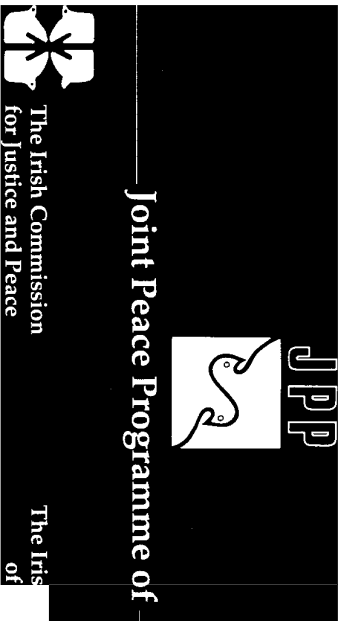


# what the Bible says about POVERTY



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## FOREWORD

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*What the Bible Says About Poverty* was written by **Miriam Tighe**, a theological graduate of St Patrick's College, Maynooth, Co. Kildare and edited by Jerome Connolly and Sr Maura Ward PBVM

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Reflection on the Biblical insights and teaching on the poor and poverty was never so necessary as it is today. The existence of such extremes of wealth and poverty, both material and spiritual, in the world at large and the scandal of deprivation and marginalisation at the centre of the affluence and consumerism of our own societies call for such reflection.

As this study guide makes clear, we cannot understand the Biblical approach to poverty without looking at what both the Old and New Testaments say about wealth and riches.

The Biblical message on riches is itself one of the greatest of stumbling blocks for Christians who find themselves at ease with affluence.

We are very pleased to welcome the fifth title in the series of "What the Bible says about . . .", a series which is being extensively used by adult groups and senior students in post primary schools.

DAVID W. BLEAKLEY

General Secretary, Irish Council of Churches

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# WHAT THE BIBLE SAYS ABOUT POVERTY

## **Paper 1: "The Poor Shall Possess the Land" (Ps 37:11)**

One of the most common themes in the Bible is that of the poor. The Old Testament makes it clear that God has a special concern and a care for those who are oppressed and deprived.

### **YAHWEH' - A GOD WHO LIBERATES**

The foundational event in the history of the People of Israel was God's calling of Moses to lead them out of bondage in Egypt.

*"I have seen the affliction of my people who are in Egypt, and have heard their cry because of their task-masters; I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them out of the hand of the Egyptians. . ."*

(Exodus 3:7-8)

God sent Moses to Pharaoh - who had imposed a condition of slavery on the Israelites - to instruct him to "Let my people go, that they may serve me" (Exodus 8:16). God is seen as the 'Goel' - the liberator (a term used in Israel at the time to describe one who frees the oppressed relative and avenges injustice). God called his people out of bondage into freedom - a full life, symbolised in the gift of land.

*"I have come down to deliver them ... to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey." (Exodus 3:8)*

The Israelites looked on the possession of land in somewhat the same way as we, in Ireland, do - it meant security, status, and identity.

### **LIFE IN THE PROMISED LAND**

God's liberation of the People of Israel came about through the course of human history, and the cooperation of human agents, like Moses, with the plan of God, and culminated in the gift of the Promised Land. The Israelites had previously been a semi-nomadic people

1. Yahweh is the personal name of the God of Israel which not only identified the person but revealed his character as creator. It was first revealed to Moses on Mount Horeb. (Ex. 3)



living in the desert. They now became small independent farmers, each one having title to his own piece of land. Possessing the land in an individual sense took priority over the idea of the land as a gift to the community. The new monarchy meant that the people had to support the king and his court. The rise of a merchant class gave rise to a more stratified society. An economy developed which involved dealings in trade and land. Some families acquired much land and became very rich, while those without land grew poorer. As a result, an imbalance in the economic order came about.

#### **LAWS TO PROTECT THE POOR**

In the sacred books of the Israelites, we find many references to the poor. At the time the existence of poverty, which was widespread, was taken for granted without any expression of discontent. In the Torah (Book of the Law) we see detailed laws designed to prevent the accumulation of wealth and the exploitation of the poor: for example, what remained in the field after the harvest was to be left for those who had nothing:

*"When you reap your harvest in your field, and have forgotten a sheaf in the field, you shall not go back to get it; it shall be for the sojourner, the fatherless, and the widow; that the LORD your God may bless you in all the work of your hands."* (Deut. 24:19)

The field was not to be harvested to the very edge, nor were the gleanings to be gathered - these were for the poor. On every third year, the tithe/levy was not to be taken to the Temple; it was to be used instead to feed the poor of the community. Interest on money lent to those in need was forbidden, and a garment, taken in pledge, was to be returned by sundown. (Exodus 22:24.25)

Every seventh year was declared a 'Sabbath Year' - a time when slaves were freed and debts pardoned. (Deut. 15)

Every 'seventh seventh' year - in practice every fiftieth year - was a Jubilee Year, a year of restoration and reconciliation, in which all land was supposed to be returned to its original owner. This was an ideal probably never adequately realised in practice. However, we can see that in this and other laws the Israelites attempted to promote an ideal of justice, so that the material goods of the community would be more fairly distributed among its members. At the same time it is salutary to note in the Old Testament the gap between what is laid down in the law and what actually happened.

#### **FOR GROUP WORK AND DISCUSSION**

1. Consider the various forms of oppression from which God liberates people in the Old Testament, e.g. slavery, illness, debt, etc.
2. Investigate how just/unjust our society is as regards regulations which affect the poor. For example, what is the rate of social welfare payment for a family of four? (parents unemployed, two children); a widow?; a senior citizen? Are these payments adequate?
3. "It is more important to pray than to become involved in a struggle for justice".
4. The Israelites held that poverty and injustice resulting from economic and social changes required to be rectified for religious reasons. Is this valid for those who believe today?
5. What would be the modern equivalents to the 'laws to protect the poor', for example, the Sabbath year, The Jubilee Year, the prohibition of harvesting to the very edge of the field?
6. The laws of the Covenant show a special concern for the vulnerable members of the community, widows, orphans, the poor and strangers. Do these comprise the vulnerable members in our society to-day?

#### **FOR REFLECTION**

"The longest journey begins with the first step."

## Paper II: The Prophets Read the 'Signs of the Times'

It is from the background of Israel's faith in a God who is on the side of justice, and of the oppressed, that the prophets take up their condemnation of those who exploit the poor.

### WHAT IS A PROPHET?

We generally think of a prophet as one who foretells the future, but that is not what a prophet, in the biblical sense, means. In the Bible, the prophet was one who had an intense experience of the reality of God, and felt compelled to speak out 'in God's name' against unjust situations or immoral actions. She/he had warned of the consequence which would follow for individuals and society at large, if people did not change their ways. Prophets 'read the signs of the times' i.e. they recognised what the outcome would be if people did not follow God's will. However, the message of the prophets also included from time to time an element of hope and comfort.

### THE PROPHETS AND THE POOR

In the prophetic books of the Bible, we see God on the side of the poor and the oppressed, and His condemnation of those who exploited such people, (see Isaiah 3:14f), and of laws which did not encourage a fairer distribution of wealth (Isaiah 10:1-2). In the Book of Jeremiah, to do justice to the poor is equated with knowing God.

*"He judged the cause of the poor and needy ... Is not this to know me? says the Lord."*

(Jer. 22:16)

We cannot know God, as long as we ignore the plight of those who are poor and in need.

In the Book of Job, we find a deep awareness that neglect of those in need is displeasing to God.

*"If I have withheld anything that the poor desired, or have caused the eyes of the widow to fail, or have eaten my morsel alone, and the fatherless has not eaten of it, if I have seen any one perish for lack of clothing, or a poor man without covering ..."*

(Job 31:16-20)

### THE FIGHT AGAINST POVERTY

The message of the prophets is unmistakable: one cannot claim to love

God, while at the same time behaving in an unjust manner, or exploiting the poor. The words of Isaiah are clear concerning what is necessary for our fasting to be sincere - we have to set about breaking unjust fetters ... letting the oppressed go free ... sharing bread with the hungry ... sheltering the homeless (Isaiah 58:6-10). Jeremiah warns that unless the rich people mend their ways, simply coming to the Temple will not save them (Jer. 7:1-11). Amos condemns those who ... "by swindling and tampering with the scales ... can buy up the poor for money, and the needy for a pair of sandals." (Amos 8:5-6).

The prophets acted as the conscience of Israel, calling people back to a proper response to the Covenant made with them by God. They especially challenged the rich and the powerful, reminding them that the judgement of their God, who "... delivers the needy when he calls, the poor and him who has no helper." (Psalm 72:12) was upon them because of their injustice towards these same people. The prophets' call was for a fairer distribution of wealth, and an end to exploitation; it was not simply a condemnation, but a plea for action for justice.

### THE MESSIAH OF THE POOR

In the book of Isaiah, the prophet looked forward to a future time when Israel would get a new Messiah (king) - a monarch who would protect the poor and the vulnerable (cf Isaiah 11:4.6). The Messiah would judge society by its treatment of such people. And with his reign would come an ideal world of justice and peace in which "... The wolf shall dwell with the lamb" (Isaiah 11:6), and the oppressors and the oppressed, the rich and the poor would be reconciled.

### FOR GROUP WORK AND DISCUSSION

1. Rewrite the quotation from Job, above, for your own neighbourhood and for your own country.
2. With the aid of a biblical commentary or dictionary find the meaning of the words *Sedekah* (*Sedagah*) and *Mishpat*.
3. How were the Old Testament prophets treated in their time? (e.g. Isaiah, Jeremiah, Micah). Give the references. Who are the prophets of today? How are they treated?
4. Consider the call of (a) Jeremiah (1:6) and (b) Isaiah (6:7-9). Which would be your response, if you felt you should speak out against injustice?
5. "The faith of the prophets insists that fidelity to the Covenant links obedience to God with reverence and concern for your neighbour".

What do you think the prophets would emphasise today? What practices of the rich and powerful would they denounce?

**FOR REFLECTION**

*"Day by day you transfigure the "No" in me into "Yes". You ask me, not for a few scraps, but for the whole of my existence."*

Br. Roger of Taize.

### Paper III: 'Anawim' - The Poor of God

Both the Old and New Testaments speak a lot about 'the poor', so we need to be clear about exactly what is meant by this term. The Hebrew word 'anawim' was given a special and unique meaning in the books of the Old Testament. There was a certain development in the meaning of the word, a clarification, which took place in three stages:

- (i) early on in the history of the People of Israel, the word referred to those who were poor in material terms, as were most of the people of that time,
- (ii) later, it came to refer to those who had no power, influence or special standing, and who therefore were oppressed and downtrodden by the powerful.

*"So they made the people of Israel serve with rigour, and made their lives bitter with hard service, in mortar and brick, and in all kinds of work in the field; in all their work they made them serve with rigour".*

(Exodus 1:13-14)

Such people could, nevertheless, retain their integrity. So, the term came to be applied

- (iii) to those who, in faith and humility, entrusted themselves to God, confident in His care:

*"Say therefore to the people of Israel, 'I am the LORD, and I will bring you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians, and I will deliver you from their bondage, and I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and with great acts of judgment,'"*

(Exodus 6:6)

We find such 'anawim' in the psalms.

*"This poor man cried, and the Lord heard him, and saved him out of all his trouble."*

(Psalm 34:6)

We can see a humble acceptance of present troubles, along with an expectation that God will deliver his 'poor ones'. Having no power or wealth themselves, they waited for the Lord to manifest his judgement. Such were those who looked forward eagerly to the Messiah who would liberate Israel:

*"But you, O Bethlehem Eph'rathah who are little to be among the clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel, whose origin is from of old, from ancient days. Therefore he shall give them up until the time when she who is in travail has brought forth; then the rest of his brethren shall <sup>return</sup> to the people of Israel."*

*And he shall stand and feed his flock in the strength of the LORD, in the majesty of the name of the LORD his God. And they shall dwell secure, for now he shall be great to the needs of the earth. And this shall be peace, when the Assyrian comes into our land and treads upon our soil, that we will raise against him seven shepherds and eight princes of men;"*  
(Micah 5:2-5)

*"Jesus looked round and said to his disciples, 'How hard it will be for those who have riches to enter the kingdom of God!*

(Mark 10:23,27)

Jesus did not only side with the poor, He issued very strong warnings to the rich. (Mark 23-27). This is very uncomfortable for us and we try to water it down or explain it away. He probably said more about wealth and its dangers than about poverty and its problems.

### **'THE POOR IN SPIRIT'**

Some have said that the Bible, especially the New Testament, is more concerned with 'poverty of spirit' than with material poverty. But perhaps it is a mistake to draw too sharp a distinction between those who are 'poor' and those who are 'poor in spirit'. In the Bible, especially in the Old Testament, we see that those who are poverty-stricken have no one to turn to except God. He is the defender of the poor and the oppressed, and they, in turn, are more open to accepting His care. However, there is no guarantee that those who are poor in material terms will also be 'poor in spirit'. It is rather that wealth, and the power which attaches to it are seen as obstacles to an attitude of openness to God. One cannot love God and one's material possessions with the same intensity (see Luke 16:13). Much of the time, people and countries are wealthy and powerful at the expense of others. Structures exist which enable the rich to get richer, e.g. by having access to education and other facilities. These same structures prevent other people from escaping from the cycle of poverty.<sup>2</sup>

To be 'poor in spirit' in biblical terms, one will either have to have a small share of this world's goods, or display a lack of attachment to material possessions, and, moreover, be open to the intervention of God in one's life, e.g. to have the freedom and space to welcome God:

*"Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also."*

(Luke 12:34)

### **THE OTHER SIDE OF THE COIN**

The converse of material deprivation is the attachment to riches. In the incident of the Rich Young Man (Mark 10:17-27) it is clear that someone who was otherwise good-living was prevented from answering Jesus' invitation to follow Him because of an inability to detach himself from his riches.

<sup>2</sup>To have wealth means also that one has power. It is the misuse of such power which leads to the exploitation of others.

### **GROUP WORK AND DISCUSSION**

1. Distinguish spiritual poverty from material deprivation.
2. Identify biblical figures who exemplify (a) spiritual openness to God, (b) the effects of wealth as a barrier to answering the call of God.
3. Examine those countries which, in global terms, are deemed powerful. What is the source of their power? Can you identify instances where such countries use their power to oppress groups, both within or beyond their borders?
4. "No economic system alone guarantees a fair distribution of wealth. The generation of further wealth in a country does not necessarily mean that the poor will be any better off".
5. Private property has a 'social mortgage'.

### **FOR REFLECTION**

Let us "*seek inner peace in the midst of the struggle for justice*".

Donal Dorr

## Paper IV: The Coming of the Kingdom

In the New Testament, Jesus is presented as God's anointed Son announcing the nearness of the reign of God:

*"In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And when he came up out of the water, immediately he saw the heavens opened and the Spirit descending upon him like a dove; and a voice came from heaven, 'Thou art my beloved Son; with thee I am well pleased.' The Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. And he was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels ministered to him. Now after John was arrested, Jesus came into Galilee preaching the gospel of God."*

(Mark 1:9-14)

He is the definitive prophet pushing further the mission of the Old Testament prophets. He begins his ministry with the words of the prophet Isaiah:

*"The Spirit of the Lord is upon men, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor . . . to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord." (i.e. the definitive year of Jubilee).*

(Luke 4:18-19)

Jesus was pronouncing God's judgement on the society in which he lived. His mission was to liberate people from all that oppressed them; from sin, poverty, bondage. His concern was with making people whole again. Traditionally, many have immediately spiritualised the passage from Luke above but we cannot ignore its literal meaning simply because we prefer a spiritual one.

Jesus made an option for the poor in His time: He lived in a despised village; He was one of the common people; He ate with social outcasts; He became a rambling preacher, with no fixed home:

*"Jesus replied, 'Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head'."*

(Matt. 8:20)

### KINGDOM VALUES

In His life Jesus resisted the temptation of power and prestige.

*"And he fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was hungry. And the tempter came and said to him, 'If you are the Son of*

*God, command the stones to become loaves of bread.' But he answered, 'it is written, - Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God -'"*

(Matt. 4:2-4)

Instead. He followed the will of His Father and in the Lord's Prayer He taught us to pray that it be accomplished here on earth. In proclaiming the Kingdom of God (the New Kingdom) Jesus proclaimed values for His time and ours. He warned us not to 'lay up treasures on earth' (Matt. 6:19)

The new reign of God demands a detachment from material wealth:

*"If you would be perfect, go, sell what you possess and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven."*

(Matt. 19:21)

It also demands a new attitude to power and status - one person is not to oppress another (cf Matt. 18:4); a person's worth is not to be measured by their wealth or social standing (Luke 14:7f); wealth within a community which was living by Kingdom values would be shared among all (Acts 4:32-35); people would be paid according to need (see the story of the eleventh-hour labourer, Matt. 20:1f).

Efforts to bring about a fair share of material goods for all were seen as integral to living by Kingdom values. The Beatitudes (Matt. 5:3-10) are a sort of summary of Kingdom values and reverse the standards of the world - the poor, the meek, the lowly are 'blessed', perhaps because God is to be found, as Jesus was, among the outcasts of respectable society.

Jesus speaks out for those who suffer religious and social discrimination. (Luke 7:36-50, 15:1-2)

The fact that Jesus was to be found among the poor in his own time was considered scandalous by those who had expected a mighty and wealthy Messiah. That we are to find him in the struggle, with the poor, for a more just society is perhaps as amazing.

He denounces the use of religion if it is used to avoid the demands of charity and justice. (Matt. 12:1-15, 23:23)

### THE LAST JUDGEMENT

How do we get access to the Kingdom?

*"Towards the end of his life Jesus offers a vivid picture of the Last judgement (Matt. 25:31-46). All the nations of the world will be*

*assembled and will be divided into those blessed who are welcomed into God's Kingdom or those cursed who are sent to eternal punishment. The blessed are those who fed the hungry, gave drink to the thirsty, welcomed the stranger, clothed the naked, and visited the sick and imprisoned; the cursed are those who neglected these works of mercy and love. Neither the blessed nor the cursed are astounded that they are judged by the Son of Man, nor that judgment is rendered according to works of charity. The shock comes when they find that in neglecting the poor, the outcast, and the oppressed, they are rejecting Jesus himself. Jesus who came as "Emmanuel" (God with us, Matt. 1:23) and who promised to be with his people until the end of the age (Matt. 18:20) is hidden in those most in need; to reject them is to reject God made manifest in history."*

(Economic Justice for All, Pastoral  
Letter of U.S. Catholic Bishops)

### **FOR GROUP WORK AND DISCUSSION**

1. What words of Jesus might be applicable to the way we treat marginalised groups in our society e.g. travelling people, homeless people, people who are poor?
2. "Sometimes Scripture does not charge the rich with direct oppression of the poor. It simply accuses them of failure to share with the needy. But the result is the same." Discuss this quotation in the context of the story of Dives and Lazarus. (Luke 16:19-31)
3. "Jesus' life was directed towards restoring wholeness to each person, healing whatever was preventing them from being truly themselves." Discuss this statement with particular reference to poverty and wealth (e.g. The Rich Young Man, statements on God and Mammon etc.)
4. Is it possible to consider the Biblical view of poverty without equally taking account of the Biblical view of wealth? Do we not otherwise end up saying 'share a little' rather than examining where we stand? Reflect on this in the light of (Luke 12:13-21, 3334, 41-48; 14:28-33; 21:1-4).

### **FOR REFLECTION**

*"Are you going to become 'people of the beatitudes', having no security other than Christ, a people poor, contemplative, creating peace, bearing joy and a liberating festival for mankind, ready even to be persecuted for justice?"*

Br. Roger of Taizé

## **Paper V: The People of God**

Jesus founded a Church - a community given the task of building the Kingdom.

When He called His first disciples He called them to identify with Him, to form a community with Him, to participate with Him in His ministry - a ministry of love, especially of the oppressed, the despised, those incapacitated or in need. They learned, not alone from His words, but also from His example, what it meant to follow Him. He required of those who would be identified with Him that they sell what they had and give to those who did not have sufficient:

*"Jesus said to him, 'If you would be perfect, go, sell what you possess and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me.'"*  
(Matt. 19:21)

*"Give to everyone who begs from you; and of him who takes away your goods do not ask them again."*

(Luke 6:30)

*"Lend, expecting nothing in return".*

(Luke 6:35)

By sharing all they possessed and giving the poor access to resources, His community of disciples began to establish the Kingdom of God on earth. This unselfish, sharing lifestyle changed the hearts and minds of the community. In a community where there is thought for all, relationships are transformed and life takes on new meaning.

We read in the Acts of the Apostles that, having known Jesus and having allowed Him to influence them, the disciples did not abandon their new lifestyle when He left them:

*"Now the company of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one said that any of the things which he possessed was his own, but they had everything in common."*

(Acts 4:32)

Whenever anyone was in need, they shared what they had and if this was not enough they sold their property:

*"There was not a needy person among them, for as many as were possessors of lands or houses sold them ... and distribution was made to each as any had need"*

(Acts 4:34-35)

This way of life built up their community. Life was more exciting and joyful:

*"And day by day attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they partook of food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having favour with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved."*

(Acts 2:46, 47)

Paul in 2 Cor 8 shows how spiritually important he regarded sharing with poor people, long after the initial 'communism' of the Church in Jerusalem had disappeared. It is not possible to dismiss his view in this matter in the way that people sometimes dismiss Acts 2, by saying that it was an experiment in sharing which failed and was not copied in the Churches elsewhere.

The Christian life cannot be solitary. The Church is a community and the task of the Christian is to develop a life in common. The Acts of the Apostles revealed the depth of this life in common and its basis in sharing. This was described in more detail early in the second century by a Christian writer, Aristides:

(The male oriented language of this passage should make us reflect on the struggles which Christians are still undergoing to develop a more inclusive practice of community).

*"They walk in all humility and kindness, and falsehood is not found among them, and they love one another. They despise not the widow, and grieve not the orphan. He that hath distributeth liberally to him that hath not. If they see a stranger, they bring him under their roof, and rejoice over him as if he were their own brother: for they call themselves brethren, not after the flesh, but after the Spirit of God; but when one of their poor passes away from the world, and any of them see him, then he provides for his burial according to his ability; and if they hear that any of their number is imprisoned or oppressed for the name of their Messiah, all of them provide for his needs, and if it is possible that he may be delivered, they deliver him. And if there is among them a man that is poor and needy, and they have not an abundance of necessaries, they fast two or three days that they may supply the needy with their necessary food."*

(Quoted in Sider 'Rich Christians in An Age of Hunger', p.97)

For Christians of every succeeding age, and perhaps most profoundly our own, to be a follower of Jesus demands that we make this radical response of joyous giving in contradiction to greed, materialism and denial of the needs of our neighbour.

How do we, today, listen to the cry of the poor?

### **FOR GROUP WORK AND DISCUSSION**

1. If you had been one of Jesus' first disciples called by Him to form community state what steps would you take to identify with Him in His ministry (a) as an individual (b) as a community. If this were to happen today what steps would you take?
2. Take the steps raised and relate them to your situation as a church member today.
3. What militates against making a radical response to Jesus today?

### **FOR REFLECTION**

*"Will we dare to measure our living standards by the needs of the poor rather than by the lifestyle of our neighbours?"*

Ronald J. Sider

### **FINAL EXERCISE**

Work out a budget for a single person on social welfare payment. Compare and discuss your individual notes to make the figures as realistic as possible. How will you make up a (possible) shortfall?

## READING LIST

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### ADULT BIBLICAL STUDY GUIDES ON JUSTICE AND PEACE TOPICS

#### • WHAT THE BIBLE SAYS ABOUT:

Peace  
Justice, Violence,  
Reconciliation.