

# The Doctrine of the Poor and Needy

Topics		
Preface	Definitions from the Hebrew	Alternate “Spiritual” Definitions
Passages Where these Words Are Found Together		Conclusion
Charts, Maps and Doctrines		

**Preface:** I should be frank with you here: the idea of looking at the verses with this phrase strikes me initially as boring. I did not come across this phrase and have some great inner need to examine the poor and needy. Now, it is not because I can't relate, as, for a time, I was quite poor (not starving, however) and for a longer period of time, I was relatively poor. I've never been destitute, without any resources and without any hope. So, in that regard, this is outside of my experience.

There are two words which are often found together: *the poor and the needy*; and they occurred together so often that I felt that I *had* to examine the concept, whether I had an interest in this or not. Furthermore, I write this in the year 2007, during a time when America has enjoyed a long run of prosperity. Our biggest, most far-reaching headache as a nation is periodic high gas prices. Quite frankly, that anyone could even view this as a real problem is amazing to me. Even the people that I grew up with seem to lack any real historical perspective or any true appreciation of the great prosperity that we enjoy. When someone complains about American jobs going overseas or being taken by illegal aliens, or job stability today not being what it used to be—they seem to miss the big picture that, at the time that I write this, anyone who wants a job can get one (our unemployment numbers are around 4.5%; some of the lowest sustained numbers in a long time); and that there are significant portions of our population which are subsidized by the government so that they can lead a more affluent lifestyle without having to work for it. I listen to a presidential candidate, John Edwards, whine about the two America's: the rich and affluent as versus the poor and the needy, and I think to myself, "What a load of crap!" I know many people who are on welfare and section 8 housing. They live in larger houses and have more things than I ever did as a child or as a young adult, yet they are the *other America* that Edwards is speaking about; they are the *poor and the needy*. For the most part, a significant number of the *other America* live in homes which I could not have afforded to live in a few decades ago; and they can afford things which I haven't budgeted for yet (a large screen tv, for instance). I'm not complaining or venting; nor am I unaware that there are some who live in crappy apartments and in crappy areas; but we live in a very prosperous country, and occasionally, for some of these people, moving is a good option. During the Great Depression and during the time of the Dust Bowl, huge numbers of people relocated in states far from their origins, looking to find work in other areas. Today, people with very little from Mexico and elsewhere cross our borders and make a prosperous life for themselves, starting with virtually nothing. I too had to move from where I was in order to find a job in my field, and it took a lot of nerve and faith to do so. My point is, a huge percentage of our poor are not really all that poor; they aren't hungry and they aren't without a roof over their heads. For a huge portion of our so-called poor, they have a great many options, living in the greatest country in history. If people with essentially nothing can move to the United States, and, in two generations, be doctors, lawyers and teachers, then the people who are indigenous to this land could do so as well. It is called hard work and perseverance, and when you are knocked down, you get up again.

This is not to say that, within our poor, there are not some who are destitute, who are hungry, who do not have a roof over their heads. Many of them are where they are due to a huge number of bad

decisions. You cannot do drugs daily and you cannot drink yourself into a stupor regularly and expect that you will simultaneously be wealthy and successful. By far, the majority of those who are wealthy in our country got there through hard work and discipline. So, we do have a percentage of truly poor in our country who are there by their own accord. We have a significant number of homeless people who are where they are because of mental illness. From what I have heard, we have a direct relationship between our state mental hospitals and the homeless who are mentally ill. As we decreased the number of people who are institutionalized (I believe that we made it much more difficult to institutionalize someone against their own will), we simultaneously increased the number of homeless. This is simply a result of solving human problems with human solutions; there are often unintended consequences. It may seem like a very good thing that no one can be committed to a mental institution apart from their free choice to enter into such a facility; but, the result is, those who should be under institutionalized supervision and care are often homeless as a result of their inability to take care of themselves.

Now, somewhere, in all of these numbers, there are some who are truly destitute, who are hungry, who are without shelter. This is a very minor problem in our country, and therefore, it is more difficult to grasp. However, in other countries, this is much of their population. In Communist countries, their citizens function to support the state; and those who benefit from their hard work are primarily politicians who have managed to rise to high positions of power. There are two things which strongly differentiate the United States from other countries: (1) we have a huge number of believers in the US; and (2) people in private industry make much higher salaries than those in government. In a Communist country or under an oppressive dictatorship, those who are most successful financially are those who wield political power or those who are closely associated with those in power. In the United States, a person can be extremely successful, and have nothing to do with the government. The cause here is, we have a huge percentage of believers in the US and we have a pivot of mature believers.<sup>1</sup>

All that being said, bear in mind that in most of the world, we have true poverty; in most of the world, we have huge populations of people who are hungry and who are without a home. This is evidenced by nearby Mexico, from whence we received countless millions of illegal immigrants. As we examine this doctrine, the fact of true poverty—unlike you have ever witnessed before—should be in the back of your mind. Quite frankly, you may not even know a person who is truly poor and destitute.

Now that I have beat the concept of poverty to death, I need to suggest that God the Holy Spirit often uses these two words, *the poor and the needy*, to have more of a spiritual connotation instead of a financial one. That is, the *poor* are the *grace oriented* and the *needy* are those who lack the wherewithal to provide their own salvation or for their own spiritual growth. It will become clear, part way through this doctrine, that there are times when these *spiritualized meanings* are the primary ones and appropriate to the context.

[Return to Topics](#)

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[Online Doctrines](#)

[Return to the Chart Index](#)

[Exegetical Studies in the Psalms](#)

[Doctrinal Index \(a list of all topics covered\)](#)

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<sup>1</sup> This is term coined by R. B. Thieme, Jr., which refers to a very small, but significant portion of a country's population, who not only believe in Jesus Christ, but who have matured spiritually. God not only blesses them, but blesses their periphery, their family, their city, their state and their nation by association. Bob's illustration is, you might have this very successful business enterprise, and the president and the vice presidents are toasting each other up in their executive suite for their brilliant success; and meanwhile, there is a janitor in their building, and he is mopping their floors and cleaning their toilets; and he is a mature believer and he is the reason their business is successful—blessing by association.

1. We have two words, both of which are found in our passage, Psalm 12:5: [On account of the oppression of the grace oriented \[or, poor\] \[and\] on account of the clamor of the destitute, I will now arise,](#)” says Y<sup>e</sup>howah [“\[and\] I will place \[him\] into the safety \[or, deliverance\] he pants \[after\] for \[or, for which he longs\].”](#)
2. In the Hebrew, the two words are:

ʿânîy (אֲנִי) [pronounced <i>gaw-NEE</i> ]	<i>poor, afflicted; humble, grace oriented; those in circumstances of humiliation and poverty</i>	masculine plural adjective (functions here as a noun)	Strong's #6041 BDB #776
ʿeb <sup>e</sup> yôn (אֶבְיֹן) [pronounced <i>eb<sup>ve</sup>-YOHN</i> ]	<i>destitute, in want or need [of food, clothing, shelter, money], needy, poor, bankrupt</i>	masculine plural singular noun/adjective	Strong's #34 BDB #2

This second word can also be applied to those without the means to secure their own salvation; they are the slaves on the slave market of sin, unable to purchase their own freedom. This does not mean that they are *spiritually destitute* or *spiritually bankrupt*, per se; but simply lack the *inherent* means to secure a place with God and to grow spiritually.

3. The meaning of the word ʿeb<sup>e</sup>yôn (אֶבְיֹן) [pronounced *eb<sup>ve</sup>-YOHN*]:
  - a. First off, the second word clearly refers to those who are in need of food in Ex. 23:11 ([But the seventh year you shall let your field rest and lie still; that the poor of your people may eat: and what they leave the beasts of the field shall eat. In like manner you shall deal with your vineyard, and with your olive yard](#)). They just let the field do what it does naturally, and they do not tend to it, they do not harvest it, they just let it sit and they allow the poor of the land to come into the field and harvest it. **Application:** although it is reasonable for a society to provide support to those who are unable to support themselves, note that the Bible over and over expects people to work for their own food. If the poor wanted to eat, then they had to go to the field and harvest the food. The Bible *never* justifies paying a healthy person to sit on their butt and collect money.
  - b. This word can be used for those who are poor and cannot afford a lawyer. Ex. 23:6 ([You shall not pervert the justice of your poor in his dispute](#)). The passage is a specific example, but the idea is, the judicial system should not distinguish between the rich and the poor.
  - c. This word can be used for someone who is in need of money. Deut. 15:7–8 ([If there be among you a poor man of one of your brethren within any of your gates in your land which the LORD your God gives you, you shall not harden your heart, nor shut your hand from your poor brother: But you shall open your hand wide unto him, and shall surely lend him sufficient for his need, in that which he lacks](#)).
  - d. There will be a time in Israel when there are no needy people. Deut. 15:4
4. Now, let me offer some spiritual definitions: those who are *poor* might be seen, instead, as *humble* or *grace oriented*; and those who are *needy* by be seen as those without the means to secure their own salvation; they are the slaves on the slave market of sin, unable to purchase their own freedom. This does not mean that they are *spiritually destitute* or *spiritually bankrupt*, per se; but simply lack the inherent means to secure a place with God and to grow spiritually. Once we get into the psalms and the use of these words, it will become clear that they have these additional meanings.
5. Passages: We find these two words together in the following passages: Deut. 15:11 24:14, Job. 24:4, 14, Psalm 9:18 12:5 35:10 37:14 40:17 70:5 72:4, 12–13 74:21 82:4 86:1 109:16, Psalm 109:22 113:7 Prov. 30:14 31:9, 20 Isa. 14:30 25:4 32:7 41:17 Jer. 22:16 Ezek. 16:49 18:12 22:29 Amos 4:1 8:4 8:6. The reason that I pursued this doctrine is because these two words are found together in so many places.

[Return to Topics](#)

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[Online Doctrines](#)

[Return to the Chart Index](#)

[Exegetical Studies in the Psalms](#)

[Doctrinal Index \(a list of all topics covered\)](#)

6. The *poor and needy* in the Law:

- a. The first time these words occur together is Deut. 15:11, when Moses says, “For there will never cease to be poor in the land. Therefore I command you, You shall open wide your hand to your brother, to the needy and to the poor, in your land.” The context of the passage is giving to the poor. The wider context is the Sabbatical year and one part of it is letting go free one’s Hebrew slaves. Incidentally, notice that Moses said, “There will never cease to be poor in the land” just as Jesus said, “The poor you will have with you always.”
  - b. Deut. 24:14–15: “You shall not oppress a hired servant who is poor and needy, whether he is one of your brothers or one of the sojourners who are in your land within your towns. You shall give him his wages on the same day, before the sun sets (for he is poor and counts on it), lest he cry against you to the LORD, and you be guilty of sin.”
7. In the historical narratives:
- a. 1Sam. 2:7–9: Jehovah brings down, and He gives riches; He brings low; yea, He lifts up high. He raises the poor from the dust; He lifts up the needy from the dunghill, to cause them to sit with nobles; yea, He causes them to inherit a throne of honor; for to Jehovah are the pillars of the earth; and He sets the habitable world on them. He keeps the feet of His saints, and the wicked are silenced in darkness; for man does not become mighty by power.
8. The book of Job:
- a. Job 24:4: “...they [who no longer think about God and their relationship to Him] turn the needy out of the way; the poor of the earth have hidden together.”
  - b. Job 24:14: “The murderer rising with the light kills the poor and needy, and in the night he is a thief.” Job is bemoaning the state of things in his world.
9. In the Psalms, we find these two words used together most often.
- a. Psalm 9:17–18: The wicked shall be turned to Sheol, all the nations forgetting God. For the needy shall not forever be forgotten; the hope of the poor shall not perish forever. At this point, there seems to be more to these terms than those who are in financial straits. Here, they are in contrast with the wicked, who are turned toward the grave. Therefore, the poor and needy here seem to be more than those without means, but they are presented as believers.
  - b. Psalm 12:3: For the pain of the poor, for the sighing of the needy, I will now rise up, says Jehovah; I will set in safety; he pants for it. Again, these are contrasted with those who have flattering lips and those who lie—men that God will cut off. So we are dealing with believers again, whom God will deliver.
  - c. Psalm 35:7–10: For they have hidden their pit-net for me without cause; without cause they have dug for my soul. Let destruction come on him; he will not know; and let his net which he concealed catch him; let him fall in it, into destruction. And my soul shall be joyful in Jehovah; it will rejoice in His salvation. All my bones shall say: O Jehovah, who is like You, who delivers the poor from those stronger than he; yes, the poor and needy from his plunderer? This is an imprecatory psalm and notice that the poor and the needy again are provided for by Jehovah God, and they are in contrast with those who are David’s enemies without a cause.
  - d. In Psalm 37:14, the poor and needy are associated with those who walk upright and are contrasted with the wicked. The wicked have drawn out the sword and they have trodden their bow, to cause the poor and needy to fall, to kill those who walk uprightly. Again, it is clear that the poor and needy are more than those without a bank account.
  - e. Psalm 40:14–17: Let those seeking my soul to destroy it, be ashamed and humbled together; let those delighting in my evil be driven back and disgraced. Let them be desolate until it is the reward for their shame; for they are saying to me, Aha! Aha! Let all who are seeking You be glad in You and always say, May Jehovah be magnified, those loving Your salvation. But I am poor and needy; the Lord will take thought for me. You are my help and my deliverer; O my God, do not delay. Again, we have a psalm where we have, on the one side, those who persecute David; and then there is David, who calls himself *poor and needy*. As being *poor and needy*, David looks to God for deliverance.
  - f. The short 5 verses of Psalm 70 are almost identical to the end of Psalm 40, above.
  - g. Psalm 72:1–4: Give the king Your judgments, O God; and Your righteousness to the king's son. Your people He shall judge in righteousness, and Your poor in justice. The mountains will lift up peace to the people, and the little hills through righteousness. He shall judge the poor of the people; and He

shall save the sons of the needy; and He shall crush the oppressor. In one of the few psalms written by Solomon, he also speaks of God delivering the needy and crushing those who oppress them. Solomon continues this theme in Psalm 72:12–14: For He shall save the needy who cries, and the poor with no helper. He shall have pity on the poor and needy; and He saves the souls of the needy ones. He shall redeem their souls from oppression and violence; and their blood shall be precious in His eyes. Since we know that God ultimate saves those who are His and puts into eternal torments those who do not believe in Him, the *poor of the people* and the *sons of the needy* again refer to more than simply those who can't afford cab fare.

- h. Psalm 54:18, 21: Remember this: the enemy has defamed, O Jehovah; and a foolish people have scorned Your name. O let not the ill-treated ones turn back ashamed; let the poor and needy praise Your name. The enemy of Jehovah and those who are foolish are contrasted with the poor and needy, who praise God's name.
  - i. Psalm 82:4: Deliver the poor and needy; save out of the hand of the wicked. Again, for the n<sup>th</sup> time, the poor and needy are contrasted with the wicked, who appear to be oppressing them.
  - j. David prays to God: O Jehovah, bow down Your ear, answer me, for I am poor and needy. Guard my soul, for I am godly; O You, my God, save Your servant who trusts in You. Be gracious to Me, O Lord, for I cry to You daily. Give joy to the soul of Your servant; for to You, O Lord, I lift up my soul. For You, O Lord, are good and ready to forgive, and rich in mercy to all who call on You (Psalm 86:1–5). David asks for graciousness from a God Who is rich in mercy; so it is obvious that David is not financially destitute and looking for a quick fix.
  - k. Psalm 109 is an imprecatory psalm of David, wherein, he writes: let them be always before Jehovah, so that He may cut off the memory of them from the earth; because he did not remember to do mercy; and he persecuted the poor and needy man, even to kill the broken of heart. Those that David is speaking of are those who have lied about David and have put him in difficult situations with their lying words (see vv. 2–3). Their lies about David further indicated that they also persecuted the poor and the needy (and these could be reasonably interpreted with the same set of spiritual meanings as given at the first). David continues in vv. 21–27: But You, O Jehovah the Lord, work with me for Your name's sake; deliver me because Your mercy is good. For I am poor and needy, and my heart is pierced within me. As a shadow when it stretches out, I am gone; I am shaken off like the locust. My knees stumble from fasting, and my flesh grows lean from fatness. And I have become a reproach to them; they looked at me; they shook their heads. O Jehovah my God, help me; save me according to Your mercy; and they will know that this is Your hand; that You, O Jehovah, have done it. Here, David uses *poor and needy* to indicate that he, with his own strength, cannot overcome whatever problems he is dealing with, and he asks for God to interpose.
  - l. Psalm 113:4–8: Jehovah is high above all nations; His glory above the heavens. Who is like Jehovah our God, who exalts Himself to dwell; Who humbles Himself to consider all in the earth and the heavens! He raises up the poor from the dust; He lifts the needy out of the dunghill, in order to make him sit with nobles, with the nobles of his people. He causes the barren to live in the house as the joyful mother of sons. Praise Jehovah! We might understand two meanings to apply here: God takes those who are financially poor and needy, and raises them up out of their poverty; but also takes those who are grace-oriented and those who do not have the human strength to lift themselves up, and God raises them up and exalts them.
10. Proverbs:
- a. Prov. 30:13–14: There is a generation, Oh how lofty are its eyes! And its eyelids are lifted up, a generation whose teeth are like swords, and its jaw teeth like knives, to devour the poor from the earth, and the needy from among men. One could interpret this in either way—that we are dealing with a generation of men who abuse, exploit and oppress the poor and needy; or those who treat as badly those who have some spiritual sense.
  - b. Prov. 31 appears to be a list of sayings which a mother taught to her son, called King Lemuel in Prov. 31:1 (apart from this, we do not know who this man is). V. 9 reads: Open your mouth, judge righteously, and defend the poor and needy. V. 20 reads: She [a woman of virtue] spreads out her hands to the poor, yea, she stretches out her hands to the needy. These verses could be interpreted with either set of meanings.



11. The prophets (it appears as both interpretations may be applied to *the poor and the needy* in the following passages). By the way, I offer these by way of completeness, but I think that I have clearly established the double-meaning of these two words back in the psalms.
- a. Isa. 14:29–30: [Do not rejoice, O Philistia, all of you, for the rod of your striking is broken, because a viper comes forth from the root of a snake, and his fruit shall be a fiery flying serpent. And the first-born of the poor shall eat; and the needy shall lie down in safety; and I will kill your root with famine; and it shall kill your remnant.](#) If I understand this correctly, God through Isaiah is prophesying the destruction of Philistia, but those who are believers and mature believers will be preserved.
  - b. Isa. 25:4: [For You \[God\] are a stronghold to the poor, a stronghold to the needy in his distress, a refuge from storm, a shadow from heat; because the breath of the ruthless is like a storm against a wall.](#) Again, we use the word *the poor and needy* to describe those who are believers and mature believers, and those whom God protects.
  - c. Isa. 32:7–8: [And the weapons of the miser are evil; he devises wicked plots to destroy the poor with lying words, even the needy when he speaks right. But the noble one devises noble things; and he shall rise by noble things.](#) The object of the attack could be interpreted in both ways here.
  - d. Isa. 41:17: [The poor and the needy seek water, and there is none; their tongue is parched for thirst. I, Jehovah will hear them; the God of Israel will not leave them.](#) Again, God takes care of the poor and the needy; He also takes care of the grace oriented and those who are unable to save themselves (which is all mankind).
  - e. Jer. 22:16: [He judged the cause of the poor and needy, then it was well. Was this not to know Me, says Jehovah?](#)
  - f. Ezek. 16:49: [Behold, this was the iniquity of your sister Sodom: pride, fullness of bread, and abundance of idleness was in her and her daughters. Also, she did not strengthen the hand of the poor and needy.](#)
  - g. Ezek. 18:12–13: [he has oppressed the poor and needy; thieving, he stole; he has not returned the pledge, and has lifted up his eyes to the idols; he has committed abomination; he has given on interest and has taken increase; shall he also live? He shall not live. He has done all these abominations; dying he shall die; his blood shall be on him.](#)
  - h. Ezek. 22:28–29: [And her prophets have daubed themselves with lime, a seer of empty visions, and divining lies to them, saying, So says the Lord Jehovah, when Jehovah has not spoken. The people of the land have used oppression and practiced robbery. And they troubled the poor and the needy, and they have oppressed the stranger without justice.](#)
  - i. Amos 4:1–3: [Hear this word, cows of Bashan who are in the mountain of Samaria, who press down the helpless, who crush the poor, who say to their husbands, Bring in, that we may drink. The Lord Jehovah has sworn by His holiness that the days are coming that He will lift you up with meat hooks, and the last of you with fishhooks. And you shall go out at the breaches, each woman before her. And you shall throw down the high place, declares Jehovah.](#)
  - j. Amos 8:4–6: [Hear this, you who swallow up the poor, even to make the humble of the land to cease, saying, When will the new moon have passed, so that we may buy grain? Or the Sabbath, so that we may open the wheat, making smaller the ephah, and making greater the shekel, and to falsify the deceitful balances, in order to buy the helpless with silver, and the poor for a pair of sandals, and sell the chaff of the wheat?](#)
12. Conclusion: *the poor and the needy* no doubt refer to those who lack money and are in need. However, it is clear in the context of the psalms that these two words together refer to believers and believers who are maturing. *The poor* can also refer to one who is *grace-oriented*; one who understand the grace of God (making him a mature believer); and *the needy* refers to a man in need of salvation, something which he cannot provide for himself; he recognizes his own deficiency.

[Return to Topics](#)

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[Online Doctrines](#)

[Return to the Chart Index](#)

[Exegetical Studies in the Psalms](#)

[Doctrinal Index \(a list of all topics covered\)](#)

