Poverty in Qur'ān and the Bible

1. Opening — The Poor Among Us and the Poverty Within Us

My friend Patricia is homeless and struggles with mental illness. She has been sleeping on the streets for the past couple of years in our neighborhood. Recently, she began sleeping on our front porch. There was something beautiful about this. Of all the places she could go, our home had become a place where she felt safe enough to sleep. There was also something uncomfortable about it. I have a wife and children, and compassion toward Patricia does not remove my responsibility toward them. Poverty becomes complicated when the person experiencing it has a name.

Patricia and I have spent perhaps thirty hours together—driving, talking, eating, laughing, dealing with difficult moments, and simply being together. Recently, she came back with some good news. Her Social Security card was finally on its way. She exclaimed, "My work here is done!" Assuming she would be moving on into more permanent housing, likely outside of our neighborhood, I told her I was excited about whatever the next chapter held. She corrected me: "It's for us to help people together!"

Her response caught me off guard. It had not occurred to me that she might imagine a future in which we continued working together—or that she might want to help others alongside me. Her response caused me to wonder whether there is something deeper happening in the way we understand poverty.

Both the Bible and the Qur'ān have extensive teachings about caring for the poor. Both command generosity, condemn oppression, warn about the dangers of wealth, and teach that what we possess ultimately belongs to God. But the Bible eventually turns the question around. It begins with a question such as, **"What do I owe the poor?"** Then Jesus confronts me with another: **What if I am poor too?**

2. Everything Belongs to God

The Bible and the Qur'ān begin from remarkably similar places regarding wealth. The Zabur declares, "The earth is the LORD's, and everything in it."[1] When David and the people give generously toward the temple, David acknowledges that they are merely returning what they first received from God: "Everything comes from you, and we have given you only what comes from your hand."[2] The Qur'ān presents a similar understanding, instructing believers to give from that over which Allah has made them trustees.[3]

This changes the meaning of wealth. I may legally own my house, my bank account, or my possessions, but neither the Bible nor the Qur'ān allows me to imagine myself as an entirely

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[1] Zabur, Psalm 24:1 (NIV) 24.1 The earth is the Lord's, and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it;

[2] Ketuvim, 1 Chronicles 29:14 (NIV) 29.14 "But who am I, and who are my people, that we should be able to give as generously as this? Everything comes from you, and we have given you only what comes from your hand.

[3] Qur'ān 57:7 "Believe in Allah and his messenger, and donate a portion of what he has made you inherit. Those who believe and donate will have a great reward.

autonomous owner. What I possess exists because God has allowed me to possess it. Wealth therefore becomes stewardship, and stewardship raises an important question: **What does God expect me to do with what he has entrusted to me?** Both the Bible and the Qur'ān answer that question, in part, by pointing toward people who have less.

3. God Pays Attention to the Poor

The Taurat repeatedly commands Israel to care for people experiencing poverty. Deuteronomy says, "If anyone is poor among your fellow Israelites...do not be hardhearted or tightfisted toward them. Rather, be openhanded and freely lend them whatever they need."[4] The prophets become even more severe. Religious practice becomes offensive to God when it coexists with oppression. Isaiah connects true worship with sharing food with the hungry, providing shelter to the poor wanderer, and clothing the naked.[5]

The Qur'ān likewise makes generosity toward people in need part of faithful obedience to God. It describes righteousness as including giving from one's wealth to relatives, orphans, the needy, travelers, beggars, and those in bondage. This is significant common ground. Neither the Bible nor the Qur'ān allows a person to claim devotion to God while treating the suffering of other human beings as irrelevant.

Both texts make an even more surprising connection between God and giving. Proverbs says, "Whoever is kind to the poor lends to the LORD, and he will reward them for what they have done."[6] The Qur'ān uses remarkably similar language: "Who will lend to Allah a good loan which Allah will multiply many times over?"[7] The idea is not that God lacks resources and needs a loan. Rather, giving something away for God's purposes is treated as something given to God himself.

This changes the economics of generosity. The person receiving my gift may never repay me, but God can. Jesus makes this explicit when he tells his followers to invite "the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind" to their tables because "although they cannot repay you, you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous."[8] Generosity becomes an act of faith. I can

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[4] Taurat, Deuteronomy 15:7–8 (NIV) 15.7 If anyone is poor among your fellow Israelites in any of the towns of the land the Lord your God is giving you, do not be hardhearted or tightfisted toward them. 15.8 Rather, be openhanded and freely lend them whatever they need.

[5] Prophets, Isaiah 58:6–7 (NIV) 58.6 "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? 58.7 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 them, and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood?

[6] Zabur, Proverbs 19:17 (NIV) 19.17 Whoever is kind to the poor lends to the Lord, and he will reward them for what they have done.

[7] Qur'ān 2:245 "Who can loan Allah a good loan? Allah will repay him many-fold. Allah withholds and he gives forth. You will return to him."

[8] Injil, Luke 14:13–14 (NIV) 14.13 But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, 14.14 and you will be blessed. Although they cannot repay you, you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous."

give without receiving something in return because I believe there is another economy beyond the one I can presently see.

4. The Danger of Wealth

Yet both the Bible and the Qur'ān recognize a problem. The very wealth that gives me the ability to help someone else can also convince me that I do not need help myself. The Qur'ān warns that wealth can become a test and that the pursuit and accumulation of worldly things can distract people from what ultimately matters.[9] [10]

Jesus' warnings are similarly severe. In Luke 12, a wealthy man experiences an unusually successful harvest. His solution is to build larger barns. Once he has accumulated enough, he tells himself, "You have plenty of grain laid up for many years. Take life easy; eat, drink and be merry." God responds, "You fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you."[11] The man's problem is not merely that he has money. His money has convinced him that he possesses something he does not actually possess: his future, his security, and ultimately his life.

Jesus later asks, "If you have not been trustworthy in handling worldly wealth, who will trust you with true riches?"[12] That question suggests that money itself is not true wealth. It is something temporary entrusted to us that reveals what we value. Here the Bible and the Qur'ān again stand remarkably close together. Wealth is not necessarily evil in either text, but wealth is dangerous because it can create the illusion of independence. Perhaps that is where the question of poverty begins to turn around.

5. What If the Rich Person Is Actually Poor?

Jesus begins the Beatitudes with an unusual statement: "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."[13] The Qur'ān likewise describes humanity as fundamentally needy before the self-sufficient God. This may be one of the deepest points of connection between the Bible and the Qur'ān concerning poverty. There is material poverty, but beneath

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[9] Qur'ān 64:15 "Your money and your children are a trial. There is a great reward with Allah."

Scholars, Arabic. Reference Qur'an: a literal Quranic translation into English with cross-references into the other Holy Books and detailed footnote explantions of Arabic words (Function). Kindle Edition.

[10] Qur'ān 102:1-2 "In the name of Allah, the most gracious and merciful. Gathering up [possesions] distracts you until you go to the graveyards."

Scholars, Arabic. Reference Qur'an: a literal Quranic translation into English with cross-references into the other Holy Books and detailed footnote explantions of Arabic words (Function). Kindle Edition.

[11] Injil, Luke 12:19–20 (NIV) [12.19] And I'll say to myself, "You have plenty of grain laid up for many years. Take life easy; eat, drink and be merry." ' [12.20] "But God said to him, 'You fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you. Then who will get what you have prepared for yourself?'

[12] Injil, Luke 16:11 (NIV) [16.11] So if you have not been trustworthy in handling worldly wealth, who will trust you with true riches?

[13] Injil, Matthew 5:3 (NIV) [5.3] "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

it lies another kind of poverty. Human beings need God, and money, power, or status cannot eliminate that need.

The Bible makes this reversal especially dramatic in Revelation. The church at Laodicea says, "I am rich; I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing." Jesus responds, "You do not realize that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked."[14] This may be one of Scripture's most important statements about poverty because the people Jesus calls poor do not know they are poor. They think they are rich. Their possessions have actually made their true condition harder to see.

Suddenly the question is no longer simply, **What should rich people do for poor people?** The question becomes: **Who is actually poor?**

6. The Poor May Have Something I Need

This reversal changes the way I see people like Patricia. Jesus once watched wealthy people putting large gifts into the temple treasury. Then a poor widow put in two small coins. Jesus said, "This poor widow has put more into the treasury than all the others."[15] Financially, she had not. But Jesus was measuring wealth differently. The widow who appeared to have almost nothing possessed something worth showing his disciples.

This pattern appears repeatedly in Jesus' ministry. Children become examples of receiving the kingdom.[16] A Samaritan becomes an example of loving one's neighbor.[17] A poor widow becomes an example of generosity.[18] People who appear to have less may possess

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[14] Injil, Revelation 3:17 (NIV) 3.17 You say, 'I am rich; I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing.' But you do not realize that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked.

[15] Injil, Luke 21:3 (NIV) 21.3 "Truly I tell you," he said, "this poor widow has put in more than all the others.

[16] Injil, Mark 10:14–15 (NIV) 10.14 When Jesus saw this, he was indignant. He said to them, "Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. 10.15 Truly I tell you, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it."

[17] Injil, Luke 10:30–37 (NIV) 10.30 In reply Jesus said: "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, when he was attacked by robbers. They stripped him of his clothes, beat him and went away, leaving him half dead. 10.31 A priest happened to be going down the same road, and when he saw the man, he passed by on the other side. 10.32 So too, a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. 10.33 But a Samaritan, as he traveled, came where the man was; and when he saw him, he took pity on him. 10.34 He went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he put the man on his own donkey, brought him to an inn and took care of him. 10.35 The next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper. 'Look after him,' he said, 'and when I return, I will reimburse you for any extra expense you may have.' 10.36 "Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?" 10.37 The expert in the law replied, "The one who had mercy on him." Jesus told him, "Go and do likewise."

[18] Injil, Luke 21:1–4 (NIV) 21.1 As Jesus looked up, he saw the rich putting their gifts into the temple treasury. 21.2 He also saw a poor widow put in two very small copper coins. 21.3 "Truly I tell you," he said, "this poor widow has put in more than all the others. 21.4 All these people gave their gifts out of their wealth; but she out of her poverty put in all she had to live on."

something that people with more desperately need. That is what Patricia's statement exposed in me. "It's for us to help people together." I had been so focused on Patricia getting what she needed and moving forward that I had overlooked what she might have to give. Poverty is not a complete description of Patricia any more than material security is a complete description of me.

A person can lack housing and possess generosity. A person can lack money and possess faith. A person can need help and simultaneously have something to give. Likewise, a person can possess a house, income, education, and social status while remaining profoundly needy before God. This does not romanticize material poverty. Hunger still matters. Housing still matters. Resources still need to move, and both the Bible and the Qur'ān insist upon that. But it does undermine superiority. The dividing line between "the needy" and "the people who have something to give" is not as clear as I might imagine.

7. The God Who Became Poor

It is here that the Bible makes its most distinctive claim about Jesus. Paul is collecting money for followers of Christ experiencing poverty when he writes, "For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that **though he was rich**, yet for your sake **he became poor**, **so** that **you** through his poverty **might become rich**."[19]

Paul could have simply commanded followers of Christ with resources to give to those without them. Instead, he tells them a story: Christ was rich, Christ became poor, we were poor, and through his poverty we became rich. For followers of Christ, generosity therefore begins with the recognition that I am not fundamentally the benefactor; I am the beneficiary. Before I ever give, I have received. Before I help someone in need, God has met me in my need. Before I imagine myself entering someone else's need, the Bible tells me that Christ entered mine.

This is where the biblical understanding of poverty becomes inseparable from the person of Jesus. God does not merely command generosity from a distance. The rich one becomes poor. Christ places himself among the needy, and those who receive from him are then called to follow the same pattern.

8. "You Did It to Me"

Jesus takes this identification even further in Matthew 25. He describes people who are hungry, thirsty, strangers, naked, sick, and imprisoned. Then he says, "Whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me."[20] Proverbs describes generosity to the poor as lending to God. Jesus goes further by placing himself alongside the person in need: I was the one standing there.

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[19] Injil, 2 Corinthians 8:9 (NIV) 8.9 For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich.

[20] Injil, Matthew 25:40 (NIV) 25.40 "The King will reply, 'Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.'

That creates another extraordinary reversal. I can approach another person believing I am bringing Christ to them, while Jesus tells me that I may discover he is already there. The person experiencing poverty is no longer merely an object of my generosity. My encounter with that person may become an encounter through which God reveals something about me. Do I trust my possessions? Do I believe they are really mine? Do I give only when I can be repaid? Do I see another human being or merely a need? Most importantly, **do I remember that whatever I have to offer another person has first been given to me?**

9. Poverty Before God

The Bible and the Qur'ān share substantial common ground regarding poverty. Both teach that wealth ultimately belongs to God, command generosity, condemn oppression and indifference, warn that wealth can distract human beings from God, and connect generosity with accountability beyond this life. Both also recognize something deeper: material wealth cannot eliminate humanity's fundamental need for God.

The Bible, however, develops this truth around Jesus in a distinctive way. The movement begins simply enough: I have something, someone else needs something, and God commands me to give. But it does not end there. Jesus turns the categories upside down. I discover that I am poor. Christ possesses the riches I lack. **The rich Christ becomes poor for me. *Through* his poverty I receive riches** I could never acquire for myself, and **having received, I am called to give.**

This changes how I understand Patricia. She is genuinely poor in some ways, and those needs should not be minimized. Our poverty is not identical, and pretending that it is would trivialize the very real hardship she experiences. I can go inside my house at night; she may not have a house to enter. Yet following Christ does not permit my material security to become evidence that I stand above her. Before God, I am a recipient too.

Maybe that is why Patricia's words continue to stay with me: "It's for us to help people together." I had been thinking about what Patricia needed to move forward in life. She was already thinking about what she might have to give. Her words reminded me that receiving help does not leave a person with nothing to offer. A person can be in genuine need and still have something valuable to give to someone else. We are all recipients. We are all dependent. Whatever we possess, we have first received.

For followers of Christ, the ultimate picture of poverty is therefore not simply a poor person waiting for a wealthy person to become generous. It is Christ: **the rich one became poor, the needy received what they could not provide for themselves, and those who discover how much they have received are invited to open their hands to others.**

Perhaps the deepest question poverty asks me, then, is not simply, What do I owe the poor? It is: **Do I recognize how poor I am—and how much I have received?**