

PROPERTY OR PROSPERITY?

Today's Text: (a) Psalm 73; (b) 3 John 2,3

Extracts:

1. I was envious of the boastful, when I saw *the prosperity of the wicked*. ... they are not in trouble as other men, nor are they plagued like other men. ... Their eyes bulge with abundance; *they have more than heart could wish*. ... When I thought how to understand this, it was too painful for me *until I went into the sanctuary of God; then I understood their end* [Ps. 73: 3, 5, 7, 16, 17]
2. Beloved, I pray *that you may prosper in all things and be in health, just as your soul prospers*. I have no greater joy than to hear that my children walk in truth [3 Jn 2,3]

In a recent study, researchers surveyed 117 people who had won the Ohio State lottery over a 12-year period and whose winnings ranged from US\$20,000 to almost \$5 million. A significant 63% reported that they continued to work in spite of their winnings.¹ In another study, a New Jersey resident who had won \$1 million in a lottery way back in 1993 said that it was a curse disguised as a blessing.²

The above stories confirm the word of God that “he who hastens to be rich will not go unpunished” [Prov. 28: 22]. So, if material prosperity cannot satisfy, why then do people pursue it with such singular commitment? Why do some people steal or cheat to get rich? Why are the poor or not so rich so envious of the rich? Why are especially those who have chosen to follow the way of truth and righteousness also caught up in the craze for material success? Is God against material prosperity?

These issues have been raised in Psalm 73 and elsewhere in the Bible. Today's lesson will attempt to clarify the matter. We shall attempt to demonstrate that material success (property) is not the same thing as prosperity (the enjoyment of it).

¹ “Researchers: “Most lottery winners stay on the job,” www.lotterypost.com/threads75708.htm posted on 31 October 2003

² “Some lottery winners lose, too,”

www.theolympian.com/home/news/20030913/frontpag/99008_Printer.shtml

1. What is prosperity?

Prosperity may have different meanings to different people, depending on their pursuits. However, in general, prosperity can mean one or all of the following:

a) *Material assets*

Houses, bank accounts and other personal possessions are used as a measure of our material success. The commonest measure is how much money (cash or credit facilities) that we have. It can determine what we can eat or wear or ride and where we can live. It influences our leisure and pastimes. Some people quote the scripture, “money answers everything” [Eccl. 10: 19] to illustrate the versatility of money.

In describing Jacob’s success while he was working for Laban, the Bible said, “Thus the man became *exceedingly prosperous*, and had large flocks, female and male servants, and camels and donkeys” [Gen. 30: 43]. Job was said to be the “greatest of all the people of the East” because, apart from a large family of sons and daughters, “his possessions were seven thousand sheep, three thousand camels, five hundred yoke of oxen, five hundred female donkeys, and a very large household” [Job 1: 2-3]. When Peter asked Jesus what was the reward for those who had given up everything to follow Him, Jesus listed, in addition to everlasting life, a doubling of houses and lands, among other earthly blessings [Matt. 19: 27-29]. In deed, it is God that gives humankind the power to get wealth [Deut. 9: 18].

b) *Success in a chosen task or profession*

Some times, prosperity has nothing to do with material affluence but more with achieving success in one’s chosen task or profession. For example, a scientist who wins a Nobel Prize in his/her field sees prosperity in terms of the prestige enjoyed among peers. In material terms, sports people earn more than the American President but how many of them enjoy his power and prestige in national or world politics?

When Abraham sent his servant to find a wife for Isaac from among his people in Syria, he came to a well and prayed for certain signs to confirm that he had met the right woman. After he had met Rebeka, “the man, wondering at her, remained silent so as to know whether the Lord had made his journey *prosperous* or not” [Gen. 24: 21]. His journey became successful or prosperous when Rebeka turned out to be the woman that had met his criteria.

c) *Peace of mind*

What good is it to have the softest bed on earth when you cannot find sleep? After all, “the abundance of the rich will not permit him to sleep” [Eccl. 5: 12]. What does it matter if you can pay for any meal in the best restaurants and you have no appetite? What kind of affluence are you in when you can only move around under heavy security?

As the children of Israel languished over the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians, Jeremiah lamented, “You have moved my soul far from *peace*; I have forgotten *prosperity*” [Lam. 3:17]. When David sent word to Nabal for food and supplies, he told his servants, “And thus you shall say to him who lives in *prosperity*, ‘Peace be to you, peace to your house, and peace to all that you have!’” [1 Sam. 25: 6]. In his third epistle, John wrote, “Beloved, I pray *that you may prosper in all things and be in health, just as your soul prospers*” [3 Jn 2]. God keeps in perfect peace those whose minds are stayed on Him because they trust in Him [Is. 26: 3].

From the forgoing, we see that God is the source of prosperity [Ps. 118: 25] and He gave us the *power* to get wealth “that He may establish His covenant which He swore to your fathers, as it is this day” [Deut. 9: 18]. Through wisdom, which only God can give, a house is built, and by understanding it is established. “By knowledge the rooms are filled with *all precious and pleasant riches*” [Prov. 24: 3-4]. With this background, let us now look at Psalm 73.

2. What kind of rich person are you?

In Psalm 73, Asaph is envious of the prosperity of the wicked. As long as he examined the problem in flesh, he could not understand why wicked people were blessed in spite of their evident arrogance and lawlessness. However, it was only when he began to look at it from a spiritual perspective that he became consoled. Jeremiah had a similar problem. He challenged God with questions like, “Why does the way of the wicked prosper? Why are those happy who deal so treacherously?” God replied him with a question, “If you have run with the footmen, and they have wearied you, then how can you contend with horses?” [Jer. 12: 1-5]. God is telling Jeremiah, “You don’t understand!”

In general, rich people can be classified as follows (among others):

a) *The Rich Fool*

The fool has been defined as a person who “has said in his heart, ‘there is no God’” [Ps. 14: 1]. Therefore, material wealth becomes his/her god “for where your treasure is, there will your heart be also” [Matt. 6: 21]. Consequently, fools “set their mouth against the heavens, and their tongue walks through the earth” [Ps. 73: 8-9]. “Pride serves as their necklace; and violence covers them like a garment” [v. 6].

A rich fool is wicked in the sense that s(he) acquires wealth by all means fair and foul. Wicked people oppress the underprivileged with the show of their abundance, giving the impression that “they are not in trouble as other men, nor are they plagued like other men” [vv. 5, 7]. They boast, “How does God know? And is there knowledge in the Most High?” [v. 11]. “These are the ungodly, who are always at ease; they increase in riches” [v. 12]. But are they really at ease? No! God has “set them in slippery places” and “cast them down to destruction” [v. 18].

The Parable of the Rich Fool was told by Jesus to illustrate the point that we should “take heed and beware of covetousness, for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of the things he possesses” [Lk 12: 15]. The man’s estate produced much abundance and he became very rich, to the extent that he had no more storage room. Instead of **sharing** his abundance with the needy, he decided to pull down and enlarge his barns. Thereafter, he would sit back and enjoy himself, telling his soul, “Eat, drink and be merry.” God said to the man, “Fool! This night your soul will be required of you” [vv. 16-20]. Apart from going to hell, his estate went to others!

b) *The Robin Hood*

In English folklore, Robin Hood was an outlaw who lived in the woods to escape arrest. Occasionally, he would attack the rich and oppressing elite and distribute his loot among the needy. Consequently, it was difficult for him to be caught because the needy did not provide information on his whereabouts!

The modern Robin Hoods may be white-collar criminals, that is, highly placed people in enterprises or the civil service or in politics who use their positions to enrich themselves, family, friends and supporters. They pay tithes on their loot and make fat offerings, including building places of worship for their denominations. They champion causes and set up charities or foundations for the poor and the needy. As a result, they are seen as the leading lights of the community and people would do everything to protect them! Inwardly, they are as wicked as the Rich Fool. So, they cannot deceive God. “Getting treasures by a lying tongue is the fleeting fantasy of those who seek death” [Prov. 21: 6]. Therefore, “as a dream, when one awakes,” so will God “despise their image” [Ps. 73: 20].

In the Parable of the Unjust Steward [Lk 16: 1-11], Jesus tells the story of a smart servant who faced loss of his job. His master told him to render an account of his management before leaving. What did he do? Knowing that he was too old to dig and too ashamed to beg, he went to his master’s debtors and got them to reduce how much they owed, with the hope that

on his dismissal, they would fund his pension scheme! The telling conclusion is that you cannot do well with evil means, that “you cannot serve God and mammon” *at the same time* [v. 10].

c) *The Prodigal Son*

The Prodigal Son is a rich person whom God has blessed with wealth (through, for example, inheritance or hard work) and then goes to waste it on sinful ventures. In the Parable of the Lost Son [Lk 15: 11-32], the younger son obtained from his father his inheritance. Soon after, he “gathered all together, journeyed to a far country, and there *wasted his possessions with prodigal living*” [v. 13]. We know what happened to him. Famine came to the land and hunger struck the young man.

Another example from the Bible is Lot, Abram’s nephew. It was his uncle who had helped him to build his wealth of “flocks and herds and tents” [Gen. 13: 5]. Soon after, his servants began to contend with Abram’s. The old man became worried. He called Lot and told him that the fight was not necessary. He gave him a choice of two territories: the plain with the cities or the hills. Lot chose the former and Abram moved out. It turned out that Lot’s inheritance contained Sodom and Gomorrah, the cities later destroyed by God for their grievous sins of immorality [vv. 6-13; 19: 1-29]. Lot’s future thereafter went down hill. He lost his wife, and his daughters raped their drunken father to raise children by him [vv. 30-38]. What a riotous living!

Solomon is a classical example of the Prodigal Son. God blessed him with wisdom and material wealth beyond measure. All the kings of the earth came to Jerusalem to hear of his wisdom and they came with expensive gifts [1 Kgs 4: 29-33]. He spoke three thousand proverbs, some of which today constitute the books of Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and the Song of Solomon. He also built the temple for which his father, David, had gathered the materials. In the end, he squandered his prosperity on foreign wives and worship of false gods [1 Kgs 11: 1-15]. The kingdom of Israel went downhill from that point on. Solomon had squandered his spiritual gifts by allowing material blessings to rule over him.

d) *The God-fearing*

The God-fearing rich person uses honest and God-sanctioned ways to make his/her wealth and uses it to glorify God for “the blessing of the Lord makes one rich, and adds no sorrow with it” [Prov. 10: 22]. In addition, “the fear of the Lord leads to life, and he who has it will abide *in satisfaction*; he will not be visited with evil” [Prov. 19:23].

There are numerous examples of people in the Bible who used their wealth to glorify God. For example, Barnabas “having land, sold it, and brought the money and laid it at the apostles’ feet” [Acts 4: 36-37]. Cornelius, a Gentile and a Roman officer, was called “a devout man and one who feared God with all his household, *who gave alms generously to the people*, and prayed to God always” [Acts 10: 1-2]. Therefore, it is possible to be materially rich and still be God-fearing!

3. Conclusion: Lessons

The following lessons should be noted:

- God gives us the power to get wealth. However, how we use that wealth is our *responsibility*.
- Those who use their God-given wealth to glorify Him will be blessed with *prosperity*, that is, peace of mind and good health.
- Those who trust their material wealth are into idolatry and they are stuck with mere *property*, that is, real estate, bank accounts and other assets, all of which are perishable, the works of human hands [Ps. 115: 4-8]. “For the *love* of money is a root of all kinds of evil, for which some have strayed from the faith in their greediness, and pierced themselves through with *many sorrows*” [1 Tim. 6: 10].
- The God-fearing rich person “leaves an inheritance to his children’s children, *but the wealth of the sinner is stored up for the righteous*” [Prov. 13: 22]. For example, the stolen wealth of dead politicians from the developing world is being retrieved from European and American banks to fund development programmes for the poor in Asian and African countries!

Wealth is from God. Its misuse is from Satan. If you want prosperity, enjoy your wealth God’s way. Otherwise, you will be stuck with worry, fear and poor health in trying to protect diminishing and perishing property. The choice is yours.

Do you want property or prosperity?