

# **We Cry Justice: Reading the Bible with The Poor People's Campaign**

**Edited by Liz Theoharis and Foreword by Rev. William Barber II**

Broadleaf Books, Minneapolis, 2021

This book is a collection of 53 essays and reflections by notable pastors, scholars, community organizers, and justice advocates from diverse religious, racial, and cultural backgrounds who share the faith conviction that we cannot talk about the love of God without seriously addressing the issue of social justice, especially for the poor, the vulnerable, and the voiceless in our midst. The unifying theme among all these contributors is their commitment to end injustice, to fight poverty, and to build a world free from economic inequities, systematic racism, militarism, and ecological devastation.

The stated purpose of this book is “to provide strength, hope and power for the 140 million poor and dispossessed people living in poverty” in the U.S. where abundance is available for many others. These reflections have been written by those organizing through the Poor People's Campaign: A National Call for Moral Revival and related grassroots movements that have been championed by clergy like Rev. William Barber and activists seeking to address public policies in the name of social equity and justice. The reflections contained in this book were designed to serve as devotional readings, collective prayer or Bible study, political education, and/or spiritual formation to inspire action on behalf of justice work. Most of the 53 reflections begin with a Biblical passage and include questions for reflection, other suggested biblical texts to read, and a prayer.

These devotional resources are organized into six themes or parts- Jubilee, Struggle and Lament, The Days of Liberation, Learn as We Lead, The Advent of Revolution, and the Birth of a Movement. As Rev. Barber notes in his foreword, the title of the book echoes the words of the ancient biblical prophets who cried out to God on behalf of those who suffered “from injustice, poverty and the pain perpetuated by the forces of empire and deception” and represents the cry for justice being voiced today by those supporting the Poor People's Campaign. The Introduction provides the unifying context for these 53 reflections with the claim that the world, including half of the population in the U.S, is “broken by poverty” with a dominant and immoral narrative that blames the poor for their poverty. Drawing on their Christian biblical convictions that God in Christ calls for the liberation of those held captive by poverty, racism, and a false narrative about religion, each of the contributors seeks to provide “spiritual nourishment” for those who are committed to working for economic justice on behalf of the poor.

The following is a summary of each of the reflections that make up the six parts of this book:  
**Part One- Jubilee** (taken from an Old Testament concept of liberation from debt)

- Many Christians prefer to address poverty with charity while ignoring the Biblical injunctions to forgive debts, to free the enslaved, to pay people fairly, and to lend money without demanding repayment. As leaders of the Poor People's Campaign

discovered in their conversations with members of Congress, government has to be forced to address the sins of poverty.

- While many poor people today are crushed under the burden of medical, educational, and other forms of debt, biblical laws call for the freeing of people from debt and poverty. The vision in Deuteronomy, for example, is to put structural practices and policies in place to lift people out of debt, to stop blaming the poor for their condition, and to restore the common good. This vision in America today would call for laws to provide living wages for all workers, affordable housing, equitable education, less investment in military defense and policing and more redistribution of wealth for the sake of those living in poverty.
- The followers of Jesus must recognize that Jesus himself was a poor man living under the subjugation of the Roman empire. Being a follower of Jesus today means joining a movement on behalf of the poor and letting the poor and marginalized lead an effort to remove the burden of poverty.
- The Exodus story provides a lesson for confronting the powers of the empire with the conviction that there is enough wealth in the land to benefit everyone and to keep people out of poverty if there is a shared moral will to do so. People of faith must challenge the empire's false narrative about the scarcity of resources and embrace the abundance of resources that claims there is enough for everyone.
- The prayer Jesus taught contains a spiritual survival strategy about inclusion in the larger family of God and humanity where everyone needs to have daily bread and we all find release from oppression into liberation.
- The Apostle Paul wrote about the power of establishing a community of care where resources are shared freely and everyone recognizes the equality we share as children of God.
- People of faith must be mindful about standing as the conscience of the state rather than serving as a servant of government. The Book of Deuteronomy issues a vision for the mutual sharing of the harvests and the sins of sacrificing the well-being of people (essential workers in particular) for the sake of the economy.
- The spirit given in the Bible to those living in despair is to reclaim human rights for economic and political justice rather than being silenced, shamed, or divided by the systems that perpetuate dominance and wealth.
- The Book of Leviticus gives a model for equalizing a nation's economy every fifty years (Jubilee) so that that relief is provided for the poor and for the aliens in the land. Essentially, this model calls for the wealthy to pay a fair share in taxes for the economic benefit of the poor and the vulnerable. In U.S. history it has often been the poor, the marginalized, and the oppressed who have led for meaningful changes in the just distribution of resources in the land.
- Any law that disinherits some or marginalizes people is not reflective of God's moral purposes for humanity and must be challenged.
- The Church today must remember that Jesus was a peasant Jew living under the edicts of the Roman empire and he challenged the economic and political powers of his day on

behalf of those who were politically, economically, and religiously oppressed. We must be willing to do the same in our time.

### **Part Two- Struggle and Lament-**

- Referencing the lament in the biblical prophet Amos in ancient Israel, there is a similar enormous economic and political gap between the rich and the poor in the U.S. today. The evils of economic exploitation rely on an unholy alliance between corporate business interests, political structures, and a distorted religious narrative, all of which must be called out.
- The struggle for and the laments about limited and inadequate health care for the poor is part of the cry for justice within the Poor People's Campaign.
- Noting that the prophet Jonah was reluctant to speak truth to power in ancient Israel, this reflection asks us to recognize that most people today make value judgments based on the measures that the powerful devise- stock market performance, the nation's GDP, jobs reports, etc. Today's ecological crisis calls us to shift our perceptions away from domination systems to life-restoring visions.
- With the belief that poverty is not inevitable and low wages violate human worth, this reflection uplifts the impact that organized farmer workers in Florida has had on social transformation for economic justice without waiting on politicians or lawyers to hear their cry.
- Claiming that Jesus was a movement organizer for justice, this reflection notes how churches often remain silent and complicit in the struggles of the poor and dispossessed. We are asked to see that Jesus' crucifixion was the result of unjust government policies to silence the cries of the poor and vulnerable.
- Citing the Apostle Paul's letter to the early church about the unifying symbolism of sharing in the Lord's Supper, this reflection calls for a communion of sharing where all gifts at the Table are seen as an equal gift regardless of one's income or background.
- Crying out against political corruption is part of the movement for justice. Siding with the poor recognizes that as long as money talks people will never be heard. As long as idols to power are only allowed speak, the marginalized can't.
- Using the biblical story of Naboth's vineyard as an example, this reflection notes how the desire of the powerful to dominate and possess their resources is as true today as it was when this story was written.

### **Part Three- The Days of Liberation**

This set of reflections focus attention on the teachings and ministry of Jesus with the following points:

Holy disruptions in the name of justice is a mandate not an option; those living in communities are more attuned to justice issues than experts, authorities, or government officials who seek to maintain law and order; hope for the poor and marginalized often comes from the broken bodies of forgotten workers in America's prosperity; seeking dignity for the dying in the streets is part of justice work; walking off the job in the name of justice and equity is sometimes necessary; rallying a mixed multitude of the oppressed in the economic system is part of the movement;

recognizing that those with institutional power often create false narratives about the poor; women and those with disabilities are often the strongest voices for bringing about social change; justice work asks us to make a way when there seems to be no way.

#### **Part Four- Learn As We Lead**

All but one of the nine reflections in this part of the book provide the economic and spiritual orientation towards addressing justice issues for the poor and the marginalized. Each of these reflections relate current issues facing the poor in the U.S. with situations and events that many of the Biblical books describe in terms of moral and spiritual matters. The overarching perspective and analysis within this section of the book can be summarized as follows:

- Every economic system, past or present, reflects a material manifestation of a moral system. Whenever poverty is allowed to exist, the economic system is failing and we all are vulnerable to its failure.
- Rather than blaming the poor for their economic failures, the biblical challenge is to implore the wealthy to see how the system exploits the working poor and needs to be restructured for the good of everyone.
- Economic justice requires us to pay attention to the persistent problems the poor face in gaining access to clean water, decent housing, good jobs, quality healthcare and education, and the other resources necessary for healthy living.
- God created a world of abundance but humanity sees a world of scarcity so people of faith are called to be good stewards of care for both the earth and one another.
- To build a society and local communities on the basis of justice and equity requires us to hold civic and religious leaders accountable for the use of power in service of these aims.
- Justice work often calls for public indictment of the sins of indifference or abuse of the poor and the lack of clean water or health care that government is expected to provide all citizens.
- Organizing for justice on behalf of the poor involves developing creative tactics of non-violent civil disobedience in support of a vision of the common good.
- Oppressive economic systems are characterized by structures that benefit the wealthy and the powerful while neglecting or abusing the poor, not seen as broken but often sanctioned by political, legal, and religious institutions.

#### **Part Five- The Advent of Revolution**

The reflections in this section of the book issue a call to people of faith based on the belief that there is no neutral position when injustices exist around us. The critique that is offered here is that in a society with lots of hatred and violence too many religious people today are focused on individual moral issues like gun rights, sexual ethics, freedom of speech, etc. God has made us responsible for the conditions of society and cannot be held responsible for our failures to create just conditions and warns against hoarding resources for the benefit of the few. Collective action is needed to repair the breaches in our society so that all needs are met. The spiritual

goal of this movement for justice is to see God present among us where the poor, the homeless, and the hungry can sing about receiving a blessing.

**Part Six- The Birth of a Movement**

The last nine reflections in this book are accounts of how community organizers and faith leaders who have been part of the Poor People's Campaign have addressed justice issues in their various communities following the principles of the movement. These experiences include keeping a health care facility in a local community, dealing with law and order as an immigrant, surviving the stigma of homelessness, helping low-wage workers address hunger issues in their community, the Way of justice that bring about structural changes and eliminate the need for charity and Band-Aids for the poor, that challenge the attempts to displace the poor by removing homeless camps in cities, and by greeting and assisting refugees and asylum seekers even during a pandemic. In many of these experiences these voices for justice claim a connection to Moses leading the oppressed people out of bondage in Egypt with reliance on God.