relief. Just as the tsunami tragedy affected rich and poor, celebrities and the anonymous, Muslim, Buddhist, Hindu, and Christian alike, so too did the responses flow from diverse people and groups around the world. Like me, the world knew it could have been any one of us.

For me the most harrowing accounts came from parents who lost their children. "Why them? Why not me?" they cried. When a little blond boy about my son Aiden's age survived on floating debris and was picked up by a villager and taken back to town, a deep sense of survivor guilt hit me, too. As I watched the latest news (and, for some relief, cricket from a South African cable channel), I had to reflect: "Why not our family? Why were we spared?"

My only conclusion was that no one deserves poverty like this, and yet, in a fallen world everyone is vulnerable to it. Jesus says, "The rain falls on the just and the unjust" (Matt. 5:45).

Yet, every day 30,000 children die of hunger and preventable diseases. Over 180 million people die unnecessarily each year from

illnesses for which there are cures. There is no round-the-clock TV coverage for this silent, despairing travesty. Few will even notice. I pray those of us who still have breath will help make this kind of poverty history. Perhaps that is one of the reasons why we are still here. Together we can do it with the one who understands poverty like no other—one neighborhood at a time, if necessary.

## Bono Again

Bono shouted to the crowd at Hyde Park, “We’re not after charity. We’re after justice!” Just over six months after the tsunami, the world made a statement that it wants to take poverty seriously. The Live 8 concerts led by Geldof and Bono went out to over 2 billion people. Not a fundraiser like the 1985 “Live Aid,” the “Make Poverty History” campaign was about putting political pressure on the most powerful nations on earth. The so-called G8 listened to this global expression of the will of the people and promptly cancelled the debts of the world’s poorest countries, doubled their aid budgets, and worked out a timetable for fairer trade.

I watched the G8 announcement by Tony Blair on TV only a few days after the Live 8 concert. It should have been one of the most exciting days of Blair’s political career. He and thousands of others had worked hard for years for this result. Yet, a deep strain was etched on his face. He seemed close to tears, and there was no note of jubilation in his voice. Only a few days after the Live 8 concerts had packed up and the G8 summit was in full swing, one of the worst acts of terrorism in England’s recent history occurred. Four bombs ripped through London’s underground and a double-decker bus, leaving over fifty dead and hundreds injured.

Perhaps these events, together with May’s and Saw’s stories, show the reality of poverty. It can’t be ended simply by powerful people pulling economic levers and switches—though this is needed as well. Even the power of mobilized billions and rock star celebrity power is not enough. Poverty and injustice is too sinister to be fooled by that. People had mobilized and shown

their collective will, yet so too had a destructive force that could not be factored into the best laid plans to end poverty.

What will it take to end poverty? Jeffrey Sachs's book *The End of Poverty* has one of the most inspiring and optimistic forewords of any book I have read. Of course, it is by Bono. It says:

We *can* be the generation that no longer accepts that an accident of latitude determines whether a child lives or dies—but *will* we be that generation? Will we in the West realize our potential or will we sleep in the comfort of our affluence with apathy and indifference murmuring softly in our ears?

Sachs, *The End of Poverty*, xiv

Yet, there is something spiritual about poverty that can't be sorted out only by cash, economics, medicines, or government structures. Surely, despair is an integral part of poverty, and the only lasting antidote to despair is the hope that the living Christ can bring. My good friend Scott Bessenecker, who works with InterVarsity in helping American Christians engage with poverty, put it this way:

Governments cannot grant true hope. We must acknowledge the spiritual dimension of poverty. There are also, I believe, demonic forces at work that the UN knows little about except in the most generic sense (greed, corruption, oppression are some of the faces but there are deep demonic roots). It will take discerning, spirit-filled people moving into these communities to confront demonic issues that surround poverty. Satan's plan in the garden was essentially a plan to perpetually impoverish God's image-bearers. One of God's original commands was to "subdue the earth." I think this relates to God's mission for humans to vanquish his enemy. Believers are called, equipped, and set apart to confront the powers of evil that keep people trapped in intractable poverty.

Jeffrey Sachs's book itself outlines a recipe that, if followed, claims to ensure the end of poverty—get people up to the next rung on the development ladder and they'll make the next one too, it

argues. However, could it be that the book is far too materialistic and underestimates the stubborn spiritual reality and world view that oppresses those affected by poverty? Could it be that Christians could play a crucial role in ending the despair of poverty through the authority of the one who overcomes death?

From my experiences both in Melbourne and Bangkok, I know poverty and despair can become so internalized that it can take generations to heal. There is a family I know with four children who lives in Noble Park in Melbourne. No member of this family has had a meaningful job for two generations, and both parents and some grandparents have been in and out of jail. Getting a minimum wage job will not fix this. Just giving them enough to keep starvation at bay is not enough. Poverty is not just a lack of cash, medicine, or technology. It is also about the confidence, skills, and belief that people can use what they have for the community's good. Surely poverty is as much about identity, meaning, and belonging as material goods. Surely God's hope needs to be involved to change the world and rid it of poverty.

### **The Millennium Goals Are Not Enough**

While I appreciate the sentiment, passion, and effort of the “Make Poverty History” campaign, in light of the above I wonder if the actual goals—known as the Millennium Development Goals—need to be revisited. These goals were put together by the United Nations and ratified by most countries. They aim to help quantify how and if poverty is being eradicated. But, as people of faith and hope, we should reconsider its definitions of poverty. For example, extreme poverty is defined as earning \$1 a day, a nice figure dreamed up in a boardroom somewhere, but this has little to do with the complexities of real-life oppression or spirit-breaking despair. Such a definition can be helpful for those donating money, but it's hardly a measurement of whether poverty is being made history or not.

I question this measurement because:

***It doesn't take urban realities seriously***

For the first time in human history, most people now live in cities, including 1 billion people in slums (2 billion in slums by 2020, or one in four people). It is far more expensive to live in a city, and income can't be supplemented by growing or raising food; yet cities are where the majority of people are now going for jobs. In our slum (Klong Toey, Bangkok), \$2 a day would rent you a tiny shack and nothing else. Living on \$3 a day in our slum would be extreme poverty by any measure. Never mind what the poor actually need just to survive hunger in a Western city. There are simply too many variables in an increasingly urban world to measure poverty by per-day income.

***It doesn't take poor families seriously***

If a person living by him- or herself earns a dollar a day, it obviously would go further for him or her than it would for the sole breadwinner with a family of eleven. Because there is no social security safety net, and because infant mortality is high, the poor in the developing world often try to create as many children as possible. To fail to take this into account skews the count of those who live in poverty.

***It doesn't take the nature of poverty seriously***

While there have been far better attempts at measuring poverty with all its variables (e.g., the Henderson poverty line), even these become inadequate when the soft data of family background, disability, or age is included. As Christians we need to reread our Bibles and study such words as "oppression," for example. (There are, in fact, fourteen different Hebrew words for oppression.) What such a study reveals is that poverty by nature mars the image of God in people, and makes it impossible to live as God intends. The nature of poverty is as alive on the streets of Melbourne as it is in the slums of the developing world.

Of course, such definitions of poverty require responses to those oppressing and marring God's image, as well as measuring what minimum wage the oppressed need to keep hunger at bay. Making poverty history and stopping the oppression of the poor will require the giving up of wealth, power systems, and lifestyle privileges. Can we really make poverty history by taking these issues no more seriously than finding a neat measurement for the lowest possible income a poor person needs? Will we take poverty so personally that we really can make poverty history?

### About This Series of Eight Bible Studies

Whereas my last two books, *Finding Life* and *Surrender All*, moved from our experiences in UNOH to scriptural reflections, this series of studies will follow a more traditionally evangelical route. Each of the eight chapters in this book reflects on responses to poverty in key biblical texts, with consideration given to their literary contexts. Each chapter begins with an opening reflection to help the reader enter the world of the Bible, and then we engage with some of the specific biblical concerns related to poverty. Only then does this lead to some reflection on personal and community experiences I have had, both here in Klong Toey and in Melbourne. Finally, I provide some suggestions for practical action, as well as questions for group discussion.

This book is aimed particularly at those who have a sneaking suspicion that the Christian faith is more than a cultural ornament, that it is a call to follow Jesus as he stands in solidarity with the poor. I have been asked numerous times to recommend a book accessible to ordinary Christians that would help small groups engage in a Bible study about poverty. My prayer is that this book can be an answer to such a request.

I pray that you will see the biblical writing on the wall and make a response. "Saw" in my opening story might be a figment of my imagination, but the awful truth he represents, and his plea for us to stand with him, is a truth that both billions living

in poverty and the God of the Bible want us to see, hear, and act upon.

I pray also that this book contributes to the undermining of the Western use of the Bible as an ornament for admiration, or even as a mat to stand on. May its intricately woven threads combine again to cause the revolutionary action for which it truly calls. If one more Saw of this world is heard and stood with, then this book will have done its job.

### **How to Get the Most Out of This Book**

This book will change and inspire if you:

- have a small group of people willing to journey together no matter where Jesus leads;
- pray for an openness to the Spirit who inspired all Scripture and inspires us today to see insights and act upon them;
- get to know actual people who are facing poverty and stand with them against their exploitation and injustices;
- agree to read a chapter of the book and the Bible passages before you come together as a group so that you can all work off the same page. You can then, with better insight as a community, reflect on the “group questions.”

With two-thirds of the world living in poverty, the Bible’s message has never been more important. I pray we can each see, hear, and find our responses to the Bible’s call for us to stand with the poor.

Lord, please help us to take poverty as personally as you do!