

## The Old Testament and Prosperity Gospel Teachings

### 1.0 Introduction

Prosperity theology is a modern scriptural interpretation that asserts that followers of Christianity can expect financial blessings as part of God's will. By following their scriptural interpretations of being a good Christian, which includes donations, positive speech and following the ten commandments, individuals will have a higher degree of wealth and prosperity. Prosperity gospel teaching and justifications are neither subscribed to by major denominations nor large cross sections of Biblical scholars. As a result, those individuals teaching and following prosperity based gospels are doing so from non denominational Christian catalysts. Rather than groups of Churches, prosperity gospels are generally confined to individual churches ran by singular leadership structures. The reason for the lack of popularity in prosperity gospels is due to the lack of Biblical evidence to support such proclamations. In contrast, there is far more evidence in the Old and New Testaments to refute prosperity teachings than there is to justify them. In an effort to illustrate why prosperity gospels are not supported by the Old Testament, this work will draw from Biblical scholars, prophets and the books of the Old Testament. In doing so, the loose foundations on which such teachings rests will be highlighted. Beyond this, a better understanding of the true relationship between God and man will be facilitated. According to Stenhammar, "The prosperity gospel is poor, and when taken in full dosage it has a devastating side effect; it impoverishes the Christian faith."<sup>1</sup> Holistically, subscribing to the prosperity gospel declarations is contrary to the fundamental underpinnings of Christianity. For true followers of Jesus Christ, it is important to understand such distinctions.

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<sup>1</sup> Stenhammar, M. "The Poverty of the Prosperity Gospel." *Lausanne Global Conversation* (2010): 75.

## 2.0 Foundations of the Prosperity Gospel

While there are some Biblical verses that when taken out of context are frequently used by subscribers to prosperity gospels to back their claims, the primary motivation for being attracted to prosperity gospels is very human in nature. Human beings tend to see themselves at the center of importance, whereas the center of importance in the Old and New Testaments would be God and God's will. As the center of their own introspection, it is of small wonder that a doctrine of embracing God to achieve a better human condition would be attractive. Within the realms of the prosperity gospel is a general focus on material wealth. Material wealth, however, is a human condition. Stenhammar contends, "The promises of health and wealth for all Christians are exciting and appealing as they often are presented by rhetorically gifted speakers who seem larger than life."<sup>2</sup> Being that rhetorically gifted speakers are the primary disseminators of prosperity teaching, they do have the ability to gain loyal followings as they first are charismatic and naturally leaders and second they are producing a message in which humans find great comfort. It is far more difficult to understand God's nature when that nature is sometimes unpredictable, when it sometimes is punitive and when it has a component of free will that allows for earthly based suffering to happen to even the most devout.

Typically, understanding of scripture comes from either official Church agencies or contemporary scholars.<sup>3</sup> The tradition of breaking from official interpretations of scripture can be dated back to Enlightenment philosophy.<sup>4</sup> Essentially, events like the reformation took power from what they considered to be corrupt official Church interpretations of scripture that were serving man and human power rather than the actual word of God. Though not an official or

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<sup>2</sup> Stenhammar, M. "The Poverty of the Prosperity Gospel." *Lausanne Global Conversation*. 75.

<sup>3</sup> Brueggeman, W. *Theology of the Old Testament* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997).

<sup>4</sup> Hasel, G. F. *Old Testament Theology: Basic Issues in the Current Debate* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991).

even a large movement, the foundations of prosperity gospel are putting forth a doctrine that heralds a human agenda rather than a holy one. Prosperity gospel, therefore, is a convenient oversimplification that provides humans with a message that they wish to hear.

## 2.1 The Place of the Old Testament

Perhaps even more so than the New Testament, the Old Testament has a unique capacity to speak in reference to lives of communities and individuals.<sup>5</sup> While it is understood that the central theme in the New Testament is Jesus Christ and his resurrection, there is no such agreement as to the central thematic of the Old Testament.<sup>6</sup> In general, it can be stated that there is a general avoidance of the Old Testament by even the most devout followers of Christianity.

According to Peels,

The way in which the Old testament speaks about God may be alien and even frightening to the average reader of the Bible. The God who hides himself in anger, executes revenge, and who in jealousy outpours wrath and judgement - Who is he? Can this God be trusted? These are questions that not only raise theological problems, but also touch the heart of our faith and experience.<sup>7</sup>

The result of this phenomenon has been what Dyrness described as typical Christian study time.

Under the typical Christian studying process, the Old Testament is generally only consulted on occasion and when it is, it usually is confined to Psalms and Proverbs with occasional consideration of Prophets.<sup>8</sup> “The result is that many Christians fail to understand the whole scope of God’s revelation of himself-they have an incomplete picture of God’s purposes.”<sup>9</sup>

With a culture of avoidance and generally less understanding of the Old Testament, the book is ripe for hijacking by individuals seeking to push forth their own agenda. It is certainly

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<sup>5</sup> Goldingay, J. *Old Testament Theology* (Downers Grove: IVP 2003).

<sup>6</sup> Hasel, G. F. *Old Testament Theology: Basic Issues in the Current Debate*

<sup>7</sup> Peels, H.G.L. *Shadow Sides: The Revelation of God in the Old Testament* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2003): 1

<sup>8</sup> Dyrness, W. *Themes in Old Testament Theology* (Exeter: Paternoster, 1979).

<sup>9</sup> Ibid. 15.

not something new or even unique to misquote or take biblical passages out of context in order to rationalize a human agenda that would be contrary to the true message of God's word. According to Biblical scholar, Rendtorff, Christians have frequently hijacked Israel's Bible and imposed upon it their own alien categories.<sup>10</sup> While this finding can generally be used to demonstrate how the Old Testament has and continues to be misused, the nature of prosperity gospel as an offshoot of official Christian doctrines makes it erroneous to call prosperity interpretations a general Christian phenomenon. The fact that the Old Testament is so frequently misunderstood and so easily manipulated to serve human needs demonstrates not only why it is important that Christians study the teachings with more focus than has traditionally be allocated, it also demonstrates how something like the prosperity gospel can take on a life of its own and captivate humans who believe they are following Christian teachings.

## 2.2 Examining Verse Justifications for Prosperity Gospel

Since the New Testament justification is not the focus of this discourse, it will only be examined on a cursory basis. In this particular verse of Corinthians it states, "For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, that you through his poverty might become rich"<sup>11</sup> In this argument, wealth was not being expressed by Paul in terms of human riches. The literal interpretation of this passage is not what it was intended to be by the author. In the Old Testament, similar examples of wealthy kings or Christians who had great prosperity or that were led to the land of milk and honey are incidental and not supposed to be a literal focus of the passages. Focusing on such matters is diverting attention from the major themes. Childs, in citing Isaiah, explained that God's work and purpose

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<sup>10</sup> Rendtorff, R. *The Canonical Hebrew Bible: A Theology of the Old Testament* (Leiden: Deo, 2005).

<sup>11</sup> 2 Corinthians 8:9

is suited according to his own time and will.<sup>12</sup> This proclamation is important for understanding how the Old Testament operates. Rather than being predictable or concerned with matters of man, God is on another plane of existence. For men to link God's will with matters of human concern is essentially overlooking the fact that time and will are matters for God to determine and not man. While it would be convenient for God's followers on Earth to have prosperity and wealth, this does not mean that it is God's will or plan. In addition, it does not mean that if wealth blessings were part of a previous paradigm that they are suited to another time or situation. God knows what is best for man better than man knows what is best for his own existence.

There are a variety of Biblical verses that are typically cited to justify prosperity gospels. While on a cursory glance or in a non connected capacity these claims may seem legitimate, upon further evaluation they are not of sufficient scope to back prosperity gospel claims. In Genesis, for example, it is stated, "And I will make of thee a great nation, and I will bless thee, and make thy name great; and thou shalt be a blessing: And I will bless them that bless thee, and curse them that curse thee: and in thee shall all the families of the earth be blessed."<sup>13</sup> While this speaks of God's blessings and foreshadows a great civilization for the people of Israel, it does not specifically reference human based material wealth. Blessings for followers of God on Earth could be spiritual vitality, an increased understanding of their place in the universe or prosperity in the hereafter. This verse, though frequently cited, is not a sound justification for Christianity being linked to guaranteed material wealth.

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<sup>12</sup> Childs, B.S. *Old Testament Theology in a Canonical Context* (London: SCM, 1985). 38.

<sup>13</sup> Genesis 12:2,3

In Job, a frequently cited verse by prosperity gospel advocates explains, “Thou shalt also decree a thing and it shall be established unto thee: and the light shall shine upon thy ways.”<sup>14</sup> While this again guarantees God’s blessings, it does not state how those blessings will be delivered nor when they will be delivered. When put into the context of the Book of Job, the reader should understand that Job had endured some of the most harsh human experiences that one could experience. Had he forsaken God, his suffering would have actually stopped. He remained steadfast in his love for God despite his suffering and accepted God’s definition of blessing and salvation. There is no human wealth component to this particular tale. If anything, this book would be a far better example of how the human experience is linked to suffering rather than prosperity.

In regards to prosperity gospels, Deuteronomy is another typically cited source. In the book it states, “But thou shalt remember the Lord thy God: for it is he that giveth thee power to get wealth, that he may establish his covenant in which he swore unto thy fathers, as it is this day.”<sup>15</sup> This verse does employ the term *wealth*, however, it does not specifically state if this is wealth in the human or literal sense. Wealth can be interpreted differently from one individual to the next and it may not mean material wealth. Even if it were agreed upon that this verse is specifically referencing material wealth, the verse actually states that God has only given man the power to get wealth. Under this clause, man can get wealth, but it does not guarantee he will achieve it or be successful. This statement would be akin to the wording of the U.S. Declaration of Independence that suggests people are guaranteed Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness. It does not state that happiness will be achieved. God has given man the ability to get wealth and

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<sup>14</sup> Job 22:28

<sup>15</sup> Deuteronomy 8:18

he will not be punished for it, but there are no links between following God's will and being guaranteed human material wealth.

In a more overt example of prosperity through health, it is stated in Deuteronomy, " And the LORD will take away from you all sickness, and will afflict you with none of the terrible diseases of Egypt which you have known, but will lay them on all those who hate you."<sup>16</sup> While this does make a strong argument for health guaranteed through the Lord's blessings, it is focal on a singular situation and not a general phenomenon. In this example, God is speaking to the people of Israel in regards to their subjugation under Egypt. This is a specific situation and God's will could be different under another situation. For modern Christians, there is no guarantee that God's perspective would be the same as the situation of today's world would be very different from those present in the Old Testament. How God would classify blessings today can only be the subject of speculation as there is no direct gospel specific to a modern event in the same manner that this verse is specific to the flight from Egypt situation.

Holistically, in some situations it is true that God's blessings due include material wealth and abundant health. In addition, it is true that God has given man the free will to achieve wealth through earthly means. This has led Biblical scholars like Bruce Barron to conclude that there is some validity to prosperity gospels. Barron believes that prosperity teachings address parts of the Bible that have been traditionally overlooked; however, he also believes that the same movement is also frequently embellished by hermeneutical excess.<sup>17</sup> Though material wealth and health are possible through God's blessings, they are not guaranteed and based on God's will in a given time and situation, whether or not even the most devout should be privy to such earthly comforts

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<sup>16</sup> Deuteronomy 7:15.

<sup>17</sup> Barron, Bruce. *The Health and Wealth Gospel* (New York: Intervaristy Press, 1987).

can vary greatly.

### 2.3 Exploring Suffering As Part of the Human Existence

According to Preuss, Encountering pain was and is part of human existence. Humans can suffer biologically and also from the wickedness of other humans like a tyrannical king.<sup>18</sup> Even the most devout and prophets throughout the Old Testament have not been spared from suffering. Some of the events that God's people in the Old Testament have endured were slavery, loss of property, being poor and self blame.<sup>19</sup> Each of these elements can be considered a form of suffering and/or pain and they are denoted in Amos, Micah, Isaiah and Job.<sup>20</sup> This pain does not mean that the people who endured such elements were not children of God, it simply means that their salvation was not denoted in earthly designations. This is reflected in Psalms, "Your grace is better than life."<sup>21</sup> In this capacity, God's grace is the reward, the byproducts of that grace are consequential and should not be the focus. In God's grace there is still pain and suffering despite the ultimate reward of salvation. Stenhammar refers to the prosperity gospel propensity for ignoring this element by explaining,

A Common criticism voiced at the prosperity gospel is that it turns God into a vending machine; put faith or 'seed money' in and out comes the blessing you want. Even though prosperity preachers vehemently oppose such criticism it is in fact how God becomes. (e.g. sowing and reaping and the mouth's confession or positive confession). If we learn how to practice these laws we will get access to "life more abundantly." There is therefore a great emphasis on studying and learning these principles as lack of knowledge is the main reason why Christians are stuck in poverty mentality, it is said.<sup>22</sup>

The ultimate downfall of this process is that it puts human beings at the center of theology.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Preuss, H. D. *Old Testament Theology: Vol 2* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1995).

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Amos 2:6, Micah 2:2; Isa. 5:8 & Job 1:13-20.

<sup>21</sup> Psalms 63:4.

<sup>22</sup> Stenhammar, M. "The Poverty of the Prosperity Gospel." 75.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.



In addition to suffering and pain, there is also the human connotation of not understanding the difference between suffering and prosperity in some situations. Essentially, there are examples of God's will that would appear to be problematic from a human perspective but that are actual blessings or divinely inspired events when put into the context of God's plan. One such example would be the relationship between Sarai and Abram. Sarai is unable to have children of her own. This designation is not a punishment or an intended suffering, but a test to see how the two humans live within God's grace. Rather than blaming God or suggesting that the creator has forsaken her, she accepts his judgement and instead seeks to help out his master plan. She explained, "Please go to my maid: perhaps I will obtain children through her."<sup>24</sup> Rather than questioning God, the humans decide to work within his designated framework. Accepting God's will is part of being a Christian. Assigning how God's will should manifest in human interpretations, which is the center of prosperity gospel, is erroneous and being negligent of these types of circumstances. Human beings will suffer and life on Earth can be a struggle. Faith, however, is also a struggle and it will be tested throughout the lives of humans. If simply praying gave a human being everything in which they desired, there would be no tests of faith and glorifying God would be an easy task as it would be based on desire for rewards rather than truly pious love.

#### 2.4 Biblical Refutation of Prosperity Gospel

There are a variety of verses throughout the Old Testament that express that man will endure suffering. For this however, it is God that is the answer rather than the answer being expressed in material or earthly prosperity. The salvation, or answer he provides, however, is not

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<sup>24</sup> Genesis 16:2.

something as simple as riches. In seeing the Lord as the solution to inevitable suffering, Psalms has a variety of relevant verses. For example, Psalms states, “The LORD is a refuge for the oppressed, a stronghold in times of trouble.”<sup>25</sup> In addition, the books states, “The LORD is my rock, my fortress and my deliverer; my God is my rock, in whom I take refuge. He is my shield and the horn of my salvation, my stronghold.”<sup>26</sup> Taking refuge in anything other than the lord, like wealth or prosperity, would be problematic or at least potentially leading the person astray from the true nature of God. Psalms continues, “For he has not despised or disdained the suffering of the afflicted one; he has not hidden his face from him but has listened to his cry for help.”<sup>27</sup> This verse is important because it explains that suffering on Earth is not necessarily punishment from God or an example of what happens to people when they do not follow the word of God. God does not like suffering, as the verse states; however, it is part of the human experience as a result of the original sin that was established in the Garden of Eden. God had given man paradise, however, man disobeyed God and the present rules of the universe are still established from this situation in which man’s actions were the catalyst.

While earthly suffering will occur, the only way in which to avoid eternal suffering is through following God’s word. Psalms also highlights this factor, “Weeping may remain for a night, but rejoicing comes in the morning.”<sup>28</sup> The morning rejoice is a reference to how suffering will be temporary if a person follows the word of God. This temporary but inevitable state of suffering is explained in greater detail in Psalms 71, “Though you have made me see troubles, many and bitter, you will restore my life again; from the depths of the earth you will again bring

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<sup>25</sup> Psalm 9:9

<sup>26</sup> Ibid 18:2

<sup>27</sup> Ibid. 22:24

<sup>28</sup> Psalm 30:5

me up. You will increase my honor and comfort me once again.”<sup>29</sup> This verse denotes a clear process between suffering and salvation. Salvation in an Earthly state, however, is not the end of suffering. For example, though prosperity gospel may point at suffering as a temporary phenomenon until God rewards salvation through prosperity, suffering on Earth is not necessarily a one time experience. This process is also referred to in Lamentations, “For men are not cast off by the Lord forever. Though he brings grief, he will show compassion, so great is his unfailing love. For he does not willingly bring affliction or grief to the children of men.”<sup>30</sup> It is not God’s nature to create grief and suffering, however, it is an acknowledged part of the human experience. The degree of that suffering can vary greatly from one person to the next and this has no bearing on the person’s devoutness.

As Psalm 71 highlighted, the person had seen many troubles and though God restores life, those troubles will continue so long as the person is in the human state of their existence. The true salvation of Christianity is what lies beyond the human condition. Salvation, therefore, cannot truly be found on an Earthly paradise. In Isaiah it is stated, “He will swallow up death forever. The sovereign Lord will wipe away the tears from all faces; he will remove the disgrace of his people from all the earth. The LORD has spoken.”<sup>31</sup> Delivery from suffering is the state of eternal life in God’s glory rather than within human reward structure.

### 3.0 Conclusions

Prosperity gospels are a predictable part of scriptural interpretation. Essentially, prosperity gospels take small amounts of information from the Bible and puts them within the very human context and desire for comfort. Human comfort in the modern world generally

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<sup>29</sup> Psalm 71: 20-21

<sup>30</sup> Lamentations 3:31-33

<sup>31</sup> Isaiah 25:8

comes from health, freedom and wealth. The Old Testament does not provide scriptural guarantees that any of these things will occur during one's time on the planet if he/she follows the word of God. What God does guarantee, however, is salvation and series of life events that will ultimately test an individual's faith at one point or another. Even the prophet Moses had a moment of lost faith when he was leading the Israelites from the Pharaoh. Men, even prophets, are fallible and life will produce some degrees of suffering. The Old Testament poignantly asserts these notions, however, it does not provide sufficient evidence to justify prosperity gospels.

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