

## 7 Prosperity

‘Money is the root of all evil’—so proclaimed the popular song. A bit of a travesty really, because what the King James version said was, ‘The love of money is the root of all evil’ (1 Timothy 6:10). George Bernard Shaw is said to have declared, ‘Lack of money is the root of all evil’.

It is because people love money so much that pyramid schemes or chain letters flourish. You know the way these things work. You receive a letter requesting you to send money to someone several steps further up the pyramid, and to broaden the base of the pyramid by copying the letter and sending it to a number of other people. Then, in due time, you expect to receive from those further down the pyramid several times the money you paid out. Many people are taken in by this idea, not stopping to think that there must be a limit to the number of those who receive several times what they give. (Those who hope to win large sums on the lottery also do not seem to consider that the money to enrich them only comes from the large number of people who lose their stake.)

A common idea which seems to be increasingly popular in some circles is that God shows his favour to us by increasing our material riches. So the bigger, the more expensive, the flashier car which the minister drives, the more God must be blessing his ministry. This is the so-called ‘prosperity teaching’, represented by its opponents as ‘name-it-claim-it-get-rich-quick’. How far does this concept agree with what the Bible teaches?

We have suggested (in Chapter 2) several principles which we should follow when trying to interpret the Bible. We have traced (in chapters 3 to 6) five major themes which are basic to the Bible’s message. From this chapter on we will seek to apply these ground rules to a number of issues which will serve as suitable examples for demonstrating how the principles for interpretation are to be applied. More importantly, these issues have been chosen because they have caused and are causing problems for Christians, often generating much pain and distress. Prosperity teaching is the first of these.

### **Prosperity in the Old Testament**

There are many places in the Old Testament where we find the promise of material prosperity for those who are righteous, that is, those who keep God’s Law. One notable example is in the blessing which was to take place on Mount Gerizim. ‘If you fully obey the Lord your God and carefully follow all his commands,’ they were told (Deuteronomy 28:1), then ‘the Lord will grant you abundant prosperity—in the fruit of your womb, the young of your livestock, and the crops of your ground—in the land he swore to your forefathers to give you’ (v. 11). Certainly in the Old Testament wealth could be a sign of God’s blessing.

Poverty would be an unknown thing: ‘There should be no poor among you . . . if only you fully obey the Lord your God and are careful to follow all these commands I am giving you today’ (Deuteronomy 15:4–5).

Before you get carried away with this, remember that the blessings promised on Mount Gerizim were offset by the curses declared on Mount Ebal. Note that all such prosperity is promised to those who keep the Law. It is of the nature of the Law that there are both blessings and curses. We are not now under the Law, and so we are not subject either to its blessings or curses. We need to hold our fire until we see what the New Testament has to say about this matter.

Some have seen in the prayer of Jabez an encouragement to seek prosperity: ‘Jabez cried out to the God of Israel, “Oh that you would bless me and enlarge my territory! Let your hand be with me, and keep me from harm so that I will be free from pain.” And God granted his request’ (1 Chronicles 4:10).

This is, however, just a single verse. Remember we need to look at how much evidence there is for any theme. Once again, we need to see how the New Testament regards this subject.

Undoubtedly the Old Testament is given to us for our profit. But should we expect this to be profit which lines our pockets?

### Warnings about riches

The disciples of Jesus were well aware of the Old Testament link between God’s blessing and material prosperity. When the rich young man went away sorrowful, not being able to respond to Christ’s claims, Christ astonished his disciples (Mark 10:23–7). He told them, ‘It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God’ (v. 25). In their amazement they asked, ‘Who then can be saved?’ (v. 26). If the one who has been so blessed by God that he has abundant riches can hardly be saved, then who can?

The trouble with riches is that one may easily rely on them. Paul has to instruct Timothy, ‘Command those who are rich in this present world not to be arrogant nor to put their hope in wealth, which is so uncertain, but to put their hope in God, who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment’ (1 Timothy 6:17).

Jesus taught that the seed sown among thorns is choked by ‘the worries of this life, the deceitfulness of wealth and the desire for other things’ (Mark 4:19). So riches are certainly not the unmitigated blessing which some see them. Individuals who have won the lottery may often serve as examples of this. Riches beyond the dreams of avarice do not necessarily free people from problems in this life.

James in his epistle is extremely strong in his remarks to the rich. He charges them with having ‘hoarded wealth in the last days’ (James 5:3). In other words, these are the last days, near to the time when Christ will come again. We should be about his business, on tiptoe with expectation. This is no time to be merely busying ourselves by amassing wealth. Such a concern is tantamount to getting ‘involved in civilian affairs’ when a Christian’s aim should be ‘to please his commanding

officer’ (2 Timothy 2:4). James’ condemnation is, ‘You have lived on earth in luxury and self-indulgence’ (James 5:5).

If possession of riches can be dangerous to one’s spiritual health, seeking riches is no less a risk. ‘People who want to get rich fall into temptation and a trap and into many foolish and harmful desires that plunge men into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs’ (1 Timothy 6:9–10).

In view of these verses it is hard to imagine Christ or his apostles urging us to seek material prosperity as a sign of God’s blessing on us. If riches are a danger to the soul, can we expect a loving heavenly Father to reward us in such a way? Even a desire to be rich can ruin our spiritual lives.

### Examples

If material prosperity is a sign of God’s favour, then we might expect that Christ would be the supreme example of this. However, the reverse is the case. He was born in a stable. His baby clothes were only strips of cloth. These matters were to be the very evidence that he was a Saviour, Christ the Lord (Luke 2:12). When he was in the flow of his adult ministry, he did not even have a half shekel (‘two-drachma’) for the tax (Matthew 17:24–7). He certainly did not have a denarius, but had to ask for one to be brought in order to use it as a visual aid (Mark 12:15). He cautioned a would-be follower that he had nowhere to lay his head (Matthew 8:20), the implication being that his followers could not be certain of this either.

‘You know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ’, Paul says, ‘that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich’ (2 Corinthians 8:9). Are we to interpret this verse literally? Although Christ was poor in this world’s goods, maybe it was in order that we might attain material riches?

This was certainly not Paul’s experience. He explains to those who had sent him financial help, ‘I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty’ (Philippians 4:12). The experience of apostles is that ‘we go hungry and thirsty, we are in rags’ (1 Corinthians 4:11). In fact, Paul says, ‘We commend ourselves . . . in hunger’ (2 Corinthians 6:4–5). Does it really seem that God wishes to commend his servants by a display of wealth?

### God’s provision

Though the New Testament does not promise that we will be materially wealthy, it makes it abundantly clear that God will provide for his servants. 1 Timothy 6:17, already quoted, reminds us that God ‘richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment’. Those who give to others will find an ample supply for themselves: ‘God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work’ (2 Corinthians 9:8).

In words which could be particularly relevant to the prosperity movement, Paul warns Timothy about those who imagine ‘that godliness is a means to financial gain’ (1 Timothy 6:5). Before the verses quoted above on the danger of desiring to be rich, he says: ‘Godliness with contentment is great gain. For we brought nothing into the world, and we can take nothing out of it. But if we have food and clothing, we will be content with that’ (1 Timothy 6:6–8).

Being content with the basic provision for life, and with the presence of the one who can provide for us, is a theme echoed by the writer to the Hebrews: ‘Keep your lives free from the love of money and be content with what you have, because God has said, “Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you” ’ (Hebrews 13:5).

After the rich young man had gone sorrowfully away, and Jesus had told his disciples how hard it was for a rich man to enter the kingdom, the disciples wondered how they would fare in terms of material provision. Jesus told them that anyone who had left home or family or property for his sake would receive ‘a hundred times as much in this present age (homes, brothers, sisters, mothers, children and fields)’ (Mark 10:30).

A hundred times more material benefits than one has given up for the gospel—that sounds like riches! However, one must bear in mind that Jesus has just that moment told them of the difficulty rich people would have entering the kingdom of God. Would he choose that same time to promise them that they would become rich?

I suggest that Jesus was reminding them that God is no man’s debtor. They had followed Jesus in a way which the young rich man found impossible, by leaving everything. Jesus is saying that throughout this life, though there will be persecutions ahead, there will be ample provision for their material needs, and with a loving family of God’s people to make up for the family left behind.

### **True riches**

Christ contrasted ‘worldly wealth’ with ‘true riches’ (Luke 16:11). He contrasted treasure on earth with treasure in heaven: ‘Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven . . . For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also’ (Matthew 6:19–21).

The church in Smyrna is told: ‘I know your afflictions and your poverty—yet you are rich!’ (Revelation 2:9). On the other hand, the church in Laodicea is told: ‘You say, “I am rich; I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing.” But you do not realise that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked’ (Revelation 3:17).

So it seems that there are two kinds of wealth. You may be a millionaire in one kind, yet be a pauper in the other. There are real spiritual riches, riches in heaven, which are of far more value and much longer lasting than earthly wealth. God has ‘chosen those who are poor in the eyes of the world to be rich in faith,’ James tell us (James 2:5). The parable of the rich fool (Luke 12:13–21) ends with the death and

impoverishment of the man, and with the statement: ‘This is how it will be with anyone who stores up things for himself but is not rich towards God’ (v. 21).

So there are riches which are much more than this world’s wealth, and which are far more to be sought after. This is surely the way we are enriched in Christ: ‘Though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich’ (2 Corinthians 8:9).

It is far more important for a believer in Christ to seek for these spiritual riches rather than looking for material wealth. ‘In him you have been enriched in every way,’ says Paul to the Corinthians (1 Corinthians 1:5).

God may also commit earthly wealth to us, in which case we have a responsibility to act as faithful stewards. However, ‘Though your riches increase, do not set your heart on them’ (Psalm 62:10). Our heart should be where our treasure is. Our true riches are Christ himself, the real treasure in heaven. Where is your heart?

### **Conclusions**

We have seen again that the material provision of the Old Testament is matched by spiritual provision in the New. By nature we have hearts that long for the fleshpots of the old covenant. God is in the process of showing us that what we have in Christ is so much more than these things. In particular, he promises to provide for us day by day as he lives with us, and as he dwells in us by the Holy Spirit.

### **And finally . . .**

Suppose you have a church where the minister is convinced about prosperity teaching. He preaches that the more you give to God, the more you will get. His congregation give until it hurts. The minister gets the flashy car which (he reckons) shows that God is blessing his ministry. His congregation are left with a hole in their bank balances, waiting for someone to give to them. Doesn’t this sound rather similar to a pyramid scheme? Have you thought of that?