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AWAITING

A SAVIOR

THE GOSPEL, THE NEW CREATION

AND THE END OF POVERTY

Aaron Armstrong



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*The Gospel, the New Creation and the
End of Poverty*

Aaron Armstrong

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To Ajax, whose love for the poor and love for
the Lord is both humbling and inspiring.
– Aaron Armstrong

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“Aaron Armstrong’s heart to minister to the least of these is on full display in this concise book about the opportunities and limitations of ministry to the poor. Challenging our own idolatry, our own motivations, and our own actions, *Awaiting a Savior* reorients our mercy ministry around the gospel, seeking to show how a life of love is the overflow of a grace-filled heart.”

Trevin Wax, editor of *TGM* (Theology, Gospel, Mission) and author of *Counterfeit Gospels* and *Holy Subversion*

“Aaron Armstrong has not only *thought hard* about alleviating poverty, he’s also *worked hard* at it. Consequently, this biblical theology of poverty is a mixture of pessimism, optimism, and realism. He’s rightly pessimistic about humanistic solutions, he’s brightly optimistic about God’s ultimate solution, and he’s practically realistic about the best and most the Church can do in this present age.”

Dr. David P. Murray, professor, Puritan Reformed Theological Seminary; president of HeadHeartHand Media

“Finally, a book that tackles the subject of poverty in a biblical, balanced, thought-provoking, and convicting manner! In his book, Aaron manages to walk the fine line of calling for a biblical solution to poverty without causing the reader to feel overly burdened with unnecessary, unbiblical guilt. He also shows how biblical generosity is ultimately rooted in the generosity of God himself. Too many times I’ve seen the call for generosity fueled by legalistic guilt. Aaron instead points the reader to the glories of the gospel as the motivation for giving. Read this book. Discuss it with your friends. Be generous!”

Stephen Altrogge, author of *The Greener Grass Conspiracy*; pastor; blogger at TheBlazingCenter.com

“While many books on eradicating poverty focus solely on statistics and need as motivating tactics, *Awaiting a Savior* moves beyond the stats, the great need, and excellently emphasizes

addressing the root of poverty and what motivates us to address the issue. The redemptive story of God highlighted in this book provides the grace-based motivation in the gospel necessary to provide the most holistic and sustainable response to the great need around us. Few books so astutely combine a comprehensive theological look at poverty with empowering, inspirational motivation.”

Logan Gentry, Pastor of Community & Justice, Apostles Church, NYC

“In his book, *Awaiting a Savior*, Aaron Armstrong addresses the issue of poverty in a clear and theologically practical way. Armstrong does a good job emphasizing sin’s damaging effects on economics and pointing to the one true hope of the world, Jesus. This book is a valuable resource to help Christians think biblically when it comes to finances, economics, resources, and poverty.”

Pastor Bubba Jennings, Mars Hill Church, Seattle, WA

“In our highly activist, solutions-oriented generation, we easily think that we ourselves are the solution to the world’s social ills, particularly poverty. But the problem of poverty is the problem of sin and its solution lies in the heart of the gospel. Aaron Armstrong brilliantly brings us back to Genesis and delivers a theologically robust vision for obeying the Scriptures’ command to help the poor while living in anxious anticipation of Christ’s coming Kingdom.”

Daniel Darling, Senior Pastor of Gages Lake Bible Church; author, *iFaith: Connecting to God in the 21st Century*

“We all care about poverty, but caring isn’t enough. We need to move beyond feelings and good intentions. In *Awaiting a Savior*, Aaron Armstrong helps us think theologically about poverty, because we’ll never know how to respond until we understand both the issue and our response from a biblical perspective. He then shows us how we can respond out of grace, not guilt. This book is a clear and insightful look at an issue that’s on all of our minds.”

Darryl Dash, pastor, blogger at DashHouse.com

“Aaron Armstrong has succeeded in helping us see the solution to poverty in a biblical light. He understands that poverty itself is no more a root problem than those things said to be born out of it, such as economic oppression or social injustice. Thus, he calls us back to Scripture to see that the real root problem is sin and that the answer is found in nothing less than the enduring good news of Jesus Christ. With so much confusion in the Church and para-church ministries regarding a Christian response to poverty and so much interest in social justice presently, this volume is an urgent read for any Christian who has a genuine interest in helping the poor.”

N. D. Muscutt, Pastor, Newcastle Fellowship Baptist Church

“Awaiting a Savior is a compelling and captivating book that looks at global poverty through the wide-angle lens of the gospel. Aaron Armstrong’s book will likely change the way you look at the problem of poverty in our world and how you think about addressing it. But what I love most about *Awaiting a Savior* is that it empowers us to care for the poor by making much of Jesus.”

Dan Cruver, author of *Reclaiming Adoption*, director of Together for Adoption

“Aaron Armstrong’s book, *Awaiting A Savior*, brings a fresh approach to the world-wide problem of poverty. It is gospel-driven, Jesus-centered, and gets at the real but often overlooked cause of poverty. This is not another book that takes you on a guilt trip because we’re ‘not doing enough.’ It is not filled with lists of all the things we should do to eliminate poverty, but rather is a solid theological treatment of what poverty really stems from and how to see it within a biblical framework. Aaron has provided thought provoking questions throughout that will get your brain churning.”

Pastor Dave Kraft, Mars Hill Church, Orange County, CA;
author of *Leaders Who Last*

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Introduction

THE REAL ISSUE

“What’s the real issue?”

The question on the billboard had done its job. “I wonder what that’s about?” I asked my wife. “Not sure,” she replied. “Maybe you should go to the website.” And later that day I sat down at the computer to learn what, exactly, was the real issue.

Apparently, it’s poverty.

I read that, despite living in one of the richest cities in one of the wealthiest countries in the world, almost one in five children here in London, Ontario is born into poverty. Seventeen percent of citizens can’t afford to buy groceries or keep a roof over their heads.¹ I began to imagine: could it be that one of every five families we know doesn’t have enough food or is in danger of becoming homeless?

“What am I supposed to do about this?” I wondered as I read on. Here’s what the site recommended:

1. Give your time and resources to local aid groups, like food banks and local initiatives that provide basic needs such as food, baby items, storage space, and clothing.

2. Advocate for change in government policies.
3. Engage in discussion online about solutions and what you think is or isn't working in current policies.²

Give, talk to the government, and engage with others over these issues. Do these responses get at the core of the issue?

This kind of clear, simple, action-oriented advice is found in much of the talk about poverty. Actions like these can have value, but you don't have to look too hard to see that especially on a global scale, people are already giving a lot of money and talking a great deal about poverty. Experts like Jeffrey Sachs and Paul Collier are writing about the causes of and solutions to poverty. Hundreds—more likely, *thousands*—of charitable organizations large and small are raising awareness regarding the poor and seeking to bring them relief. Even rock star/activist Bono has gotten into the mix. His organization, ONE, hopes to get the First World to cancel Third World debt and provide additional relief dollars to impoverished nations.³

Of course, most people who focus on poverty see it as wrapped up in larger questions of injustice and inequality. Yet the proposed solutions remain the same: resource distribution, awareness, and effort. Do we just need more of all three? If we can distribute resources differently, put the right government and private-sector policies in place, and shift some of our personal and social priorities, shall all be well?

This perspective, however well-intentioned, is fundamentally flawed. *We should* have a heart of generosity toward the poor, and there is certainly a place for giving.

We can and should commend the work of many of the organizations seeking to serve and support the poor. As Christians, we should be compassionate toward the poor and pray for them. And it is always worth evaluating whether government policies are helping or hurting.

But, especially as Christians, we need to be very clear about something. Resources and awareness and policies are important, but poverty is not fundamentally *about* any of these things.

The root cause of poverty is sin.

Don't conclude too quickly that you know precisely what I mean by this statement, or that you understand exactly what applications should follow from it. This apparently simple sentence is just the beginning of a complicated conversation.

The Problem at the Heart of Poverty

Everywhere you look, there is evil—lying, murder, theft, adultery, abuse, apathy, and all the rest. You cannot turn on the TV or radio or go online without being confronted by sin. And sin is not simply something we do—it's part of who we are. You and I, along with every human who has ever lived, are born sinners.⁴ Before we take our first breath, we are ruled by sin. We love it and are naturally its slaves.

Yet the pervasiveness and nature of sin is missing completely from most of today's discussion surrounding poverty. The idea that we can wipe out injustice and inequality for good overlooks the fundamental problem of our sinful nature. Therefore, the basic premise of this

book is that *our good faith efforts to address legitimate questions of poverty and injustice must never lose sight of the fact that poverty will persist as long as the heart of man is ruled by sin.*

Christians can often overlook this as well as unbelievers can, which leads to even more confusion. Some of us hold to a theology declaring that it is our mandate as the Church to bring about the end of poverty. Others, holding a different theology, seem content to do nothing at all and wait for Christ to return. Neither approach is acceptable.

I wrote this book because I am among those who believe that the Bible's teaching on poverty is clear and carries clear implications for us as Christians. We need to be able to think about and respond to these issues biblically. I hope to show that the best way to help the poor is to minister to them as the Church, in both word and deed, to the glory of God.

This is no academic exercise for me. As an employee of a Christian charity that works with the Church to care for the poor, I have seen real poverty firsthand—and I have seen the rich hope that the gospel brings to those who live in it. As a husband and father, I am eager to teach my family how we can respond faithfully and effectively to the needs of the poor—economic needs, spiritual needs, human needs.

I have hope that there is a biblical and effective way for the Church to serve the poor. I want you to have that hope as well. As Christians, we don't have the option to ignore true poverty, and we must not waste our time

and resources on approaches that ignore the pervasive presence of sin in every heart.

When I look at poverty, I do not feel defeated. When I see the needs of the world, I am not disheartened. When I weigh the clear responsibilities we have to care for the poor,³ I am not overwhelmed. I know there are things we can do to serve the poor, that God will give us grace to do them, and that he will take pleasure in our efforts—where we succeed and even where we fail.

I also know that hope for truly resolving the injustices of this world is not to be found in utopian visions of global partnership, or pouring massive amounts of money into relief efforts, or even in providing food, education, and opportunities to people who don't have them. While we are responsible for pursuing biblical solutions to poverty, our only hope for an *ultimate* solution is in the return of Christ, when *he* will put an end once and for all to sin, suffering, and death, and bring about the new creation. That's the hope I want to share with you in this book.

Reflect, Discuss, Apply

1. Before you picked up this book, what was your perspective on poverty in general and how Christians should respond? Write a paragraph summarizing your thoughts. If you're in a group study, share what you've written with your group.
2. Have you ever been or are you currently involved

- with any organization serving the poor in your community? What would you say is the goal of that organization?
3. Have you traveled to the developing world as part of a short-term missions group? If so, what have you learned from those experiences?
 4. The author writes that the real issue behind poverty lies within the heart of man. Do you agree? Explain your answer.
 5. Read Psalm 51:1-6. What does David say about man's state?
 6. What is at least one thing you hope to take away from this study?

One

POVERTY IS SPIRITUAL

The Persistence of Sin

Some of the best moments in parenthood happen when you see that your efforts to teach your children to become civilized human beings are actually paying off. One day they can do almost nothing on their own. But in a few short years they are dressing themselves, practicing the alphabet, praying, coloring, and expressing distinct preferences about breakfast foods. Without instruction and example, children would learn almost none of this. They must be taught.

But there's one thing no parent ever has to teach: how to lie. It seems to be a natural talent (if you can call it that) — no instruction necessary, no assembly required. Lies, gossip, slander, mockery, and showing off come so easily to us that they seem almost instinctual, as if we were made to do them. Yet, as we examine the Scriptures, we learn something very different. These things that seem so natural are not the result of how we were made. They're the result of a curse.

How the Curse Came

How *were* we created in the beginning? Where did this curse come from? And what does it mean for our study of the roots of poverty? To answer these questions, we need to start, as the Scriptures do—at the beginning.

The opening of the book of Genesis describes the creation of the universe. Over the course of six days, God literally spoke the world into existence—light and darkness, day and night, land and sea, plant and animals, the sun and moon and stars—everything.⁶ As each new creation emerged, God “saw that it was good.”⁷ There was no flaw, fault, or error. All was exactly as God desired it to be. Then, God spoke again, creating the first humans. But when he speaks this time, he says something different. He doesn’t say, “I will make man according to *their* kinds,” as he did with plants and with animals. He says, “Let us make man in *our* image, after *our* likeness.”⁸

Put simply, God made humans to be fundamentally different than the rest of creation. We were given “dominion . . . over all the earth” and everything in it. We were called to “fill the earth and subdue it.”⁹ Humans were intended to be more than just another part of the created order. No other creature was given this command to govern and steward the earth. Man and woman were intended to represent God in the place he had made for them.

With the creation of the first man and woman, God saw “everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good.”¹⁰ The divine work of creation was now complete. Genesis chapter two leaves us with a picture of the “very good”-ness of creation as the man and the woman enjoy

a perfect relationship with one another, with the rest of creation, and most importantly with their Creator.¹¹ *It was a world in which poverty could not exist.* A world free from any material, relational, or spiritual need. It's the world we still long for today.

In this perfect world, there was only one rule, found in Genesis 2:16-17: "You may surely eat of every tree of the garden, but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die." We don't know how many days, months, or years passed, but for some time Adam and Eve obeyed that single command. Then the serpent came, a cunning creature that was no mere reptile. He was apparently the devil himself,¹² come with one agenda: to tempt God's image-bearers to reject their Creator.

What makes the serpent so cunning is that he doesn't grandstand. His technique for tempting Adam and Eve to disobey God is subtle and understated. He starts by simply slithering up to the woman and starting a conversation.

"Did God actually say, 'You shall not eat of *any* tree in the garden'?" the serpent asks.¹³ At first glance, it almost sounds like the serpent is merely asking for clarification. But something else is going on. God had made a ruling about *one single tree*. By suggesting that God's prohibition extended to *every* tree, the serpent misrepresents God. He also positions Eve to begin to think differently about God and his commands. That's the way temptation is: subtle, multi-layered, and easy to miss.

The serpent's temptation leads Eve to fix her eyes on what she *doesn't* have—freedom to eat of the fruit of

this one tree—rather than on all that God has graciously provided,¹⁴ and this discontentment gives the serpent his opportunity to strike. You can almost hear the twisted delight in his voice as he says, “You will not surely die. For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.”¹⁵

With Eve already contemplating disobedience, the serpent gives her a final incentive to sin: *she will be like God*. If she does the one thing she is forbidden from doing (eating from that particular tree) she will have the one thing she does not now possess: a supposed equality with God—the God who suddenly seems so unreasonable and oppressive.

All it took was a single question—a conversation starter—to move Eve along the serpent’s train of thought. She went from devoted follower and faithful friend of God to not merely doubting God’s goodness, but wanting to be like him.

So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate, and she also gave some to her husband who was with her, and he ate. Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked.¹⁶

This is how sin entered the world. God’s image bearers chose to believe the lie that they could be “like God”—equal to him, and therefore not subject to his commands.

It’s the same lie we believe today, appearing in

countless different manifestations and touching every aspect of our lives. We want to wrestle control of our destinies away from God. Being the only creatures called to exercise dominion on God's behalf isn't quite enough for us. We don't want to settle for being God's representatives, we want to be more "like God" than that—we want control. (As we will discuss later, this desire to force outcomes and control destinies has come to dominate much of the antipoverty movement.)

The result of Adam and Eve's disobedience was just as God had predicted: "you shall surely die." Death came, suddenly and swiftly, even if physical death was not immediate. Spiritually, the man and the woman died in their trespasses and sins, becoming children of wrath, enslaved to sin.¹⁷ So our inheritance from our first parents became not a life of blessing and joyful fellowship with God, but death and damnation: "sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned," wrote the apostle Paul.¹⁸

Sin destroyed Adam and Eve's relationship with God and devastated their relationship with each other and the rest of creation. They became ashamed of their nakedness and hid themselves, first from one another and then from God when they heard him in the garden. Adam and Eve became different people, fallen sinners, given to evasion and blameshifting and making excuses for their sinful behavior.¹⁹ They not only flagrantly disobeyed God, but they then went on a mission to deny responsibility for their disobedience.

God responded with a curse.

The Curse, Spoken and Manifested

First God cursed the serpent, then Eve, then Adam. All these curses are still in effect, still obvious. For our purposes, we will consider only the curses spoken over Eve and Adam.

The curse upon Eve and relationships. God's curse upon Eve brought great pain in childbearing and a fractured relationship with her husband. "Your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you," we're told.²⁰ This part of Eve's curse seems to be about control—a constant jockeying for position that can devastate male-female relationships. Without suggesting that women take exclusive responsibility for relational difficulties, we can certainly see this curse manifested today.

The curse upon Adam and economics. Whereas the curse upon Eve is primarily about interpersonal relationships, Adam's curse spreads outward to all economic life. The ground is cursed because of him, so meeting material needs will be difficult. Fruitfulness will require toil. At every turn, forces from outside will oppose our efforts at material advancement. Prosperity will always be challenging and elusive. The very materials and processes we work with to try to create prosperity will resist us. And it will continue like this until the day we die.²¹

Today, as it has been since the fall of Adam and Eve, all our efforts to provide and prosper meet with opposition. From subsistence farmers in forgotten corners of the globe to CEOs in corner offices, all progress requires toil. The

curse on labor is still in effect, and this has extensive implications for how we understand and respond to poverty.

It's also obvious that the excuse-making and blame-shifting we see Adam demonstrating in the Garden continued after the fall, as men frequently fail to take responsibility for their actions or the actions of those under their leadership:

- We see it with Aaron when, after he fashioned a golden calf for the grumbling people of Israel, said to Moses, “I don’t know how this calf got here—I just took the gold, threw it in the fire and out came a calf.”²²
- We see it in Eli who failed to correct his sons when they had abused their positions as priests of the people of God.²³
- We see it with David’s messed-up family and his refusal to discipline his children, which led to the rape of his daughter, one son’s murder, and another son’s attempted coup d’état.²⁴
- We even see it today as popular entertainment, which always echoes the culture, features so many sitcoms built around bumbling, bungling, irresponsible men.

Poverty, a Result of the Curse

Adam and Eve’s disobedience resulted not in the fulfillment of their desire to be like God but in a curse. Sin backfired, as it always does. The curse is at work continually even today, in more ways than anyone can count, and in every life—no exceptions.

If not for the curse—God’s just response to Adam and Eve’s fall into sin—and therefore the fact that we face constant opposition as we aim to be productive, we might not even call it “working.” Life would be very different—in ways that we may not be able to imagine well until we are with Christ in the new heavens and new earth.

Everything about Adam and Eve’s fall makes economic prosperity difficult and elusive. In fact, *the fall has made poverty the default setting*, an ever-present gravitational pull intent on dragging us down. This is true not only because it is now harder to produce material wealth but also because the fall triggered an ongoing cascade of relational challenges characterized by blame-shifting and excuses about our sin, as well as an ongoing desire in each of us to play God over one another. Hardly a recipe for success.

The Difference between Root and Branch

People who study poverty today have a hard job.

First, you must define what poverty is. How poor is poor? There are many levels of poverty, and poverty in North America can look very different, for example, from poverty in West Africa. Then you must consider a huge number of factors to try to figure out what mix of things is really “causing” poverty.

But if you are one of these researchers, you may have an even bigger obstacle before you. If you don’t understand what happened in the Garden of Eden, you are missing the single biggest factor that contributes to poverty. You are blind to the fundamental, underlying-

ing cause. You can see lots of branches, but you don't realize they all connect to a root. You can recognize many symptoms, but you end up imagining that the symptoms are the disease itself.

Material poverty. For some researchers, poverty is all about what people have or don't have. The focus is on whether a particular society is experiencing economic growth, or whether people have shoes, proper food and shelter, or access to basic medical care.

External factors. Other researchers may include additional factors in their analysis. Is government corruption damaging the economy and preventing the fair distribution of existing resources? Is the country landlocked without any good trade routes, seaports, or airports? Are cycles of civil war and political instability preventing an economy from gaining traction?

It's easy to look at something as ambiguous and complex as poverty and try to define it exclusively in terms of external factors or the lack of material possessions. But when we do that, we are looking only at the effects of sin and the curse, not sin *itself*.

All of this goes back to the curse. Soil that produces few edible plants is a result of the curse. War and corruption and cheating go back to the curse because they are driven by people who, being sinners, want desperately to become rich, powerful, and autonomous — like God.

All poverty has its roots in the curse. Everything else is just branches. Poverty, therefore, is fundamentally a spiritual issue, not a material issue or a matter of policies and systems and government. This is why the solutions

that are frequently offered to “solve the poverty problem,” even if well-intentioned, can seem insufficient.

Some suggest, for example, that we could end poverty by redistributing wealth: those with more material prosperity would sacrifice in order to bless those who have less. This could be accomplished, we are told, by eliminating the debts of the poorest countries, increasing the aid that richer countries give to poorer ones,²⁵ and seeking to stimulate the economies of weaker countries. The idea is that this would create a “new normal” for poor countries and give them a fresh start economically.

Others say the solution must come from within the poor nation itself. Poverty can only end if the society trapped in it *wants* to change, although we can encourage them to help themselves through aid, security, trade, and better laws and charters.²⁶

These ideas are not all bad. Some even follow biblical principles of compassion and generosity. It is certainly possible to do some good by using these approaches. But nowhere in these analyses is the root problem of sin taken into account.

If it is true, as I have suggested, that the Bible teaches that poverty is the result of sin and the curse, these solutions are treating symptoms, not cause; they are pruning branches, not digging up the root. The ultimate issue behind poverty is sin.

Having said that, however, we need to go even deeper. We need to introduce the core idea of the rest of this book.

In the final analysis, sin is *the* poverty from which we *all* suffer.

The Ultimate Poverty

Let me be clear. I am not saying that material poverty comes when God punishes particular individuals or particular people for particular sins. At times, God may choose to discipline people through material means, but a “punishment” view of poverty is not necessary to account for the poverty we see. We live in a fallen world, a world living under a curse as the direct result of Adam and Eve’s sin, and that in itself is more than enough to account for the world’s poverty.

The first man and woman were created in the image and likeness of God and declared “very good” in his eyes. They were then given the task of serving as God’s representatives within creation. For a time, they lived in perfect harmony with God, each other, and the world around them. But when they chose to sin, everything changed. Their original identity was lost. Their relationships with God, with each other, and with the world were broken, devastated, ruined.

This is poverty in its most true and ultimate sense. Incomparable riches—an unbroken relationship with God and a harmonious relationship with the rest of creation—have been squandered. Everything about our existence has been impoverished as a result of sin.

A fallen world inhabited exclusively by sinners: that is the essence of poverty. Sin, and the effects of sin throughout creation, is the Poverty from which all other poverty flows.

As we will see in the next chapter, this reality should have profound implications for how we understand, think about, and respond to material poverty.

Reflect, Discuss, Apply

1. Read Genesis 1:1-2:3. Why does God look at his work and declare it good? Why is this important?
2. What was the only thing God said was “not good”?
3. What was mankind’s role within creation? What does it mean to “subdue the earth and have dominion”?
4. Read Genesis 3:1-19. What impact did the Fall have on Adam and Eve’s relationship with God, each other, and the world?
5. How does that affect your understanding of poverty?