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The journey of serving those in need is, in essence, the journey of following Christ. And God has created each person uniquely for the journey, giving each spiritual gifts, skills, and passions with which to serve him, to be the change we want to see in the world. This week we'll explore our individual gifts and be reminded that it is God's grace that sustains us along the way.

Hope Lives: A Journey of Restoration
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Foreword

"There will always be poor people in the land." I've thought about this Scripture from Deuteronomy 15:11 for years.

The verse haunted me throughout my years growing up among the poor on the desolate plains of the Ivory Coast in West Africa. It taunted me each time I witnessed the death of a childhood friend from malnutrition, diarrhea, or another preventable disease that cut life short in that area of the world. "Why," I asked, "does poverty exist? Why, on earth, are we doomed to see it always?"

Even with that biblical edict, I became a crusader against poverty. For more than 30 years now, I've dedicated my life to fighting poverty and its effects upon its smallest victims: children. Emboldened by my childhood experiences and fueled by my desire to protect these little ones, I have committed my life to combating the mind-set of the poor that often says, "You don't matter. Just give up."

It breaks my heart to hear good people lament that they also want to do something about poverty but don't know where to begin. They honestly don't know what to do or whom to trust! But as I recall how I became an advocate, a "doer" in the fight against poverty, I realize there's another reason many Christians may not get involved with the poor: *If you don't know the poor, it's hard to serve them.*

As president of Compassion International, I lead an army of child advocates who live to serve the poor. And everything I need to know to guide this global ministry I learned around the campfires of my poverty-stricken village in West Africa.

The poor taught me about love, joy, and generosity. Living among them and serving them taught me about patience and relationships. Working beside them taught me about courage, strength, and incredible faith.



Hope Lives challenges us as Christians to focus on becoming what God is calling us to be. This book demands that you interrupt your busy life and embark on a spiritual journey to know the poor through God's eyes, through his words. Through this journey, you will understand why God values the poor and why he repeatedly asks us to serve them. It is my greatest desire that this book will help you develop a deeper relationship with God and, in doing so, ignite a natural response and a passion to serve the poor as God directs.

"There will always be poor people in the land." Yes, the poor will always be with us. Which gives us all ample opportunities to serve and, as a result, grow closer to God.

—Dr. Wess Stafford
President, Compassion International

Introduction

*"He has showed you, O man, what is good.
And what does the Lord require of you?
To act justly and to love mercy
and to walk humbly with your God."*

— MICAH 6:8

Each morning before I start my day, I turn on my laptop, sit on my couch, and browse through the news. The stories I read make it hard to believe in hope. Stories of staggering poverty, stories of overwhelming numbers of AIDS victims, stories of communities gutted and raw from war, stories of children exploited and hungry and discarded. I close the laptop and sit. Overwhelmed and paralyzed. Overwhelmed by the enormity of the problems. Paralyzed by not knowing what to do.

And yet, I serve a God of hope. A God of love. A God of healing.

Where do I, where does the God of hope fit into this confounding world around me?

Sick of sitting on the couch, I went on a journey to find out. And I've found that hope lives.

I stuck my nose in the corners of the world and peeked into crannies, and found that hope is very much alive. Our God of hope is on the move to bring restoration to me and to you and to this world full of hurt.

He's calling each of us on a journey of restoration with him. Hope lives, and God is on the move.

This book will be a continuation of God's journey for you, as you take each step of your life as you follow Christ. Each week for the next five weeks, you'll begin a new

stage of the journey. Five days each week you'll read a short chapter and then reflect on it, journal, and pray.

Princess Diana had it right: "You can't comfort the afflicted without afflicting the comfortable." The first week of the journey starts as a journey of affliction—of boring down into ourselves to find out why we're still on the couch, overwhelmed and paralyzed instead of comforting the afflicted. We'll explore materialism, individualism...all the "isms" that keep us from caring about poverty. It hurts to look at ourselves raw and exposed, but God will use this self-scrutiny to heal.

The journey continues in the second week to the Scriptures, the clear path God has drawn for us to love what he loves; to feed those who hunger, break the chains of the oppressed, and protect the orphan; to follow and become more like Christ. God will reveal his heart for this world and for you through his Word, and he will transform you by it.

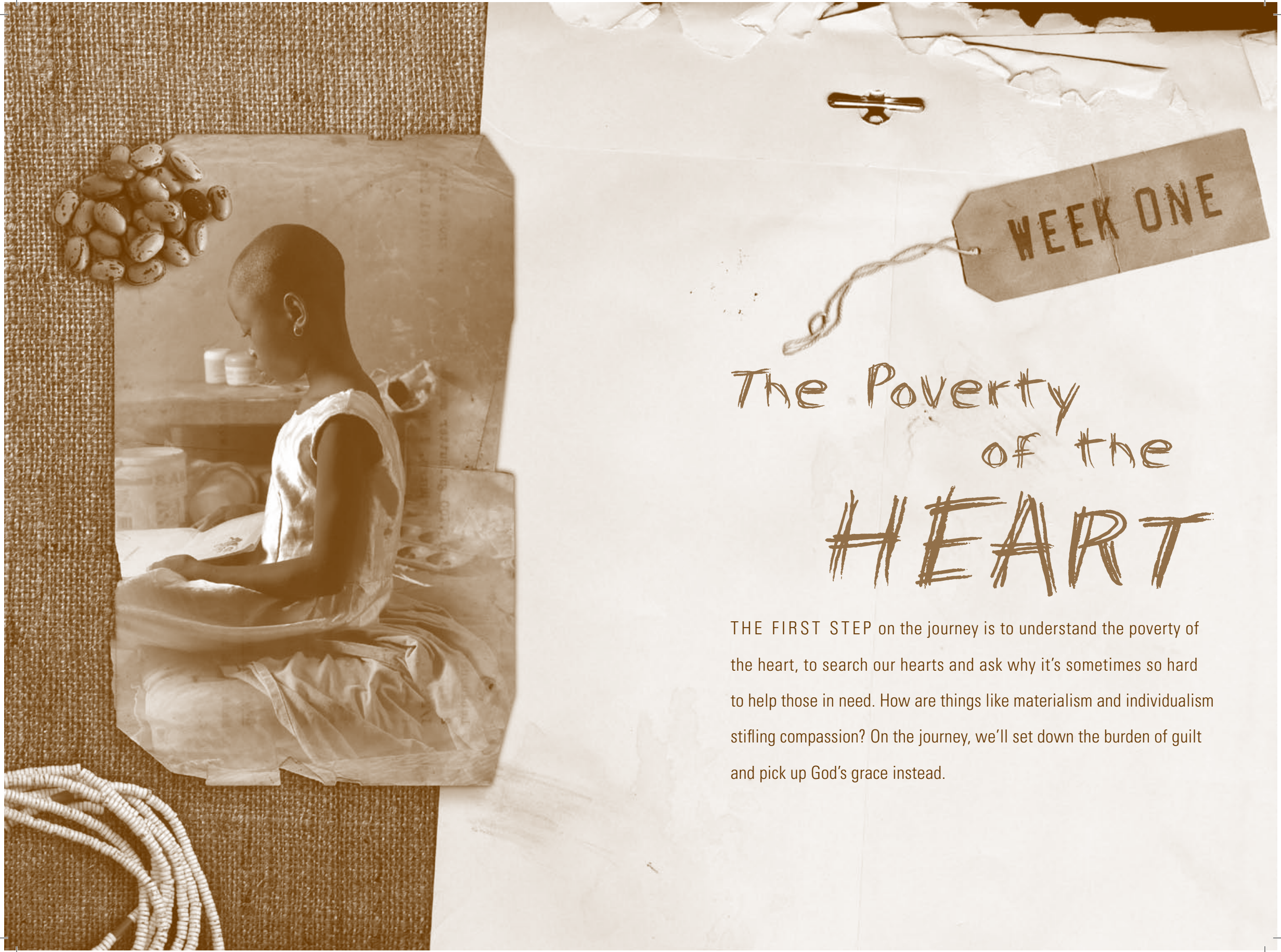
The next step of the journey is a closer look into poverty and the issues plaguing the world—what are they, and what in the world do they have to do with us? God will use this week to prepare us to know how to react and act in this world of need.

Step four of the journey is a week of prayer—a week learning of God's incomparable power through prayer for this world, and a week of humbling ourselves before God, asking for his healing and preparation as we set out to answer his call to love our neighbor.

The last week of the journey, God will reveal to you the special ways in which he has created you *just exactly so* to be his messenger of hope, love, healing, and service to those in need.

Above all, this is a journey toward Christ, a journey compelled and enabled by grace. It's not a journey of guilt or obligation. It's a journey of God's grace restoring us to the people he created us to be, and a journey of serving God to bring his grace and love to those in need. Jesus Christ, who has called you a friend, will be walking by your side, while the Holy Spirit guides and transforms you.

God is inviting you on a journey with him. Pray that he will guide and plan every step of your path as you act justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with your God.



WEEK ONE

The Poverty of the HEART

THE FIRST STEP on the journey is to understand the poverty of the heart, to search our hearts and ask why it's sometimes so hard to help those in need. How are things like materialism and individualism stifling compassion? On the journey, we'll set down the burden of guilt and pick up God's grace instead.

DAY 1: TRIALS AND ABANDONED TREASURES

*"Here on earth you will have many trials and sorrows.
But take heart, because I have overcome the world."*

—JOHN 16:33 (NEW LIVING TRANSLATION)



At first, Margaret thought the cries she heard were just her imagination. She was in a remote area. Only poor farmers ventured into this stinking, swampy plot of land to satisfy their thirsty animals. It certainly wasn't a place she liked to go and was no place for a child. Yet, there they were again: shrill, panicked cries.

Margaret had raised nine children; still she had never heard a cry of pain like this. Just up ahead the grandmother saw her goats nudging a small straw basket that lay mired in the mud. She peered inside. The infant was naked, her skin crusted in mud and blood. As the baby wiggled, Margaret could see dark, finger-shaped bruises on the child's neck. Suddenly the grim reality of the scene became apparent. There was only one reason a mother would bring her child to this desolate spot. Only one reason why a nurturer would turn murderer, wrapping her fingers around her own child's neck.

Margaret reached inside the basket and picked up the abandoned baby girl. Her wrinkled hands softly patted the child's back until her cries faded to shaky gasps. Margaret began the long walk back into town, her stooped body curved protectively over the child in her arms. Though covered in mud, blood, and disease, the baby Margaret had found was an abandoned treasure. Margaret named the child Deborah—and this grandmother of six became a mother again.

Deborah was constantly sick. Margaret didn't need to take her to a doctor to know that she had AIDS. She had seen enough children in her village die to know. She also knew that, without a job, she could never afford the medical care Deborah needed. Margaret loved Deborah, but she knew she couldn't care for her. She found a neighbor to take Deborah in. She's been abandoned again, thought Margaret as she walked away from Deborah's cries. But Margaret determined to check on Deborah often.

One day she found Deborah tied to a tree like a dog. Ignored. Neglected. Shaking with anger, she untied the crying child and took her home. She hadn't rescued Deborah from the swamp to abandon her to abuse.

Deborah's health continued to worsen. Some days, when the sick child lay weak and crying, Margaret regretted her decision to walk toward the cries she had heard on the day she found Deborah. She couldn't handle watching this child die. In those moments of desperation, Margaret felt a twinge of empathy for Deborah's birth mother. That poor woman couldn't face watching her daughter die—a nightmare that Margaret was living each day.¹

Jesus warned that on this earth we'd have trials and sorrows. Sometimes I can't help but think that's a major understatement. Even as I read it, I know Deborah's story is just one among thousands...among hundreds of thousands. There are 1.2 billion people in the world living in extreme poverty on less than a dollar a day. There are 38.6 million people diagnosed with HIV worldwide. There are nearly 30,000 children under the age of 5 dying each day of hunger and preventable diseases. There are stories of abuse, neglect, and evil that freeze my heart and stories of stupid, senseless poverty that bewilder my mind. There are countless children like Deborah—a little treasure knit together, inch by inch, by God—slowly undone by disease, poverty, and abuse. And no matter how much I want to forget that these numbers represent real people, I know that each one of the nearly 30,000 children is a story of a treasure. A diamond God crafted to catch and reflect his light just so, but now kicked in the dirt, muddied, unrecognized, and abandoned.

This is such a harsh, messed-up world...and I don't know how to take it. I want to throw up my hands and accuse God or someone or something. Of course, the Bible has never shied away from the state of this world. The first son born to man murdered the second one, and famine and disease are as old as Abraham. Indeed, this world is fundamentally broken and won't be fully fixed in our lifetime. I read the stories each day. Stories of unthinkable genocide and cruelty, tribes wiping out entire tribes. Stories of pandemics crippling entire nations and erasing generations. Stories of children given little opportunity at life before being sold as slaves or stolen as soldiers. Stories of babies whose lives were forfeit from the start, without nutrition, clean water, or care.

On the Other Hand

But on the flip side, I'm experiencing a very different story unfolding. The stories I see on TV stay in that little box—they don't invade *my* world. My section of the world is living through unprecedented prosperity, safety, and opportunity. Advances in technology, industry, trade, education, and law have created a bastion of opportunity.

¹ Adapted from a story by Brandy Campbell, Compassion International.

Sure, I grew up pinching pennies, but I was always well-fed; it was always an expectation that I would go to college, get a good job with health benefits, buy a house. Far from the despair reigning in certain pockets of the world, my industrialized world and I are thriving. We have more material wealth than any other generation in history. I drive down the street and see huge hospitals and hulking high schools; I see homes squatting like hotels; I see megacorps and megamalls and megachurches. My church buddies and I are thriving, too—we have our many church meetings, our building campaigns, our community outreaches playing Frisbee at the park with Starbucks afterward.

Put simply, we are prospering. But never able to leave well enough alone, I still can't help but wonder, as I sip Starbucks on an easy Sunday afternoon: Is this pleasing God? Is *this* his vision of what his world should look like?

Looking at God's Word, I see it isn't the first time the question has been raised.

The nation of Israel, in the time of Isaiah the prophet, faced a similar question. The people of Israel were a good people. In some ways they were like me. In many ways they were better. They were pious, keeping up their religious practices. They were prosperous, enjoying the fruits of their righteous nation. They were well-intentioned, regularly seeking God. And they very rightfully asked God, "Does this not please you?"

So when I read the words God said to them through Isaiah, they hit me like a line-backer.



Raise Your Voice

**Shout it aloud, do not hold back.
Raise your voice like a trumpet.
Declare to my people their rebellion
and to the house of Jacob their sins.**

**For day after day they seek me out;
they seem eager to know my ways,
as if they were a nation that does what is right
and has not forsaken the commands of its God.
They ask me for just decisions
and seem eager for God to come near them.**

**“Why have we fasted,” they say,
“and you have not seen it?
Why have we humbled ourselves,
and you have not noticed?”
Yet on the day of your fasting, you do as you please
and exploit all your workers...**

**Is this the kind of fast I have chosen,
only a day for a man to humble himself?
Is it only for bowing one’s head like a reed
and for lying on sackcloth and ashes?
Is that what you call a fast,
a day acceptable to the Lord?**

**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—
when you see the naked, to clothe him,
and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood?**

—Isaiah 58:1-3, 5-7

I can't help but make the comparisons...these Israelites' religious lives sound a lot like mine. They went to Temple every day. They devoted themselves to learning about God. They prayed faithfully. OK, so I don't go to church every day. But when I read this, I see myself and so many Christians I know—eager for God to come near, attending church meetings several times a week, reading the Bible faithfully, and taking classes on getting to know God more.

But God was not impressed with the Israelites. And I'm not sure he is pleased with my religiosity either. I can't help but ask, "Why not, God? Don't you see how much I'm doing for you? Don't you know how busy I am for you? Haven't you seen my acts of worship—fasting and praying? He answers,

"Is that what you call a fast, a day acceptable to the Lord?"

It is a crushing moment.

What *does* God want from me, from his people? What is true fasting, true religion? God says it is this: "to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter—when you see the naked, to clothe him." And James gives me another clue: "Pure and genuine religion in the sight of God the Father means caring for orphans and widows in their distress" (James 1:27, NLT).

Feeding the poor, caring for the oppressed...that's messy stuff. But what if what God wants is messy? What if, like the Israelites, my spiritual service is a bit too tidy? a bit too contained in the white walls of religion? a bit too focused on me? What if all this time I've been polishing myself up to exhibit spiritual excellence—like it's some precious jewel—when what God really wanted was something wholly different? Not to stay home perfecting myself, but to go out into the world. To transform it through action, in service and in love. Honestly, leading a Bible study and fasting sounds a whole lot easier. But when I read those passages again, the conviction doesn't go away. God is calling his people—me—to do something different. To refresh and restore this world full of Deborahs.

Margaret found God's abandoned treasure, Deborah. She picked her up, brushed her off, and made the hard choice not to ignore her plight, but to love her. I think God may have treasures waiting for me to help him restore, a journey he's calling me on to be his light in a dark world.

Margaret woke up from her nightmare, the nightmare of watching Deborah slowly die, the day she heard that a local church was opening a program in her village. The program

would provide health care, nutritious food and supplements, spiritual guidance and education, and the loving embrace of a local church. Deborah was the first child to be registered.

Because of the program, Deborah's medical bills were covered, as well as the extra food she required. Her health has improved, and this once abandoned, sickly infant is now an active 4-year-old who loves to play house with her favorite doll. She is now in a child sponsorship program, with a family sending her letters of encouragement and love and sharing Jesus' hope with her.

Margaret struggles to express her thanks to those who have given life to her daughter. "I don't know what to say," says Margaret, her voice choked with emotion. "Thanks to the staff and the church, Deborah can get care. Without their support I wouldn't have made it this far."²

² Adapted from a story by Brandy Campbell.

In My Own Words

What about Isaiah 58 challenges you?

Why are you reading this book? What interests you about it? What are you hoping for?

MY PRAYER

God, I want to begin a journey with you. My past religious activity seems to have left something out...it seems to have been a little too much about me.

Thank you that you want to restore my soul to be like yours. Thank you that you want to take me on a journey to become your hands and feet in this world that needs you. Help me to follow you and become like you.

DAY 2: BARELY GETTIN' BY: THE LIES OF AFFLUENCE

"I come from the Marcy projects, in Brooklyn, which is considered a tough place to grow up, but [visiting Africa showed me] how good we have it. The rappers who say, 'We're from the "hood," take it from me, you're not from the "hood."'

—RAPPER JAY-Z, REFLECTING ON A TRIP TO AFRICA

*"Give me neither poverty nor riches!
Give me just enough to satisfy my needs. For if I grow rich,
I may deny you and say, 'Who is the Lord?'"*

—PROVERBS 30:8-9

You are rich. I'm not speaking metaphorically or spiritually. I mean it: You're rich. If you're reading this book right now, you're most likely among the financially elite in the world and in history—even if you're from a low-income household in America. Did you drink clean water today without risk of death or disease? Are you wearing a pair of shoes? Do you have a dry, safe place to sleep tonight? Did you eat today? You are rich. You are richer than billions of others. The Gross National Income per capita in the United States in 2003 was \$37,610. In India it was \$530. In Ethiopia it was \$90.

I think an interesting phenomenon is occurring. So many of us—myself included—honestly think we're just barely getting by. I'm just living my modest life, trying to pay my bills...but it's just not true. *I am living the "good life."* I mean, I take showers every day if I feel like it. I can buy foreign spices to season my food. I see movies on Saturdays. I'll buy a \$4 coffee with whipped cream if the fancy strikes me.

But I still often feel like I'm the poor one around here. I live in an apartment next to an area where the average home cost is \$600,000. Going from my one-bedroom apartment to see the glorious mansions I'm surrounded by, I feel like maybe someone ought to be giving *me* money. It's easy not to feel rich as I drive down the road in my hand-me-down Chevy when I'm surrounded by Lexus SUVs. But if I were cruising in New Delhi, my Chevy would be looking pretty good.



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