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KEY EIGHT: THE POOR

Just how important are the poor?

Listen, my beloved brethren: didn't God choose the poor of the world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom which He promised to those who love Him? (Jas. 2:5)

A Father to the fatherless and a judge for widows is God in His holy dwelling place. (Psalm 68:5)

THE BOY WHO WOULD BE ROYALTY

The little ten-year-old boy was named King, but his life was the furthest thing from royal. His heroin-addicted father was usually out on the streets, and his mother was too broken to even hold down a job. The night I met him, King and his mom were wandering around downtown Denver, homeless. He later told me that he remembers that night well—he was scared and angry; scared to be a ten-year-old out on the cruel streets, and angry that once again forces beyond his control had landed him out in the cold.

Desperate, he and his mother knocked on the door of a downtown mission. It was after hours, and the door was locked. Thankfully, the owner was a friend of mine and had given me a key. I just happened to be there praying with a

young man I was discipling named Craig. We had just finished praying very specifically that God would allow us to lead one soul to Christ that night. Then came the *knock, knock, knock*. That one soul was King.

That was actually a couple of decades ago, and as I write this King is participating in a summer mission in Columbia. He recently graduated from the university in our town and is working on a degree from one of the best evangelical seminaries in the U.S. What miracles I have seen God do in and through this young man, who has gone from being a homeless and hopeless inner-city kid to a son of the KING! I wonder what would have happened to him if God had not met him on that cold winter evening?¹

The reason I was downtown that night was because I had just gone through a major paradigm shift. God had totally shaken up my view of Christian ministry. Before my big change in thinking, I assumed that some of God's people were called to the rich, most went to the middle-class, and some very rare birds (like William and Catherine Booth, Amy Carmichael, and George Müller) were called to the poor. However, God had recently opened my eyes to the fact that according to Scripture, every one of his children has a calling to the poor, the oppressed, and the broken. This is a hard pill for a lot of religious folks to swallow, but to miss this is to miss one of the great themes of Scripture.

This is pure and undefiled religion: to visit orphans and widows in their distress. (James 1:27)

¹ Since writing this, King (his real name is actually "King" in another language) has graduated from seminary and is now an assistant pastor with the Christian and Missionary Alliance denomination.

A KEY FROM ISAIAH

As long as I have been walking with Jesus, the subject of historical revival has intrigued me (some friends would say it's more like an obsession). Historical revival refers to those times in history when God's Spirit comes in supernatural power, much like He did in the book of *Acts*:

And when they had prayed, the place where they were gathered was shaken, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak the Word of God with boldness. (Acts 4:31)

Tragically, the subject of historical revival has been much neglected over the last 100 years, and many pastors and theologians today know almost nothing about it. But the fact is that down through history God has visited His people with jaw-dropping power ... when they make a way for Him. To even begin to sample the subject would take another book, but anyone interested in diving in should look up videos, lectures, and books by Oxford Ph.D. James Edwin Orr.² Here is a little sample from a seminary graduate who heard one of these lectures by Orr:

I listened in amazement and rapt attention to story after story of how God poured out His Spirit upon person after person and church after church until an entire nation was consumed. Young men had visions, old evangelists dreamed dreams ... tens of thousands of converts confessed Christ for the first time ... churches were filled to overflowing, sometimes around the clock for 18 months. Judges were issued white gloves because crime

² Audio and video archives, as well as a book list by James Edwin Orr (1912-87), can be found at www.jedwinorr.com

*had become almost non-existent ... It was a time of Divine visitation when, in the description of those who witnessed it, the fire of God fell and consumed everyone and everything in its path.*³

How do God's people make way for a supernatural, sweeping move of God on earth like that? Anyone who looks into the classic writings on historical revival (by Wesley, Whitefield, Edwards, Finney, Goforth, Lloyd-Jones, and others) will find the same themes emphasized over and over—the importance of a true salvation experience, holiness, intercession, and the power of the Holy Spirit. However, a fact that is often overlooked is the important role that the poor have played in these moves of God.

My eyes were finally opened to just how important the poor are by studying the Old Testament prophet Isaiah. In the 58th chapter, God's people are longing for His presence, and yearning for Him to come in power ... but He is ignoring them. They even go without eating for a prolonged period (fast) in an attempt to get His attention, but it doesn't work. Then God speaks, and His response is pretty straightforward. He basically says, *Once you show a real concern for the poor, oppressed, and broken, I will pay attention to you!* This passage hit me like a hammer:

*Loosen the bonds of wickedness,
Undo the bands of the yoke,
And let the oppressed go free
And break every yoke.
Divide your bread with the hungry
And bring the homeless poor into the house;
When you see the naked, cover him;*

³ R. Maurice Smith, *When the Fire Fell: The Great Welsh Revival of 1904 and Its Meaning for Revival Today* (Reno: Preparedness, 1996), 15.

*And don't hide yourself from your own flesh.
Then your light will break out like the dawn,
And your recovery will spring forth quickly;
And your righteousness will go before you;
The glory of the LORD will guard you from behind.
Then you will call in prayer, and the LORD will answer;
You will cry, and He will say, "Here I am." (vv. 6-9)*

This passage pierced me to the heart. I immediately began asking God what He would have me do. He quickly pointed out that in our city, there was an overlooked, neglected stratum of society—the street kids. These hundreds of throw-away teens slept in parks and alleys by night and hung around begging and causing trouble by day. They were dirty, rude, and had absolutely nothing to give me in return. I began taking regular trips to the outdoor mall in the heart of downtown Denver, where these kids often congregated.

To be perfectly honest, when I started I had no idea what I was doing (there was no manual). I felt like a stumbling, bumbling spiritual klutz, but the truth is that I entered into one of the most supernatural seasons of my life. What I discovered was that God was just waiting there among the street kids with His power and presence. Just like He promised in *Isaiah 58*, His glory did come, and when I prayed amazing things happened. It was during this time I met King, who became one of the most important people in my life for the next 20 years.

Since God opened my eyes, I have made an effort to target the poor with God's love. From street kids to prisoners to orphans in Africa, I have found that when we go to the lowest and least, God is there just waiting to blow our minds. Tragically, many Christians today are much like the people

in Isaiah's day, wondering, *God, where are you? Why do you seem so distant?* If we had eyes to see and ears to hear, I think often His response would simply be this—*I am among the poor! Go there, and I will be waiting for you.*

BIBLICAL EVIDENCE

If we are able to lay aside some of our biases (*construals*) and be like a person reading the Bible for the first time, we might conclude that God has a preference for the poor. The truth is that God doesn't love the poor more than the rich. He just finds the poor a whole lot easier to work with. Old Testament prophecies about Jesus specifically note that the poor would be the primary target of His ministry.

The Spirit of the LORD God is on Me because the LORD has anointed Me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent Me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners, to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor and the day of vengeance of our God, to comfort all who mourn. (Isaiah 61:1-2)

Scripture reveals that Jesus was born into a poor family, and He specifically directed His ministry to the poor (*Matthew 11:5*). He said that the poor were particularly favored: *Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of heaven (Luke 6:20)*, and also said that people would have better luck trying to force a massive camel through the eye of a needle than to get a rich person saved (*Matthew 19:24*). There is so much evidence for this apparent bias for the poor in both Testaments that only a blind person could miss it. The following rebuke comes from the epistle of *James*.

Listen, my beloved brethren: didn't God choose the poor of this world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom which He promised to those who love Him? But you have dishonored the poor. Isn't it the rich who oppress you and personally drag you into court? Do they not blaspheme the fair name by which you have been called? (Jas 2:5-7)

Is the problem that God does not love the rich? No, no, no. We must not miss the broader issue. Of course, God loves the rich—*His compassions are over all His works (Psalm 145:9)*. The problem is that the rich, as a rule, are just not all that interested in Him. We could look at it this way—Jesus said that His disciples would be *fishers of men (Matthew 4:19)*. Fishing is just a lot better among the poor—they often want to be caught by God. The rich simply aren't all that interested in God catching them.

I recently attended a conference and heard the testimony of a young minister who had been mentored by one of the great Christians of our generation, David Wilkerson (author of *The Cross and The Switchblade*,⁴ founder of *Teen Challenge*, and pastor of *Times Square Church*). This young man told us of a day that Wilkerson revealed the key to his ministry success. It was no ancient cryptic formula. All Wilkerson said was this—*Go to the poor*. This simple truth has been proven again and again and again down through the ages. God moves among the poor. That's why that great champion for the poor, William Booth, could say,

I am not waiting for a move of God, I am a move of God!

⁴ David Wilkerson, *The Cross and The Switchblade* (New York: Bernard Geis Associates, 1963).

HISTORICAL EVIDENCE

Finding this connection between God's best and brightest saints and the poor is as easy as falling off a log. These powerhouses understood that God moves easily among the have-nots, the throwaways, the poor.

For consider your calling, brethren, that there were not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble; because God has chosen the foolish things of the world to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to shame the things which are strong, and God has chosen the low things of the world and the despised, the things that are not, to bring to nothing the things that are, so that no man may boast before God. (1 Corinthians 1:26-29)

We have mentioned that great man of faith George Müller many times in the pages of this book. What was he most famous for? Caring for 10,000 orphans in his Ashley Downs Homes.

Charles Spurgeon is well-known for being the most famous pastor in the English-speaking world of his day. What is not so well-known about him is that he was also an advocate for London's vulnerable and orphaned children, opening the Stockwell Orphanage, which eventually housed 500 street children.

Charles Finney was one of the greatest instruments of God during what is known as The Second Great Awakening. Many are unaware that he was also a champion for the most impoverished, abused social class of his time—slaves from Africa. Aside from his fiery preaching against slavery, he insisted that his Oberlin College be fully integrated (in the 1800s!) and made it a stop on the Underground Railroad.

The man who almost single handedly brought an end to the slave trade in the British Empire was William Wilberforce. He was a Member of Parliament and an unapologetic Bible-believing born-again Christian. He was part of the Clapham Sect, a group of influential disciples who sought to bring hope and change—through education, labor reform, prison reform, etc.—wherever poverty and oppression were crushing the life out of people.

Time does not permit us to sample even a fraction of the evidence, but we can close our case with the following example. One of the greatest warriors for the gospel and champions in the fight against poverty and oppression in the 1800s was William Booth (1829-1912), founder of The Salvation Army (which used to be much more than used clothing stores and bell ringers). Charles Spurgeon once said that 5,000 additional police officers in London could not curb crime as well as Booth and his army. Booth had the audacity to write a book in which he proposed how to solve England's poverty issues and all the sins and crimes that accompanied it—*In Darkest England and The Way Out*.⁵ The following words commemorate the General's fiery passion for the poor and oppressed:

*While women weep, as they do now, I'll fight
While little children go hungry, as they do now, I'll fight
While men go to prison, in and out, in and out, as they
do now, I'll fight
While there is a drunkard left,
While there is a poor lost girl upon the streets,
While there remains one dark soul*

⁵ William Booth, *In Darkest England and The Way Out* (New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1890).

*without the light of God,
I'll fight—I'll fight to the very end!*⁶

Anyone who would follow Booth's lead can expect the kiss of God on their ministry efforts ... just as God promised in *Isaiah 58*.

*Then your light will break out like the dawn,
And your recovery will spring forth quickly;
And your righteousness will go before you;
The glory of the LORD will guard you from behind.
Then you will call in prayer, and the LORD will answer;
You will cry, and He will say, "Here I am." (vv. 8-9)*

I am so grateful that God showed me the importance of the poor all those years ago and sent me out to the street kids of Denver. If you follow the view of many today that God is perfectly fine with His children avoiding the poor, as if they are someone else's assignment, you may very well miss His power and glory altogether. If you want to see God's power, go to the poor.

⁶ According to Salvation Army tradition, these words were part of William Booth's last speech at Royal Albert's Hall, London, May 19, 1912.

