BEYOND ANGER AND *pity*

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A compassionate look at hunger, poverty and desperate need in America.

by

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Chapter One

Shattered Dreams, Wounded Families, Children with No Future ...and Hunger

Yes, I was angry! I was ministering in the wild southwestern hinterland near Tibet in a prison. It was primitive and most of the inmates were murderers. I witnessed what happened at a slave market. I watched as a pretty little Chinese girl was sold for 75 cents American money. The buyer was a horse innkeeper. That little girl would live with and care for horses as long as she lived. She would eat scraps and wear rags.

I have never forgotten the scene. These slave girls were never allowed on the streets. I often saw the girl because I slept in the hay loft. While I had a folding cot and covers, these little slave girls only had rags to cover their shivering bodies. Yes, I was angry.

I never dreamt that similar conditions could exist in our great country so blessed with good things and good people. We sing "America,

America..." We speak of this nation as the home of the free and land of the brave. Yes, but it is also the home of the hungry and those in desperate need. It is the home of those without hope, living in despair, unutterable frustration, and fear. "Fear is the constant companion of the resident of the ghetto," writes Bill Wilson, New York inner city pastor.

Bill Wilson should know. He has a God-blessed ministry in the heart of the Bushwick-Bedford Stuyvesant section of Brooklyn, appropriately dubbed "the Sodom and Gomorrah of the Big Apple, a neighborhood not sung about in the Chamber of Commerce TV commercials."

I visited Bill in the ghetto. Feed the Hungry brought a semitrailer load of food to Bill and his workers for distribution in the ghettos. As we walked the streets with him, I was reminded of time spent ministering in Manchuria. There I watched the police pick up the dead off the streets in the early morning hours and throw them on a flatbed truck to be hauled away to unmarked graves. They had died of starvation during the night. Such scenes remain vivid in my memory.

Perhaps you are thinking, "Surely, Dr. Sumrall, that's not what you saw in the New York ghettos?"

Not quite. Not yet. But I saw humanity treated as nothings. I saw pretty little girls whom I know will one day be pulled off the streets into some back alley or vacant building, their bodies will be violated, they will be introduced to drugs, sex, alcohol. I saw poverty. I saw the graffiti on the buildings, fences and cars. And I saw hunger. There are hungry people walking the streets of our great cities, their stomachs growling.

Yes, the ghetto. The ghetto, breeder of crime. The ghetto noted for poverty — high-rise project housing and decrepit welfare hotels, grim substitutes for homes, buildings full of shattered dreams, wounded families and children with no future. The ghetto with its streets and vacant lots littered with garbage and broken bottles where pathetic little children are forced to play. The ghetto, that blight on the American scene that we'd rather not discuss, rather not acknowledge that it exists. Why? Because the moment that we recognize its existence, that moment we are called to accountability.

"For I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink. I was a stranger and you did not invite me in, I needed clothes and you did not look after me" (Matthew 25:42-43 NIV).

America's Shame

In the heart of the New York City ghettos a tall, thin man with straight, dark hair makes his way through the crowded street with its refuse and stench. This is Bill Wilson's parish. "When you walk into one of these tenement houses, the sickening odor of unwashed human flesh, marijuana and urine assaults your senses," he explained to us. "When it's raining or too cold outdoors, the children play in the dark hallways and stairwells of the tenement houses or high-rise project housing. These hallways and stairwells are often littered with garbage and are hangouts for the drug pushers and pimps.

"As a result of the high unemployment rate a good percentage of the working age people spend their days and a good share of the night hanging out on the street corners. Just hanging out drinking beer, wine, doing dope, shooting dice.

When the welfare check runs out, if they receive one, they will turn to stealing, mugging, extortion, prostitution, dealing drugs or whatever they can do to get the money to buy drugs and booze. These people provide the role model for the children.

"This creates many other problems such as lack of motivation for the young people. The young people see no hope for a better tomorrow, so why try."

"This attitude leads to a very high dropout rate from school... Many of the

children cannot read or write. This situation creates an atmosphere of violence stemming from boredom and low value for life."

Ask Bill Wilson if it's so bad why don't people leave, and he'll provide the answer. "Brooklyn sits in the shadow of the world's center of power, wealth and fame in Manhattan. Wall Street, with all of its money, and the theatre district where fame beckons, lay just across the river. Yet, for these people, it might as well be ten thousand miles away. They're locked in. Locked in by fear, despair and lack of role models."

Besides, where would they go? Where would they get the money to take them away, and once they got there, what would they do? "There is little if any hope for a better tomorrow," Bill says. "It's hard to explain when you live in a place like this all your life and have never really had three square meals a day. The main diet for many is potato chips and soda pop. It is difficult to find hope when you share your bed with two, or sometimes three people; or perhaps sleep in shifts because there are not enough beds to go around in an apartment that is unfit for human habitation."

Can you imagine living in that kind of a situation? What does that do to you when you think about it? I know what it does to me. It makes me hurt. It makes me very sad. The spirit in me grieves about this.

And if it grieves us, think how it grieves the Father-heart of God. Jesus spoke of this when He walked here upon the earth. When He saw the hungry and needy, He did something about it. His heart was moved to compassion. He told His followers, **"I tell you the truth, whatever you do for one of the least of these..., you do for me" (paraphrased from Matthew 25:40).**

Pits of Hell in Our Cities

It is not just a New York City problem. All the sprawling urban centers of our land have devolved, degenerated and died morally and spiritually. All hell has broken loose in America's cities.

Our great and affluent nation, because of transgression of God's laws, has created these pits of hell in the ghettos. They are not too far removed from the "holes of Calcutta" I've seen on my world travels.

As I walked the streets of New York City, I saw disease, the ravages of alcohol, the effects of drugs, and festering hatred. I knew that many of the faces of the little children I spoke to were registering pain, that they came from broken homes, their little hearts were broken. The greatest tragedy is the hundreds of thousands of little children born in these asphalt jungles. They learn to survive like rodents in a tropical jungle.

These are immortal souls. This is reality. It is not the stuff of fiction. At birth these little people have beautiful, innocent faces. They learn to smile, but the smile fades all too soon as they become toddlers who experience hunger, sickness, and the effects of having been born into such degradation. As they become older, they find out they are considered the rejects of society. What an awful awakening!

The media has exploited the gang wars of Los Angeles. We've watched on our television screens as the drama unfolded. Most of the citizens of this country found the situation unbelievable. We gasped in awe. What we fail to understand is why this happened. It has its roots in the pitiful plight into which children are born, children without hope who grow up to become desperate, angry young men and women. Many of them have known too long and too often what it means to be hungry and to go without.

These inner city children, citizens of the dark ghetto, create mob groups and carry on their private wars. It is a protest that begs to be heard. Their wars create devastation and bring death.

It took the military in Los Angeles to subdue the young warriors with their automatic rifles and flashing knives of death.

It could have happened in New York on the very streets where I walked with Bill Wilson and some of my people. It could happen in your city or neighborhood.

In one New England town—not a large city — it is estimated that one in fifty children will die before reaching the age of one.

Perhaps you are thinking, "Surely you are mistaken, Dr. Sumrall. That can't be true in America."

Yes, it is true.

One man said, "We see a country where the quality of each child's life is not really cherished." So the people become angry. With many it is a subdued kind of anger. With others it erupts in time.

I, with righteous anger, declare that we are ready to do something to help bring about change.

Chapter Two

What Would Your Children or Grandchildren Want?

One of Bill Wilson's workers in the New York ghetto tells of asking students in his Saturday Sunday School if they could have anything in the world, what would they want. He had a boy and girl come up to the platform. The girl said she wanted some food; the boy said he wanted a house. "I didn't expect those answers," he said. "I expected toys, games, things of that sort."

Because the tenement housing is so old and obsolete, fires are a frequent occurrence. Another of Bill Wilson's workers tells of a fire that took the lives of seven children, from eight months old to thirteen years of age, all but one belonging to the same mother. This was a family who had ridden the church bus every week to the Saturday Sunday School, it was the highlight of their week.

Gang fights, muggings, rape, prostitution in the halls in plain sight of children. Is it any wonder that fear characterizes the lives of those who live in the ghetto? Fear and violence are their daily diet. Is it any wonder the little boy asked for a house?

Jonathan Kozol, award-winning author, in his heartrending book *Rachel and Her Children,* says some of the ghetto children are so poorly nourished, their confidence so damaged, or their muscle tissue so deteriorated, that they have a hard time even standing up.

"Pigpen Living"

He terms their lifestyle as "pigpen living". He tells of visitors to one of the welfare hotels, the Martinique Hotel in New York, who said that it reminded them of a penal institution. Kozol asks: "What crime did the children in the 'pigpen' commit? The truth is, they offend us only in one manner: by existing...They take some of our taxes for their food and concentrated formula, their clothing, and their hurried clinic visits and their miserable shelter. When they sicken as a consequence of the unwholesome housing we provide, they cost a little more; and, if they fail utterly to thrive, they take some money from the public treasury for burial."[1]

He observes that we pity them by putting them in a warehouse, but then we don't mark the buildings so that they attract attention. The plight of the hungry and homeless in this nation is a national disgrace. We have people in this nation who die daily from the effects of malnutrition.

On the Trash Heap in America

Hunger in a bountiful land. It seems utterly impossible. One man may typify a large segment of people in this country who do not understand the why behind this condition of hunger. He said, "There are always jobs to be had. These people are too lazy to work." That statement aroused my Irish ire.

In describing the problem in some of America's towns, one writer told of the hurt encountered among the former breadwinners and their families. Many Americans, including Washington officials, feel that everybody in need is a cheat. To read the report of the Harvard Physician's Task Force on Hunger in America, is to read something that sounds like it's coming from a poor African nation. They tell of watching people at emergency food centers. "It looks like the lines of people you see trying to get food in Poland," observed one staff worker. "On most distribution days at least two hundred people stand in line, old people and parents with young children, to get bread that is one or two days old."[2]

Workers at food distribution centers tell of seeing hungry people line up at three-thirty in the afternoon on winter days for a meal that won't be served until five. They walk two or three miles to get there. "Blacks, whites, adults, children...It's ecumenical suffering we see here."[3]

The woman named Rachel, whom Jonathan Kozol interviewed at length, cried out, "My children, they be treated like chess pieces. Send all of that money off to Africa?...They're not thinking about people starvin' here in the United States. I was thinkin': Get my kids and all the other children here to sing. 'We are the world. We live here too.' How come do you care so much for people you can't see? Ain't we the world? Ain't we a piece of it? We are so close they be afraid to see. Give us a shot at something. We are something! Ain't we something ... But we are something! People in America don't want to see."[4]

These children with their dark and hollowed eyes have the washed-out look of refugees in Third World countries or the victims of Hitler's holocaust. And this is affluent America.

Many of the fathers of these suffering children have lost their jobs as a result of industry taking their work overseas. The problem in America is not

resources but our priorities. The disparity between rich and poor in America has never been greater.

The plight of these people is becoming too common to be dismissed. And how can we, as Christians, ignore the pain of these people?

These American victims of injustice describe their living conditions. They talk about the rats that crawl over their children's legs while they fitfully sleep on filthy mattresses stained with excrement. They speak of summer's intolerable heat and winter's merciless cold. Broken windows, plumbing that doesn't work, stopped-up toilets. Garbage in the halls and on the stairs. No fire escapes. Elevators that don't work, having to walk up fourteen or more flights of stairs. Children falling to their death out of windows without screens. Children dying from lead poisoning (the paint chips in the old hotels). Pregnant women giving birth to deformed babies, babies with low birth weight. The infant mortality rate, for instance, in the Martinique Hotel in New York City is twenty-five per thousand, over twice the national rate and higher even than the rate in New York's housing projects.[5]

Jesus loved the little children. Then they also brought infants to Him that He might touch them; but when His disciples saw it, they rebuked them. But Jesus called them to Him and said, 'Let the little children come to Me, and do not forbid them; for of such is the kingdom of God' (Luke 18:15-16).

Think how the Father-heart of God must grieve over these precious, innocent children who live with their mothers in such pathetic surroundings, children who don't receive the nourishment their little growing bodies and their minds need. These appalling conditions hurt me. What does that do to you?

This is the darker side of America. These are preventable tragedies. There are people in this country who are suffering alone.

Many of the men, the breadwinners for their families, had worked all their lives, owned and cared for homes, generally played by the rules. When companies decided to go elsewhere, many lost their livelihood. With the jobs went medical coverage, life insurance, a way of life. Unemployment benefits ran out. Families once middle-class are now destitute. These men describe themselves as "proud people...We helped build America... suddenly we are out on the trash heap...Why are we being treated like this?"

"The New Poor"

Too many are like the man I talked to — they think people in emergency

food programs, or roaming the streets of our cities and towns, are mainly alcoholics, mentally ill, or too lazy to work.

But they are what is being called "the new poor" of this nation. People who really did help build this country, who contributed to the economy, and even helped support programs that are supposed to help others through hard times.

Researchers have found that at least twenty million Americans may be going hungry at some time each month in this country.[6]

They consider this to be a man-made epidemic in contrast to some places in the world where there is widespread famine.

Silent Undernutrition

It should be understood that hunger is a symptom, not a disease. Malnutrition, on the other hand, is considered a disease that occurs when the body is deprived of vital nutrients over an extended period of time.

That this condition exists in parts of our nation cannot be denied. It probably exists where you live. The real victim of silent undernutrition is the senior citizen, and there are a lot of them in this country.

The picture of hunger in our nation is less dramatic than that of Ethiopia, for instance. But it is no less real. It took me awhile to recognize that.

There are children in our country today who will be born with brains that will not develop normally. The mother, in her pregnant state, did not receive the nourishment needed to pass onto that unborn child what was needed.

Researchers have discovered people in various states of malnutrition around the nation— both adults and children. Hunger is really a barometer of poverty more than anything. It is believed that approximately fifty million Americans fall below the poverty line at some time during a given year, while more than thirty-three million are impoverished over any twelvemonth period. The disparity between rich and poor is greater in the United States than all but one other industrialized nation.[7]

My interest in this problem called "the disease America can cure," stems from my concern about God's hungry people. When God told me to feed His hungry children, I had no idea the problem was so great in my own country. What I have since discovered is that the devastating effects of hunger are not only so terrible for the body, but hunger is destructive to the very fabric of the family.

Hunger in a nation considered as wealthy as ours, and in a nation considered Christian, is inexcusable. It grinds on my conscience, as it should on

the thinking of every decent God fearing person.

It was said of the city of Sodom that it was a proud city, that there was **"fullness of food,"** meaning the people did not go hungry, and there was **"abundance of idleness; neither did she strengthen the hand of the poor and needy"** (see Ezekiel 16:49). God obliterated Sodom and Gomorrah, as well as Israel and Judah, because they neglected to aid the poor and feed the hungry. Our God is a just God. Do we think that we, as a nation, will be spared His righteous judgment?

We need to ask ourselves: Have we been faithful to biblical revelation? If we believe the Bible, then we must conclude that God wants us to share from our abundance. He wants us to help feed the hungry.

Chapter Three
The Desperation of a Mother's Love

Hunger. Can you imagine children in our nation's cities being caught stealing food, handcuffed, and then being put in institutions with serious offenders. Such offenses are not uncommon in the ghettos of our cities. It marks the end of innocence for Rachel's children.

Jonathan Kozol says that with few exceptions, children placed in institutions of this sort mature in time into adult offenders. These are children who miss more school than they attend, most of the time because they are ill; or when they do attend, they arrive on the bus carsick because they haven't had anything to eat.

Kozol tells of mothers who sell their bodies to buy food for their starving children.

"Plenty of children livin' here on nothin' but bread and bologna. Peanut butter. Jelly. Drinkin' water. You buy milk. I bought one gallon yesterday. Got this much left. They drink it fast. Orange juice, they drink it fast. End up drinkin'

Kool Aid," Rachel says.

"Children that are poor are used like cattle. Cattle or horses. They are owned by welfare." Kozol says the Bible by this woman's bed is opened to the Twenty- third Psalm. "I do believe," she says. "God forgive me. I believe He's there. But when He sees us like this, I am wonderin' where is He? I am askin': Where the hell He gone."[8]

She tells of living in one small basement room with no bathroom. "You had to go upstairs two floors to use the toilet. No kitchen. It was fifteen people in five rooms. Sewer kept backing up into the place we slept...There were all my children sleeping in the sewage. So you try to get them out and try to get them something better. But it didn't get no better. I came from one bad place into another...

"If I can't get out of here I'll give them up. I have asked them: 'Do you want to go away?' I love my kids and, if I did that, they would feel betrayed. They love me. They don't want to go. If

I did it, I would only do it to protect them. They'll live anywhere with me. They're innocent. Their minds are clean. They ain't corrupt. They have a

heart. All my kids love people. They love life. If they got a dime, a piece of bread, they'll share it. Letting them panhandle made me cry. I had been to welfare, told the lady that my baby ain't got Pampers, ain't got nothin' left to eat. I got rude and noisy and it's not my style to do that but you learn that patience and politeness get you nowhere."

When Rachel went back out on the street she cried. She was scared. Scared for what her children might do to fill their empty stomachs. She was fighting for her children. She says she would have sold an arm or a part of her body for food money for her starving children. In the end, that particular time when they were so desperate, she went out on the street and sold herself. "...women do not want to sell their bodies. This is something that good women do not want to do... " and so she prostituted herself for twenty dollars to feed her children. "I go and buy the Pampers for the baby and three dollars of bologna and a loaf of bread and everyone is fed."

She points to a cross on the wall. "Bible say that Jesus was God's Son. He died for us to live on this earth. See, I believe—Jesus was innocent. But, when He died, what was it for?" She asks a haunting question: "Did He die in vain?" Crying softly, she sits on a box spring in the filthy one-room apartment in a tangled dirty robe, holding the Bible in her hands.

Wilderness Walkin' American Style

Still holding the Bible she reads: "'Lie down in green pastures...leadeth me beside still waters...restores my soul...I shall not want.'

"All that I want is somethin' that's my own. I got four kids. I need four plates, four glasses, and four spoons. Is that a lot? I know I'm poor. Don't have no bank account, no money, or no job. Don't have no nothin'. No foundation... [but] my children...they're innocent. They're pure..."

She reads some more: "'I shall not fear... ' I fear! A long, long time ago I didn't fear. Didn't fear for nothin'. I said God's protectin' me and would protect my children. Did He do it?

"Yeah. I'm walkin'. I am walkin' in the wilderness..."[9]Kozol says the room is like a chilled cathedral.

It is difficult for us to comprehend all of this.

Kozol says, "Unnatural as such behavior may appear, mothers faced with bare refrigerators [or no refrigerators at all] and with hungry children often are

compelled to contemplate this option [of giving up their children, or of selling their bodies for money to buy food]."[10] When we walked through the ghettos of New York City, I was struck by the aimlessness of the milling men and youth. The enormous social problem of unemployment hit me full in the face. The ugliness of this is reflected in the despair on the faces of the men, their wives, mothers and innocent children.

It is reflected in their lifestyles and their actions on the streets. Our cameraman recorded an angry black man waving a pistol running down the street. He'd already shot one woman standing in the food line where we were distributing food. The bullet grazed her shoulder. She ran toward the church, clutching her shoulder. The street people didn't seem to concerned. It was like it was an everyday occurrence for them. It scared us silly.

We were told to be careful what we photographed. Some buildings we were warned were off limits to be photographed.

This was not middle-America, nice traditional family living. My heart went out to the mothers who stood on the sidelines as I ministered to the little children seated on bright blue tarpaulins on the hot cement. I told them Jesus loved them. Their serious little faces peered up at me so intently. Mothers held babies on their hips as they leaned against the fence. What were they thinking, I wondered. I prayed that this small token of our love and concern would do something for them. I wanted to give them hope.

Chapter Four
The Prayers of the Hungry and Needy

These desperate mothers tell of their prayers. "I figure: Go to church. Pray [to] God. Ask Him to help. I go on my knees. I ask Him from my heart: 'Jesus Christ, come help me, please. Why do you leave me here?'" Jonathan Kozol says some of these mothers pray a great deal more than other people he has met.

The pressures of life have drawn in so tightly, and the stifling of hope has left them feeling as if they are actually choking, that they are suffocating, that they cannot breathe. It is an actual physical sensation of being trapped, compacted, and concealed—objects of society's avoidance or contempt—which creates a panic that they can't get enough air into their lives and their lungs.

And so they pray. They cry out to God while drowning in their squalor. The number of homeless families in this country has increased more than 500 percent in recent years.[11] It is conservatively estimated that there are 500,000 homeless children in America. If all of them were gathered in one city, they would represent a larger population than that of Atlanta, Denver, or St. Louis. Because they are scattered in a thousand cities, they are easily unseen. And because so many die in infancy or lose the strength to struggle and prevail in early years, some will never live to tell their stories.[12] The issue is destitution in America.

Laura, a young woman who lost her baby son through a series of tragic events after his release from the hospital where he'd undergone surgery (a shunt put into the baby's skull), spoke of his death as being "something precious that I lost." They'd been forced out into the street with no place to live. Laura said, "Let me tell you, when he died, that man upstairs: I cursed Him out. I said: 'Why did you have to take my baby?' Then, you know, I said: 'It's over.' So I prayed and asked for His forgiveness. Then I say: 'He did it for a reason...'"[13]

Homelessness and the resulting suffering are not an act of God. This is man's inhumanity to man. This is one of the results of sin, selfishness and greed. It is done by people like ourselves. It is done to innocent babies such as Benjamin, Laura's baby who died.

The breakdown of the American family is a poverty phenomenon among other things. The problems this creates are pathetically cruel. I read one statistic

that said of the 859,000 people on welfare in New York City in 1981, 519,000 were children, 498,000 of them living in female-headed families.

It is acknowledged that a fair amount of this is related to outright sinful living, the unmarried mother phenomenon. In many of the subcultures of poverty, it is considered "macho" for a young man to get his girlfriend pregnant. Many of these young girls are victims; others court pregnancy as a way of finding love in the loveless world created by their environment. In the process, they sentence themselves and their children to a life of poverty.

The plight of the female poor is to occupy a disadvantaged position within an already disadvantaged occupational structure for women in a society that doesn't respond too kindly to unemployed, unskilled, uneducated women.

The roads out of poverty with its resultant hunger and other problems are roads difficult or impossible to find.

We have enough food to end hunger in our land. We have enough wealth to end hunger and suffering. Compassionate platitudes and handwringing on our part won't solve the problem. Rhetoric about how loving and good we are won't get the job done. Let us feed God's hungry people. Isaiah the prophet urged that God's people lose the chains of injustice, and undo the heavy burdens, that we do what we can to help free the oppressed and break enslaving yokes. We have been told by the prophet to share our food with the hungry, and pour out that with which we sustain our own life for the hungry, thus satisfying the needs of the afflicted (see Isaiah 58:6-10).

God hasn't changed. His thundering again and again through the prophets was not meant just for that specific time in biblical history. Mistreatment of the poor and neglect of the disadvantaged is an outrage to a just God. What does God want?

He wants us to relate to the hungry, the poor and oppressed. He wants us to imitate God's mercy. Jesus redefined the meaning of God's love for us in His own self-sacrificing giving. Christ's death secured for us our access to God's forgiveness and grace. And it should have shown us the meaning of love.

By this we know love, because He laid down His life for us. And we also ought to lay down our lives for the brethren. But whoever has this world's goods, and sees his brother in need, and shuts up his heart from him, how does the love of God abide in him?

My little children, let us not love in word or in tongue, but in deed and in truth (I John 3:16-18).

Chapter Five

Welfare Mothers Do Not Run Laps or Do Aerobics to Keep Trim

Government officials and the uninformed use jargon and speak of bringing the welfare system down to leanness. "'Cutting away the fat' is the familiar term for fiscal measures which make life a little less endurable for those who are already the least favored, and render their children, who have already far too little fat upon their bodies, still more likely to remain in skeletal condition."[14]

We have equated "leanness" with something desirable as seen in those who work hard to keep their bodies in shape. But welfare mothers do not run laps or do aerobics to keep trim.

Kozol wonders how these mothers can pray. Isn't it an exercise in futility? "You have to pray. You have no choice," Elizabeth responds. "You pray to God because He can't say no. You are hungry. You can't pay the rent. You cannot buy the shoes your child needs. You cannot understand the rules [the welfare system and government red tape imposes]...You need to pray!

Help me, God! Help me to see the day! Help me to see the light! Help me to go over. Don't forget me. Please do not do that!"

Elizabeth says poor people see God like a father. "He do not disown you. He accepts you...God is the only one who don't despise. He got to be there...you cannot live with nothing to believe."

She closes her eyes and says: "'I was hungry and you gave me not to eat. I was thirsty and you gave me not to drink. I was naked and you did not clothe me. I was a stranger. You did not take me in.'

"Jonathan, you write this down. When a child is allowed to die because he has no place to live, what is it? It is murder. Write it down."

"Why do people pray? I'm going to tell you for a natural fact. We talkin' about me. If you're not born rich and you are my complexion, you know that it's going to be hard and it ain't going to get better. If you have a dream, then you have something you can hold. You may be low. You may be beaten down. But

you say, 'Maybe, someday — So this dream don't let you die."[15]

A Kingdom of Futility: Immersion in Irrationality

Those who have seen the conditions under which the homeless and poor are forced to exist, speak of it as living in "a kingdom of futility". They speak of the "immersion in irrationality" into which these people are sucked. They point, for example, to families forced to accept welfare hotel housing where they are told they must not cook within their rooms.

They are assigned a "restaurant allowance" which they are told would be unwise to use in restaurants. Besides, how far would the meager allowance go for a typical family! So they realize that the restaurant allowance is intended to buy groceries they cannot cook in kitchens that don't exist, so they must try to cook on hot plates they are not officially permitted to possess. If they are discovered cooking in their rooms, they are at the mercy of the hotel guard who has discovered their "offense." Frustration. Indeed, a kingdom of futility. Irrational options.

Parents are told they must demonstrate their capability for self- reliance by doing all they can to find permanent housing. Failing to do this will cause their case to be closed. Their room will be given to someone else. Children are often taken from their custody. So they clip advertisements from newspapers they cannot afford to buy, make telephone calls they cannot afford to make, travel on public transportation for miles with fare they cannot afford, fill out forms, look for apartments, and return at some point to the case worker with evidence they have been searching. Where in most cities can you find a place to live for $270 a month (which is the rent allowance)?

Where do you get the first and last month's deposit?

They are told they must enroll for public housing. What they are not told is that there is a waiting list that will take the city 18 years to fill.

Dante's Hell in America

It's called modernized internment. America's displaced persons. Assigned case numbers, forced to march from one place to another with referral slips that are little more than slips of paper. An educated thirty-six-year-old Vietnam veteran who suffered a job loss, then the loss of his wife and children, says, "If someone had asked me a year ago who are the homeless, I would not have known what to reply," he says. "Now I know the answer. They are people like myself."

This man had held a steady job for seven years in inventory data

processing. He had always considered himself a well- educated stable man. When welfare regulations hit him, he began to feel that he had been "reduced to trash."

"A year ago I never thought that somebody like me would end up in a shelter. Nothing you've ever undergone prepares you. You walk into the place—the smell of sweat and urine hits you like a wall. Unwashed bodies and the look of absolute despair on many, many faces there would make you think you were in Dante's HelL.I'm not a lazy man," he adds sorrowfully.[16]

"I'm a number," the man states. He explains about the numbers: a court docket number when evicted; a welfare number, bed number in the shelter; a room number. "I have to keep repeating to myself: I have a name. I was born. I have a mother and a father. I am not a number."[17]

And always there is the desperate longing and need for food. Hunger stalks the land.

Faith and Deeds

As I read about the homeless, the jobless, and the hungry in America, I am made aware of the meaning of James' words in chapter two of the book by his name. James wrote:

What does it profit, my brethren, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can faith save him?

If a brother or sister is naked and destitute of daily food, and one of you says to them, "Depart in peace, be warmed and filled," but you do not give them the things which are needed for the body, what does it profit? Thus also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead (James 2: 14-17).

The implications of this for you and me are obvious. Neglect of the poor and those in need is one of the oft-repeated biblical signs of disobedience. Matthew 25 speaks plainly about the judgment of those Gentiles who do not obey Jesus' words about feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, and showing concern and giving care to those needing it. Jesus said, **"Assuredly, I say to you, inasmuch as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it unto Me. And these will go away into everlasting punishment, but the righteous into eternal life"**

(v. 45 emphasis mine).

Indeed, faith without works is dead How alive are you?

Chapter Six
Two Million Homeless

"Our parish is made up of numerous old hotels that have been turned into emergency housing centers," Bill Wilson, our pastor contact for our Feed-the-Hungry giving in the ghetto of Manhattan, explains. "It is estimated that over 7,000 children are living in these hotels that the New York welfare officials have called S.R.O. — Single Room Occupancy. These occupants are here as a result of evictions, homes being condemned or being destroyed by fire. It is not uncommon to find a family of five or six living in one room."[18]

It is estimated that presently there are 2 million homeless people living in this country, but according to a recent study funded by the Congress, by the year 2003, nationwide there will be nearly 10 million homeless Americans.

Kozol calls particular attention to the welfare hotels that Bill Wilson called his "parish". In his book, *Rachel and Her Children,* Kozol shows the startling amount of money spent by the city (meaning taxpayers) to the owners of these indescribably wretched places. Can you imagine taxpayers handing over an average of $1,800 a month for these single rooms through government-produced welfare checks.

Bill Wilson says, "Overcrowding and the subsequent filth of these kitchenless rooms is maddening enough for adults, but borders on cruelty for the children. Summer and winter, year in and year out, the children are cooped up in these decaying old buildings, more like prisoners than residents...It is an absolutely hostile environment for children."

It is to these "hotels" that Bill Wilson and his Saturday Sunday School workers go every week, picking up the children and bussing them to Metro and Glad Tidings Church where they are loved, nurtured, fed, and taught Bible stories.

The Rejected Waste of Our Society

The situation in New York is not an isolated case. Such pockets of desperation exist in every metropolitan area. They may also exist in your community. One of our "King's Court" directors tells of walking into tenement

houses in Dallas where you can hear the rats clawing in the walls.

The living conditions, disease and filth are indescribable.

An editor friend tells of walking the streets of San Francisco for his morning exercise ritual and seeing the homeless and hungry wherever he goes.

Jesus said the poor will always be among us. (John 12:8). Neither the early church nor Jesus Himself insisted on absolute economic equality. If anyone came close to suggesting this, it was the apostle Paul who said: **"I do not mean that others should be eased and you burdened; but by an equality, that now at this time your abundance may supply their lack, that their abundance also may supply your lack—that there may be equality"** (2 Corinthians 8:13-14).

Paul then went on to point to the biblical example of the gathering of manna in the Exodus account: **"As it is written, 'He who gathered much had nothing left over, and he who gathered little had no lack.'"** (vs. 15). Paul's premise, it appears, is that just as God insisted on equal portions of manna for the people in the wilderness sojourn, so now the Corinthian Christians should follow suit. We don't buy into that kind of thinking too readily today. That is not the norm among Christians in this age.

Early historians and Christian philosophers speak of the humility, kindness and love the early Christians had for one another. They say that falsehood was not to be found among them.

"They despise not the widows, 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 it were their own brother: for they call themselves brethren, not after the flesh, but after the Spirit and in God; but when one of their poor passes away from this 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."[20]

That doesn't require a great deal of commentary. We have not been transformed in our economic relationships. What Paul suggested and what much of the early church practiced, was blessed by God. Our failure to discern the reality of the suffering among God's people worldwide, as well as here at home, shows itself in our disregard for biblical principles and hinders our witness to them of the saving power of Christ.

Gandhi said: "In my judgment the Christian faith does not lend itself to much preaching or talking. It is best propagated by living it and applying it...When will you Christians really crown [Jesus Christ] as the Prince of Peace and proclaim him through your deeds as the champion of the poor and the oppressed?"

The early church didn't abolish ownership of private property. What we do see in the book of Acts is such an overflow of love for one's brothers and sisters that many freely abandoned legitimate claims to private possessions (Acts 4:32). The tense of the Greek words in the Acts accounts of the early church shows repeated action over an extended period of time by these early Christians whereby they regularly brought proceeds of their goods and earnings to aid the needy. (See also Acts 2:45.)

Today, most Christians ignore the example of the Jerusalem church.[21]

Jesus would have us do for the poor, hungry and needy what needs to be done, and when we do, He said, **"I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these... , you did for me... [and] whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me"** (Matthew 25:40, 45 NIV). This is a message that needs repeating. I intend to speak it wherever I go. It is a message that is consuming me like a fire. I have promised the Lord that I will do all I can to motivate others to feed His hungry people around the world.

Give Them Something to Eat

Jesus supplied natural food. It is very remarkable that the first miracle He performed on this earth was related to the feeding of people. It is also very remarkable that the last miracle Jesus performed was the amazing catch of fish at the Sea of Galilee (after His resurrection).

During the ministry of Christ, He miraculously multiplied fish at both ends of the Sea of Galilee. During His earthly ministry He revealed the deep feelings He had for the physical needs of those around Him. Possibly we do not think often enough of the tender care that Jesus had for physical needs. I feel sure Jesus wants us to understand today that He is vitally concerned about the total person—spirit, soul and body.

A Crucial Moment in World History

At the 1988 World Food Conference in Des Moines, Iowa, Archbishop Renato Martino told conference participants that human suffering and death caused by hunger will emerge as the greatest catastrophe of our times, surpassing the horror and magnitude of all other tragedies marking the 20th century. This

religious leader said it is a "moral imperative of justice" that groups and individuals be concerned not only with their own well-being, but also with the interests of others.

This is being called to the attention of the world by many leaders. New York Congressman Ted Weiss has pointed out that "We have a more efficient system in the U.S. to deal with stray pets than we have for homeless human beings."[22]

Jonathan Kozol calls to the reader's attention what is happening to the children, society's most innocent victims.

He says: "Knowingly or not, we are creating a diseased, distorted, under-educated and malnourished generation of small children who, without dramatic intervention on a scale for which the nation seems entirely unprepared, will grow into the certainty of unemployable adulthood. The dropout rate for the poorest children of New York is 70 percent. For homeless kids the rate will be much higher. None of these children will qualify for jobs available in 1989 or 1995. But every one who is a female over twelve is qualified already to become a mother. Many only thirteen years of age in places like the Martinique [in New York City] are pregnant now. Hundreds more will have delivered children, braindamaged or not [the results of malnutrition and no pre-natal care before their sixteenth year of life]. When their hour of labor comes, many will not even understand the medical permission forms they sign before they are sent into anesthesia. What, then, will happen to their children?"[23]

That is a question you and I need to face.

Chapter Seven
America's Living Nightmare

Where do these homeless people sleep and live when they cannot get into welfare housing or they are evicted?

The answer lies in what you see in your own community or city. You don't have to look very far. Train stations, subway tunnels, hot-air grates on city streets, cardboard boxes in parks, phone booths, bus and park benches, under bridges, alongside freeways. Some become very ingenious. A twenty-year-old Florida man who ran away from a juvenile detention home in Michigan when he was nine, found he was small enough to slip his body through the deposit slot of a Good-Will box. Getting in was easy, getting out was more difficult. He lived that way for five years until he was fourteen and was too big to fit into the slot.

And would you believe thousands of Americans live in dumpsters behind restaurants, hotels and grocery stores? Kozol describes the experience of a woman being awakened in the middle of a winter's night by several late-arriving garbage trucks. She nearly drowned beneath two tons of rotting vegetables and fruit.

He tells also of a thirty-four-year-old man in Chicago who found sanctuary in a broken trash compactor. "This offered perhaps the ultimate concealment," says Kozol, "and the rotting food which generated heat may have protected him against the freezing weather of Chicago." But one night, not knowing that the trash compactor had been fixed in his absence, he fell asleep never to awaken. When the engine was turned on, he was compressed into a cube of refuse.

A man named Lazarus hit the nail on the head when he said, "We are the rejected waste of society."

What Has Happened to America's Conscience?

All this calls up our pity when we read about it. What else will it do?

I have barely scratched the surface of what needs to be told. Our anger is aroused when we learn that the shelter of homeless families and individuals is left to the profit-seeking portion of the private sector that owns and manages these ruinous hotels and shelters. It seems reprehensible to think that people are profiting from the suffering of those who are in such dire circumstances caused,

for the most part, by conditions over which they have little or no control. But such is the case.

What has happened to America's conscience? Why has even the most solid documentation failed to bring about corrective action? A *Newsweek* columnist called these street people 'America's living nightmare." Why is there such a hardened attitude in public policy toward the plight of these people? "When we speak the unspeakable, think the unthinkable, and permit the impermissible, we are not far from a final darkness."[24]

I cannot speak for the conscience of America's social welfare policy makers, nor for the Congress, state agencies, the President, the landlords of these hellholes, or anyone who sanctions mistreatment of the destitute. But I can and must address myself to the responsibility of those of us who call ourselves Christians. We have been called to bring light into the darkness of this world.

Are we doing it? A man takes shelter from the wind that sweeps Fifth Avenue in New York by sleeping beneath the outstretched arms of Jesus on the bronze doors of St. Patrick's Cathedral. He is told to move.

I wonder if that is not a picture of what the Church in America is doing.

Perhaps you are thinking that you, as an individual, can't make a difference. Never underestimate the power of one. One plus God is a majority.

God isn't asking us to surrender the enjoyments we have in our lives for perpetual feelings of guilt. Not at all. That's not the kind of God He is. Jesus Himself loved life. He wasn't an ascetic like His cousin John. He only told one man, as far as we know, to sell everything he had and give to the poor. The Bible tells us that Jesus, looking at the young man who approached him, loved him, and said to him: **"One thing you lack: Go your way, sell whatever you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, take up the cross and follow me"** (Mark 10: 21).

The point is the young man loved what he had more than he loved God. He trusted in his possessions more than he trusted God. He was a "good" person, but his goodness wasn't good enough (see preceding verses in that account). The young man walked away grieved, "for he had great possessions" (v. 22). He was a slave to what he possessed.

Riches corrupt anyone who is in the least corruptible. You've probably read or heard something similar. I am from the old school of thought—waste of any kind is not tolerated well by me. I do not even like my office staff to waste paper. I am not comfortable with the extravagant lifestyle of some of the people I've met, and some of the homes I've been in in my lifetime of traveling. This is not

to say there are not godly rich folk, but it is to recognize there are perils in wealth misused.

My heart has been greatly saddened in recent years by the scandals that have rocked the Christian world and the misuse of money entrusted to Christian leaders. Riches can be evil in the hands of those who become ensnared by them.

My point in writing this book has been to increase awareness among God's people of the plight of the hungry, homeless and hurting in our own country. I can no longer be uninvolved. My wife and I do not live in affluence, but we live in comfort. So much of the world does not.

Recently, a well-known Christian magazine sent two men to interview us. I think they expected to find us living extravagantly. They were plainly surprised and told us so. We showed them where we lived and the cars we drive. (Our sons and their families are a part of this ministry.) We live like ordinary folk. We have nothing to hide.

We will all be held accountable by God. We must live with more sensitivity to the needs of God's children throughout the world. In the process we will find ourselves with a heightened awareness and a clean conscience.

Chapter Eight
Beyond Anger and Pity

Beyond our anger and pity for the hungry, the homeless and the needy, there are things we can do. When God spoke to me in Jerusalem in the fall of 1987, He made it plain that the LeSEA Global End-Time Joseph Program to Feed the Hungry would be different from other programs in that we were to have a three-pronged approach:

1. We will feed God's people who are suffering from hunger and who face death by starvation.
2. We will work through the local church internationally in a pastor-to-pastor program.
3. We will hold pastors' seminars to strengthen and encourage local pastors; and we will hold evangelistic crusades with prayer for the sick and oppressed.

It is estimated that a billion humans throughout the world go to bed every night hungry. Yet there is abundance in the world.

Dying of hunger in a world of plenty places a responsibility upon us all.

God told me in Jerusalem, "I am very concerned about My body dying of starvation in certain areas of the world. Christians get up in the morning and say, 'Our Father which art in heaven, hallowed be Thy name. Give us this day our daily bread...' and they do not get anything. Then they ask, 'God, where are You?' "

In response to the cry of His hurting people, God has asked us to supply millions of tons of food around the world to the body of Christ. That is why we have established the End-Time Joseph Program to Feed the Hungry.

God used the biblical Joseph in a mighty way to save his people at a time when their nation was stricken with a famine. In response to the King's dream, God gave Joseph the interpretation, telling him to tell the King to gather food during the good years, and to store up grain and guard it, so that the food could become a reserve for the land so that the people would not perish (see Genesis 41:35-36).

Such is the challenge and the responsibility that faces Christians today. As God spoke to my heart in Jerusalem, He said many pastors and spiritual lay men

and lay women would be raised up around the world to support this Feed-the-Hungry program.

So once again, I repeat, beyond this anger that rouses up within us when we hear about the profiteering greedy individuals with hearts of stone who are raking in the money from the welfare system in cities like New York, for instance, and beyond the pity we feel for these innocent victims of merciless men and a system that isn't paying enough attention to the wrongs that are being perpetuated...beyond all that, there are some things we can do.

1. Recognize that the responsibility for caring for those who are needy—the hungry, the homeless, and those who are so desperate — is not something that should be left to the government only. Federally subsidized housing and help is not the only answer. The church has, for the most part, failed in her God-given mandate to care for those who need help. Private-sector funding has provided a measure of relief in some places, but it is not nearly enough. Individually and as a church, we must accept our responsibility and do more.

The church in much of the world today is affluent, indifferent, selfish, prideful, arrogant, overfed and unconcerned.

2. Look at statistics and face the facts. Read some of the books and literature that are available. Become informed. Allow God to move upon your heart and show you ways whereby you and your church can respond with sensitivity in your own community — your Jerusalem (see Luke 24:47), and then to reach out with compassion as God enlarges your vision and your resources.

We are developing a pilot program for **"Children Feeding Children,"** Saturday Super Church, which can be used in cities and communities across the country. Information is being gathered from people like Bill Wilson who have been doing this and experiencing the blessing of God on their efforts. Write and ask to be kept informed.

Teach your children and grandchildren the grace of sacrificial giving. **"Children Feeding Children"** can become more than a catchy slogan.

3. Dare to become involved. If you are a pastor reading this, be the shepherd God tells you to be. The prophet Ezekiel prophesied against shepherds who only take care of themselves:

"Woe to the [spiritual] shepherds...who feed themselves! Should not the shepherds feed the sheep? You eat the fat, you clothe yourselves with the wool, you kill the fatlings; but you do not feed the sheep. "The diseased and weak you have not strengthened, the sick you have not healed, the hurt and

crippled you have not bandaged...Therefore, you [spiritual] shepherds, hear the word of the Lord..." (Ezekiel 34:2-4a, 7 AMP).

If you are a lay person reading this, become a King's Court or Queen's Court Director or participant. (Write us and ask for The End-Time Joseph Program to Feed the Hungry packet.)

4. Fast and pray. **"Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen: to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke? Is it not to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter..."** (Read Isaiah 58:611).

5. Ask God to show you creative ways whereby you can reach out to others to alleviate their hunger and pain. Share your insights and the thoughts God gives you with others and with us.

We Are Living in an "Age of Hunger"

The children and their mothers cry out for help. The dark caverns of the ghettos echo back a mockery of hunger, pain, tears and even death.

We cannot run away and hide. Christians cannot hide. I can't hide from world hunger and world tears. Can you?

God told Moses, **"I have indeed seen the misery of my people...I have heard them crying out...and I am concerned about their suffering. So I have come down to rescue them..."** (Exodus 3:7-8a NIV)

Then Moses was told, **"So now, go. I am sending you..."** (vs. 10a NIV).

Moses didn't feel equal to the task set before him. But he did respond and the rest is history.

God promised to be with him, and God is good at keeping His promises.

God isn't asking the impossible from us when He asks us to help feed the world's hungry. He has told us that caring for others is an indispensable part of sharing in His suffering, of being His servants in this world.

God has no interest in laying guilt trips on people, but the God of the hungry, the poor and the needy, wants us to feel their hunger, to experience their fears and anxiety. Christian compassion has all but been suffocated by the lifestyles we have become so accustomed to living. We know so little of sharing in Jesus' suffering. It is so easy to become snared by materialism.

But we are living in an "Age of Hunger," and the summons is loyalty to Jesus. He is beckoning us to follow in His footsteps. And Jesus fed the hungry.

Command those who are rich in this present world not to be arrogant nor to put their hope in wealth, which is so uncertain, but to put their hope in God, who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment.

Command them to do good, to be rich in good deeds, and to be generous and willing to share (1 Timothy 6:17 NIV).

Endnotes

1 **Jonathan Kozol,** *Rachel and Her Children* **(New York: Crown Publishers, Inc. 1988), p. 91.**

2 **Dr. J. Larry Brown & H. F. Pizer,** *Living Hungry in America* **(New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1987), p. 9.**

3 **Ibid., p. 10**

4 **Ibid., p. 63**

5 **As quoted in the book** *Rachel and Her Children,* **p. 30. Infant mortality is 9.4 per 1,000 live births for white Americans, 10.8 per 1,000 for the nation as a whole, 16.6 per 1,000 in New York's low-income projects, 24.9 per 1,000 in New York's welfare hotels.**

6 **Living Hungry in America, p. 161.**

7 **Ibid., p. 200.**

8 **Kozol, Ibid., pp. 68, 69**

9 **Ibid., pp. 69-71 excerpts.**

10 **Ibid., p. 49**

11 **Ibid., p. 86.**

12 **Ibid., p. 3.**

13 **Ibid., p. 127, 128.**

14 **Ibid., p. 138.**

15 **Ibid., p. 144**

16 **Ibid., p. 172**

17 **Ibid., p. 174**

18 **Bill Wilson's figure seems low when other statistics say that half of the homeless children in New York, for instance, are six years old and under.**

19 **The King's Court is the men's outreach arm of our End- Time Joseph Program to Feed the Hungry. Men and women around the world are encouraged to become a part of what God is wanting to do in the world today to put an end to hunger and its resultant suffering and loss of life. Women have a program called The Queen's Court.**

20 **As quoted by Ron Sider in his book** *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger* **(Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1984), pp. 9697.**

21 **Ronald J. Sider has an excellent discussion of this in his book** *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger* **published by InterVarsity Press, Chapter 4.**

22 **Kozol, Ibid., p. 90.**

23 **Ibid., p. 90.**

24 **Ibid., p. 184**

BEYOND **ANGER** AND *Pity*



Pockets of desperate need exist in every city in our nation. Our failure to discern the reality of the suffering among God's people worldwide, as well as here at home, shows itself in our disregard for biblical principles and hinders our witness. During His earthly ministry, Jesus revealed the deep feelings He had for the physical needs of those around Him. He said, "I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these..., you did for me...[and] whatever you did *not* do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me" (Matthew 25:40, 45).

I have promised the Lord that I will do *all* I can to motivate others to feed His hungry people. Beyond our anger and pity for the hungry, the homeless and the needy, there are things we can do.

Dr. Lester Sumrall is a prominent voice in the Christian world, having ministered for over fifty-five years in more than 100 nations of the world. He established the End-Time Joseph Program to Feed the Hungry, an emergency Christian relief program geared to relieve suffering and hunger within the Body of Christ worldwide. Dr. Sumrall is the founder of LeSEA

Broadcasting, which owns and operates Christian television stations, a local radio station, and an international shortwave radio station, with the special purpose of bringing millions of souls to heaven.