

## **16) 2 FOREWORD - Biblical Position on Homelessness. 2014 James McDonald**

### **FOREWORD**

I suppose there are people in our world who have never met a homeless person. But I suspect their number is small. The reality for the vast majority of us is that we are constantly meeting them, though often unaware that we are.

Homelessness meets us in many guises. A man sleeping on a steam grate. A woman pushing a grocery cart with all her worldly possessions down the street. A child sent from a country south of the border whose family feared that drug gangs eager for new recruits would snatch him from them. A refugee family forced to flee their country by a hostile political regime.

A Vietnam veteran whose PTSD made his return to civilian life a living hell for him and his family. A mother and her two children living in their car. A person addicted to alcohol or drugs who has been kicked out of his house. A young girl, who ran away from an abusive home, and was forced into a life of prostitution. A day laborer, who wakes every morning hoping to be chosen to join a work crew so he can send his wages back to his family in another country.

A child soldier grabbed by a rebel army to pick up a gun and join the front lines of the resistance. A group of teenage girls kidnapped by an insurgent militia to serve them as sex slaves. A young girl, sold by her poverty-stricken parents to an adoption agency in the hope that she would have a better life than they could offer. A middle-aged black couple, whose mortgage went under water when the housing bubble burst, who move nomad-like among friends and family as they try desperately to get their lives back in order. An old man, previously the picture of perfect health and vitality, now diminished by a stroke, can no longer live alone and is placed in a long-term care facility or nursing home.

This is just a sampling of the circumstances that push people into a state of homelessness.

Every homeless person has a story. We who are not homeless could try to sort through those stories to decide which of them had enough merit to warrant our sympathy, our help, our time and attention. But such an exercise is fraught with deep moral ambiguity. First, homelessness takes many forms, as Jean Kim helps us recognize and understand. It can be experienced on many levels and in various dimensions of human existence. The idea of homelessness has physical, social, cultural, emotional, and spiritual dimensions to it. The feeling of homelessness can be present even when surrounded by one's own family. The loss of one's cultural reference points and customs can bring about a profound sense of homelessness.

Second, no one is immune from the possibility of becoming homeless at some point in her or his life. Life does not come with a set of guarantees. Even those who are born into wealth, power, and privilege can find themselves in a Job-like state of loss that can even include the lack of a physical place to lay one's head at night in safety and comfort. Mental illness can often be found in families with great wealth. The transfer of wealth from generation to generation is fraught with all kinds of peril for the recipient generation. The powerful also know that their circumstances can change overnight as the result of an election, a coup, an assassination, or a loss of legitimacy. Privilege itself is always under attack by those who do not enjoy its rewards and benefits.

Third, our moral compasses are flawed. We deceive ourselves to believe that we can figure out the worthy and the unworthy among our fellow human beings. Jesus reminds us with the parable of the wheat and the tares (Matthew 13: 24-30) that God is the ultimate judge of our fruitfulness as human beings and as Christians. Our vision is limited; our understanding, imperfect. If we think we know all there is to know, we are mistaken.

And as we allow our reflections on the question of homelessness to go deeper, there comes a point where, if we have any knowledge of the Bible, we begin to hear verses of Scripture ringing in our

ears. “Birds have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.” “How shall we sing the Lord’s song in a foreign land.” “We are like lost sheep that have gone astray.” “A wandering Aramean was our ancestor.”

In this volume, Jean Kim helps us to think in a systematic way through the biblical story, with its various themes, about the frequent uprooting of people from the place they thought of as home. She reminds us powerfully that the Bible is the story of people on a journey, one laced with the recurring loss of a place called “home.” And as she does so, we begin to realize just how much homelessness is a central and critical theme of the biblical story. From God’s banishment of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden, to the stories of Abraham and Sarah, Hagar, Isaac, Jacob and Esau, Rachel and Rebecca, Joseph, the story of Genesis is a reminder of just how tenuous the prospects were for the people of Israel.

Even when we hear the great and powerful story of the Exodus, with its dramatic liberation of the people of Israel from the grip of slavery, we must also be reminded that Israel wandered—homeless—in the wilderness for 40 years before crossing the Jordan and entering the Promised Land.

And the Exodus is only half the story in the Hebrew Scriptures. The great prophets of Israel and Judah arose as the northern and southern kingdoms were forced into exile and the Temple was destroyed. The loss of their land was accompanied by the loss of a place of worship and by the loss of their culture and the freedom to practice their faith openly, without fear of retribution, recriminations, and even the loss of life.

Neither Jesus or Paul or the disciples who followed Jesus had a home. Jesus’ ministry had him crisscrossing the Sea of Galilee, moving between Galilee in the north to Judea in the south. Paul journeyed an estimated 10,000 miles by land and sea as he undertook his mission of spreading the Good News of Jesus Christ north from Jerusalem through Syria and Turkey and into Greece and finally to Rome.

To be homeless is to experience pain and suffering. It assaults our humanity. It calls into question the meaning of life, and in particular the meaning of our own life.

Jean Kim also prompts those of us who are not homeless to consider the meaning of life and of our own lives in the light of the huge reality of homelessness in our world. This volume, with its focus on the Biblical perspectives of homelessness, not only helps us understand how much human existence is a search for home, is a journey to find our home, it also helps us realize how God’s claim upon us is a call for us to reach out to and stand in solidarity with those who are homeless. Jean’s thoroughgoing analysis of the Bible demonstrates how the lives of all people are inextricably bound to one another through God’s love in Jesus Christ.

In the Presbyterian tradition, we say, “the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments are, by the Holy Spirit, the unique and authoritative witness to Jesus Christ in the Church universal, and God’s Word to us.” Jean Kim’s book shows us how powerful that scriptural witness is and, in the process, reveals to us as well what Jesus Christ is calling us to do.

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