

THE GOODNESS OF WEALTH: BUT NOT LIKE THE PROSPERITY GOSPEL CLAIMS

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Human beings obsess over possessions. Most people in the world believe they have too little material wealth, even in the most prosperous countries like my own, and perhaps yours. As a result those who truly do suffer lack regularly wonder why they cannot have a fair chance at earning a greater measure of the world's abundance. The nations that have grown in prosperity due to some significant measure of capitalism understandably reply that market forces will take care of the problems, without always acknowledging the way international dynamics and multinational corporations often skew advantages in favor of the already more prosperous nations and individuals. Questions about the appropriate roles for governments and for the business sectors of the world's nations are crucial in addressing these problems but go beyond the scope of this article.¹

¹ See Craig L. Blomberg, "Neither Capitalism nor Socialism: A Biblical Theology of Economics," *Journal of Markets and Morality* 15 (2012): 207-25.

Too often with not overtly theological topics, twenty-first century Christians default to the secular models around them that seem most successful. Church leadership is thus sometimes more explicitly indebted to the models of the business world than to a carefully thought out biblical ecclesiology. When the Bible *is* consulted, only select passages may be highlighted, so that balancing themes in other parts of Scripture may be missed. Thus we may find church leadership actually more authoritarian than the best models in the private sector, based on a handful of prooftexts from Scripture and/or a non-Christian cultural heritage, without ever giving the major theme of servant leadership in Scripture its due.² Similar errors occur in many other arenas of modern life.

What about the topics of the right attitude toward riches and their proper use? What about a holistic understanding of stewardship? What would a distinctively *Christian* treatment of these and related topics look like? Can we construct a biblical theology which identifies the relevant texts and themes of both Old and New Testament, interprets them carefully within their historical-cultural and literary contexts, and moves to contemporary application via identifiable criteria for distinguishing between the descriptive and the prescriptive, the situation-specific and the timeless?³ In a recent book for Zondervan Publishers' newly emerging Biblical Theology for Life series, entitled *Christians in An Age of Wealth: A Biblical Theology of Stewardship*,⁴ I tackle these kinds of questions in considerable detail. In the three consecutive articles in this volume, I will try to touch on some of the most important highlights in three particularly

² For the proper role of this theme, see James E. Means, *Leadership in Christian Ministry* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1989).

³ I followed this method in Craig L. Blomberg, *Neither Poverty nor Riches: A Biblical Theology of Possessions* (Leicester and Downers Grove: IVP, 1999, 2001).

⁴ Craig L. Blomberg, *Christian in An Age of Wealth: A Biblical Theology of Stewardship* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2013).

crucial areas: (1) the goodness of wealth, (2) its ability to seduce us to sin, and (3) the proper Christian way of maximizing its goodness and minimizing its seduction—giving generously, even sacrificially, from our surplus to the Lord's work in general and to helping the materially needy in particular.

This article focuses on the goodness of wealth. One might be tempted to conclude that such an emphasis is unnecessary. One of the fastest growing and most troubling developments on the Christian landscape is the so-called prosperity gospel. In a recent study, 46% of American Christians claimed to believe in some form of the principle that God wants his people to be more materially prosperous than they currently are.⁵ Proper Christian living, variously defined as having sufficient faith or adequate obedience to God's word, or the kind of prayer life that "names and claims" God's promises and blessings, is believed to be the key to this increased wealth. Now, nowhere near 46% of Americans attend churches that formally promote these highly misleading claims. I can conclude only that most of these individuals are picking up their concepts from the popular literature produced by prosperity preachers, their on-line sermons and/or the innumerable radio and television broadcasts available virtually every hour of the day and night on some channel which promulgate this dubious teaching. In my travels around the world, I have yet to find a time zone on our planet where people cannot access the prosperity gospel through some audio-visual medium!

Taken out of context, various biblical passages seem to support this message. Taken in context and combined with the sum total of the relevant biblical teaching, the picture looks quite different. Second Corinthians alone contains numerous passages on the reasons

⁵ David W. Jones and Russell S. Woodbridge, *Health, Wealth and Happiness: Has the Prosperity Gospel Overshadowed the Gospel of Christ?* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2011), 16.

God permits suffering—to enable us to comfort others with the comfort God himself grants us (1:3-9), to show to the world that it is God's sustaining power and not our own human strength that makes transcending our circumstances possible (4:7-15), because our eternal reward so far outweighs our temporal sufferings (4:16-18); because God never allows us to endure more than what we can handle if we turn to his sustaining grace for support (6:4-10), and because his power is perfected in weakness (12:9).⁶

Why, then, do we need to highlight the goodness of wealth? The prosperity gospel, like all of the most insidious forms of false teaching, is built on core truths that are then distorted. Despite a history of asceticism in various wings of Christianity, especially medieval Catholicism, the full sweep of biblical teaching makes it clear that material possessions are good. Ours is not a Gnostic universe in which the creation of matter was an act of rebellion by an emanation from the Godhead, requiring redemption that will one day free us from a material world, with no resurrection body but only the disembodied immortality of the soul. As N. T. Wright has put it so memorably, the ultimate biblical hope for believers is not life after death but "life after life after death"—that is, new heavens and new earth (Rev 21-22) in resurrection bodies (1Co 15) after the intermediate state (2Co 5:1-10).⁷ But it is precisely because a measure of material wealth is inherently good that God's people should work to ensure that as many people as possible in our world attain it. The rest of this talk, therefore, falls into two parts: a survey of the most important biblical teaching on the goodness of wealth, followed by our responsibility to help the poor materially and not just spiritually.

⁶ Cf. esp. Timothy B. Savage, *Power through Weakness: Paul's Understanding of the Christian Ministry in 2 Corinthians* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

⁷ E.g. N. T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church* (New York: HarperOne, 2008), 148.

I. Scripture's Balanced View of the Goodness of Wealth

1. The Old Testament

a. The Pentateuch

Six times in Genesis 1, God looks upon what he has created and declares it good (Ge 1:4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25). Then, after creating humanity, he recognizes it as exceedingly good (1:31). The fall of Adam and Eve into sin obviously destroys this perfection but it does not erase the image of God in humanity, however damaged it may have become (Ge 9:6; Jas 3:9). And redemption begins the process of recreating God's image in us (Eph 4:24; Col 3:10). Corporately, God's plan of redemption begins in earnest in Genesis 12:1-3 with the calling of Abram. The Lord promises him a very this-worldly seed (innumerable descendants) and land (the promised territory of Canaan), through which all the nations of the world will be blessed. The rest of the Old Testament describes the children of Israel taking three steps forward and two steps backward, as it were, at each new juncture in their history, on the path toward the fulfillment of those promises. The rest of Genesis is the story of how each successive patriarch and his family experienced the blessing of temporary residence in the Promised Land, but each faced obstacles that meant that they lived for significant stretches of time elsewhere as well and wondered if they would have the necessary children to fulfill God's promises. Each patriarch likewise at one point in his life acquired enormous wealth, but none of them was ever able to retain it over the long term.⁸

⁸ On the impermanence of the inheritance of the land by Abraham and his descendants as a unifying theme of the five books ascribed to Moses, see David J. A. Clines, *The Theme of the Pentateuch*, 2d ed. (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997).

The centuries in which the Israelites languished in slavery in Egypt seemed to call into question God's promise of a land flowing with milk and honey—brimming with material abundance. Eventually the Lord raised up Moses to deliver his people. Even after their rebellion led to a forty-year period of wilderness wanderings added to their history, Moses would pass the baton to Joshua, who would lead God's people into Canaan. Meanwhile, the laws given at Mt. Sinai guarded against theft of personal property (Ex 20:15; 22:1-15; Dt 19:14; 27:17) and tried to ensure justice in the marketplace (Lev 19:35-36; Dt 25:13-16).⁹ But this is no laissez-faire capitalism. The actual division of the Promised Land by tribes and clans is according to need. "To a larger group," Moses must "give a larger inheritance, and to a smaller group a smaller one." (Nu 26:54) In other words, the opportunity for material prosperity is so important that all must be given it.¹⁰

A surprisingly large section of Exodus narrates in exquisite detail the specifications and furnishings for the tabernacle and its construction (Ex 25-31; 35-40). Many of the details make clear that this will be an ornate structure, symbolizing the beauty and perfections of Yahweh, God of Israel, as best as this nomadic people could fashion in their given circumstances.¹¹ The tabernacle would of course give way to the far more magnificent temple in Jerusalem once the people

⁹ Even then the property is still God's, and we are but stewards of it. See esp. Philip G. Ryken, *Written in Stone: The Ten Commandments and Today's Moral Crisis* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2003), 169-83.

¹⁰ This is clearly not the classic capitalistic model in which an individual or group of people can amass as much property as they want! Casting lots to determine which tribe got which land further reminded the Israelites that they were merely stewards of God's gifts to them. Thus R. K. Harrison, *Numbers* (Chicago: Moody, 1990; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992), 350.

¹¹ G. K. Beale (*The Temple and the Church's Mission: A Biblical Theology of the Dwelling Place of God* [Leicester and Downers Grove: IVP, 2004], 66-80) demonstrates in detail the ways in which both tabernacle and temple reflect and recapitulate the Garden of Eden as a (metaphorical) temple.

had settled in the Promised Land and experienced peace from all their warfare. If God is no ascetic in creation, neither are his people to worship bereft of the appropriate luxury and aesthetics that magnify him.

Already in Leviticus 26:3-5, the Lord announces through Moses, "If you follow my decrees and are careful to obey my commands, I will send you rain in its season, and the ground will yield its crops and the trees their fruit. Your threshing will continue until grape harvest and the grape harvest will continue until planting, and you will eat all the food you want and live in safety in your land." This sets the stage for the Deuteronomic covenant in which God promises to bless the Israelites, including material blessing, in response to the measure of faithfulness and obedience to his Law which his people exhibit and, especially, which the nation's leaders model (Dt 7).¹² But to the extent that the people, and especially their leaders, are more disobedient or faithless, God will withhold his blessings. If there is no repentance, after a sufficiently patient interval of waiting, God will more actively judge his people, including through famine, drought, defeat in battle and, in extreme cases, eviction from the land. These good and bad responses to God's preceding covenant faithfulness make all the difference between life and death, respectively.

b. The Former Prophets

A cycle of blessings and curses unifies the narratives of Joshua, Judges, 1 and 2 Samuel and 1 and 2 Kings.¹³ The patterns of recurring

¹² See further Jonathan Lunde, *Following Jesus, the Servant King: A Biblical Theology of Covenantal Discipleship* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 56-58.

¹³ Richard S. Hess (*Joshua* [Leicester and Downers Grove: IVP, 1996], 33) exercises appropriate caution by using "Deuteronomistic" to refer to "a similar theological perspective and language" throughout these books that nevertheless does not distort underlying sources or their accuracy. For a representative cross-section of scholarly perspective, see Gary N. Knoppers and J. Gordon McConville, eds., *Reconsidering Israel and Judah: Recent Studies on the Deuteronomistic History* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2000).

faithfulness and faithlessness that accompany them have fueled the prosperity gospel more than any other single theme in Scripture. Three crucial observations, however, are in order at this point. First, this is a relationship made with Israel and no other nation, even in Old Testament times. It cannot simply be transferred to the U.S., the U.K., Hong Kong, China, Singapore, or any other earthly nation or people group today. Second, even within Israel, it is a collective more than an individual promise. As the people in general are more obedient than not, God will shower them with material blessings. But the Psalms, Proverbs and Prophets know numerous examples of the failure of this arrangement with certain individual Israelites, not least because they are the victims of exploitation by the unrighteous rich. Third, and most importantly, no biblical passage ever transfers the principle of material blessing for earthly faith or obedience from the Mosaic covenant to the new covenant. That does not mean that God may not choose to bless certain individual Christians in material ways on account of their faithfulness to him, merely that we cannot count on things functioning this way. We dare never promise another person that this is how God will work in their lives.¹⁴ Those who have had such promises made to them have seen them fail so often that it is stunning that anyone still believes in the prosperity gospel. The problem is that those who promote it always have the surefire excuse—if a person didn't become more prosperous, they obviously didn't have enough faith. Because such a charge is unfalsifiable, it is likewise unverifiable. But countless persons who have suffered needlessly under false guilt because of such charges, and those Christian leaders who have inflicted that guilt on them will surely bear a heavy burden on Judgment Day.

¹⁴ See further Sondra E. Wheeler, *Wealth as Peril and Obligation: The New Testament on Possessions* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 126-27, 133.

Far less prominent, but catapulted into the international limelight by Bruce Wilkinson's best-selling booklet,¹⁵ is the prayer of Jabez in 1 Chronicles 4:9-10. As a bit of a compensation for Jabez's mother's agonizing delivery of her son, God grants Jabez's request that he might bless him, enlarge his territory and keep him from harm and free from pain. But nothing in the text or its context within the Chronicler's genealogies suggests that this is a timeless model that all other people can expect God to replicate, any more than we can infer from 4:38-43 that other people had the right to kill the inhabitants of fertile farmland in order to possess it, as the Simeonites did, or that people other than the Levites had the right to become music ministers in the temple (6:31-32).¹⁶

c. Wisdom and Poetry

The Proverbs have often been used to support the prosperity gospel because a fair number of them do promise material increase either for godliness or hard work or both. Particularly famous is Proverbs 6:6-11:

Go to the ant, you sluggard; consider its ways and be wise! It has no commander, no overseer or ruler, yet it stores its provisions in summer and gathers its food at harvest. How long will you lie there, you sluggard? When will you get up from your sleep? A little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to rest—and poverty will come on you like a thief and scarcity like an armed man.

¹⁵ Bruce Wilkinson, *The Prayer of Jabez: Breaking Through to the Blessed Life* (Sisters, OR: Multnomah, 2000).

¹⁶ See further Andrew E. Hill, *1 and 2 Chronicles* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 96, esp. n. 4. If there is an exemplary function to the passage it may be to promote this descendant of the Messianic tribe of Judah's "proper acquisition of land in peace without violent or military means," in contrast to the behavior of the Reubenites and Simeonites who appear in 4:24-5:10. See also Steven Schweitzer, *Reading Utopia in Chronicles* (New York and London: T & T Clark, 2007), 63-64.

Consider also 10:3-4 ("The Lord does not let the righteous go hungry, but he thwarts the craving of the wicked. Lazy hands make for poverty, but diligent hands bring wealth.") or 14:23 ("All hard work brings a profit, but mere talk leads only to poverty.").

None of these proverbs, however, may be absolutized. The nature of a proverb, by definition, is that it is a general truth that is usually true but admits of exceptions. On the theme of wealth, the canonical proverbs themselves acknowledge numerous exceptions. Plenty of proverbs depict the righteous remaining poor, often due to oppression by wicked rich people, as we will see in our next lecture. When David says in Psalm 37:25, "I was young and now I am old, yet I have never seen the righteous forsaken or their children begging bread," he can only be making a descriptive statement, not a prescriptive promise. Moreover, given all the time David and his men were on the run from their enemies, he can hardly be claiming that he has never seen the godly in very desperate circumstances. Perhaps this is an Old Testament equivalent to Paul's observations in 2 Corinthians 4:8-9 that "we are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned, struck down, but not destroyed."¹⁷ God sets limits, in other words, on how much his people must suffer, even if they are often not the boundaries we wish he would place on suffering!

The contrast between descriptive and prescriptive proverbs is another important distinction to keep in mind when studying the Wisdom literature.¹⁸ For example, Proverbs 13:23 declares that "an

¹⁷ Derek Kidner (*Psalms 1-72* [London: Tyndale; Downers Grove: IVP, 1973], 150-52) actually uses some of these and related clauses from 2 Corinthians 4 as titles for the subsections of Ps 72:12-26.

¹⁸ See further Greg W. Parsons, "Guidelines for Understanding and Proclaiming the Book of Proverbs," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 150 (1993): 151-70; repr. in *Learning from the Sages: Selected Studies on the Book of Proverbs*, ed. Roy B. Zuck (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995), 151-68.

unplowed field produces food for the poor, but injustice sweeps it away." This passage contains no commands or promises; it merely makes two contrasting observations. In an agrarian economy like ancient Israel's, farmers were not to plow under leftover crops prior to the next planting season so that the poor could glean from the leftovers. Landowners, however, who failed to observe this law deprived the poor from this rightful opportunity. Such behavior is scarcely exemplary; the proverb's entire purpose was to discourage such behavior by reminding people of its tragic consequences.¹⁹ This is simply a descriptive proverb of the way people act far too often. A prescriptive proverb, on the other hand, actually commands us how to behave in a certain situation. So, for example, 3:27-28 requires us not to "withhold good from those who deserve it, when it is in your power to act. Do not say to your neighbor, 'Come back later, I'll give it tomorrow'—when you now have it with you." Applied to money matters, among other things, this could mean, "Pay off your debts as fast as you possibly can!"²⁰

Ecclesiastes and Job both form what Walter Brueggemann has called the protest literature of the Old Testament.²¹ Ecclesiastes clearly highlights the meaninglessness of riches unless they are used for God's purposes (esp. Ecc 5:8-6:12). Nevertheless, Qoheleth punctuates his otherwise depressing autobiographical reflections with

¹⁹ Michael V. Fox (*Proverbs 10-31* [New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2009], 570) recognizes that "observations of anomalies or injustices implies a duty to prevent them (24:11-12)." Cf. Bruce K. Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs Chapters 1-15* (Grand Rapids and Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2004), 573.

²⁰ Cf. Duane A. Garrett, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs* (Nashville: Broadman, 1993), 85: "Those who deserve good' may be laborers who have earned their pay, the poor who rightly plead for help, or suppliants at the city gates who call for justice. On the other hand, they could be those who have loaned money and deserve to be repaid."

²¹ Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005), 386-98.

reminders for people to enjoy their work, their food and drink, and whatever wealth and possessions they do acquire for however long they can enjoy them (see esp. 5:18-20; cf. also 2:24-26; 3:12-13, 22; 8:15; 9:7-10 and 11:9-12:1). If material wealth were not inherently good, these commands would make no sense.²² Job even gained back double the health and wealth that was so excruciatingly stripped away from him (Job 42:10-17). But few if any of us would want to endure the ordeals that he did simply to reach that happy ending! Meanwhile, the prosperity preachers sound much more like Job's friends, with their theology of reciprocity, so that physical suffering and poverty must be a punishment for sins Job is refusing to confess.²³

The Song of Songs indirectly demonstrates the potential goodness of wealth as the bride and groom delight in the beautiful and costly ways each is adorned (SS 1:10-11; 3:9-10). At the same time, 8:7 warns us that "many waters cannot quench love; rivers cannot sweep it away. If one were to give all the wealth of one's house for love, it would be utterly scorned." In other words, without godly love, wealth brings no happiness; with such loving relationships, people can thrive even in poverty.²⁴

²² Many commentators take these passages as referring to the futility of life under the sun, the same point as in the majority of the book, but this seems less likely. See instead throughout Michael A. Eaton, *Ecclesiastes* (Leicester and Downers Grove: IVP, 1983); cf. also Daniel C. Fredericks and Daniel J. Estes, *Ecclesiastes and the Song of Songs* (Nottingham: Apollos; Downers Grove: IVP, 2010), esp. 38-40; and C. L. Seow, *Ecclesiastes* (New York and London: Doubleday, 1997), esp. 222-24.

²³ Cf. Mark R. Littleton, *When God Seems Far Away* (Wheaton: Harold Shaw, 1987), 79-88; repr. as "Where Job's Comforters Went Wrong," in *Sitting with Job: Selected Studies on the Book of Job*, ed. Roy B. Zuck (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992; Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2003), 253-60.

²⁴ Combining both points succinctly is John G. Snaith, *Song of Songs* (London: Marshall Pickering; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 122: "love is more costly than anything money can buy."

d. The Latter Prophets

Most of what the Prophets have to say about material possessions is negative, lambasting the way the Israelites have abused them. But here and there, especially at the ends of their books, they prophesy a coming day, after judgment and exile, when Israel will be restored to the land and experience material prosperity and abundance. Then God's people will once more be faithful to the covenants God has made with them. These promises easily merge with descriptions of the land experiencing a renewal fit for the New Testament's millennial kingdom (Rev 20) and ultimately new heavens and new earth (Isa 65:17; Rev 21-22).

Perhaps the earliest of these prophecies and probably the most influential of them is Isaiah's vision of an eschatological banquet with representatives from all nations streaming to Jerusalem to worship Yahweh.²⁵ Given the intimacy and joy associated with ancient feasts, it scarcely should surprise us that the vision involves a lavish meal: On Mount Zion, "the Lord Almighty will prepare a feast of rich food for all peoples, a banquet of aged wine—the best of meats and the finest of wines" (25:6). At that time, God "will swallow up death forever," will "wipe away the tears from all faces," and will "remove his people's disgrace from all the earth." (25:8)

Prior to the eschaton, God's people can look forward to experiencing the blessings originally promised to them in Deuteronomy. Their fields will receive rain, produce abundant harvests, afford good pasture for their flocks and provide plentiful food for their beasts of burden. Copious rivers will water the land, while bright light will stream from both sun and moon, "when the Lord

²⁵ See further Dennis E. Smith, *From Symposium to Eucharist: The Banquet in the Early Christian World* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003), 166-71. Cf. also Glenn T. Miller, "Isaiah 25:6-9," *Interpretation* 49 (1995): 175-78.

binds up the bruises of his people and heals the wounds he inflicted." (Isa 30:23-26; quotation from v. 26) When "the Spirit is poured upon us from on high," the desert will turn into a fertile field and the fertile field will become a veritable forest (32:15). God's people "will live in peaceful dwelling places, in secure homes, in undisturbed places of rest." (v. 18) Isaiah 41:18-19 provides another poignant expansion of these concepts. It is clear that Isaiah understood the fulfillment of these prophecies to be temporal rather than eschatological, for in 41:25 and 45:1 they are tied to restoration of Israel to the land, under Cyrus the Persian, after the times of the Assyrian and Babylonian captivities.²⁶

Other prophetic texts envisioning the Spirit pouring out unprecedented blessings on his people were understood as still to be fulfilled in the future, and the New Testament takes up many of these and points to Jesus and the Messianic age as the loci of their fulfillment. Jesus himself cites Isaiah 61:1-2a in Luke 4:16-21, with its promises of healing for the sick and good news to the poor.²⁷ Peter sees Joel 2:28-32 fulfilled at Pentecost (Ac 2:17-21). But Joel prophesied about more than the Spirit being poured out on all people and empowering them to speak in unknown languages. Joel 2:18-27 had just predicted Israel being recompensed with superabundant harvests for its destruction by locust plagues.²⁸ And in 3:18, "the mountains will drip new wine and the hills will flow with milk"—lavish imagery for abundant, material prosperity. Compare also Amos 9:13-15.

²⁶ Brevard S. Childs, *Isaiah* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001), 321-22; Joseph Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah 40-55* (New York and London: Doubleday, 2002), 202.

²⁷ On which, see esp. Michael Prior, *Jesus the Liberator: Nazareth Liberation Theology (Luke 4.16-21)* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995).

²⁸ On which, see esp. Daniel J. Treier, "The Fulfillment of Joel 2:28-32: A Multiple-Lens Approach," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 40 (1997): 13-26.

Jeremiah 31 promises similar restoration in the more explicit context of God's new covenant with Israel (vv. 31-34). But Jeremiah sees enough of these blessings occurring in the nearer future to buy a field near Jerusalem prior to the Babylonian captivity as a sign to the people that they will come back to the land in the not too distant future (Jer 32).²⁹ Still, God's people cannot count on an unbroken period of material plenty prior to the end of the age. They may well at times have to imitate Habakkuk's astonishing faith, when he declares, "though the fig tree does not bud and there are no grapes on the vines, though the olive crop fails and the fields produce no food, though there are no sheep in the pen and no cattle in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the Lord, I will be joyful in God my Savior." (Hab 3:17-18)

Ezekiel 36-48 forms the most extensive segment of any of the prophetic books that discusses Israel's future restoration. Scholars debate whether any or all of these chapters have already been fulfilled, either literally or spiritually. Of particular interest are nine detailed chapters about a new temple with a level of grandeur never achieved during the Second Temple period (chaps. 40-48). Interpretations of this "third temple" have ranged from the view that the Jews have entirely forfeited these promises through disobedience to the expectation that they will be literally fulfilled in the future days, on one side or the other of Christ's return, possibly in a millennial kingdom. Better than any of these approaches, however, is the observation that the holy of holies in the temple was always to be built as a perfect cube, the only such building known to the ancient world. But Revelation 21:16 depicts the new Jerusalem as a giant cube, even though its walls are far too thin to support such an

²⁹ Cf. Jack R. Lundbom, *Jeremiah 21-36* (New York and London: Doubleday, 2004), 523-25, including Luther's famous quotation: "And if I knew that tomorrow the world would come to an end I would still plant my apple trees today."

enormous structure (v. 17). This incongruity points out the need for a symbolic interpretation. There is no temple at all, moreover, in the new Jerusalem (v. 22), suggesting that the city itself is the temple.³⁰ So again we are reminded of the grandeur and glory of the world to come, which will make any deprivation or hardship in this one pale into insignificance in comparison.

2. The New Testament

The New Testament contrasts strikingly with the Old Testament in certain respects. One of these is its utter lack of anything like the wealthy but godly patriarchs, the promises of material prosperity as a reward for covenant faithfulness, or examples of people becoming rich through their godliness. Nevertheless, there are clear indications that property and possessions remain a great good.

a. The Gospels

While John the Baptist is characterized as an ascetic, Jesus is *caricatured* as a glutton and a drunkard (Mt 11:19 par.). This is the unfair exaggeration of a genuine characteristic of the historical Jesus of Nazareth. There is no question that he enjoyed exquisite table fellowship. He accepted invitations to banquets with well-to-do outcasts like Levi, a customs or "toll collector," (Mk 2:15-17 pars.) and invites himself and his disciples for table fellowship with Zacchaeus, a "chief tax collector." (19:1-10) He spoke of his ministry as a time not for fasting but for feasting, for he, the bridegroom, had arrived and he was inaugurating the kingdom (Mk 2:18-19 pars.). When a notorious sinner like the woman who came uninvited into the courtyard of the home of Simon the Pharisee and anointed Jesus with expensive

³⁰ Cf. further David Mathewson, *A New Heaven and a New Earth: The Meaning and Function of the Old Testament in Revelation 21.1-22.5* (London and New York: Sheffield Academic Press, 2003), esp. 121-26.

perfume, Jesus criticized his host for his lack of hospitality and praised the woman despite her financial extravagance and suggestive behavior (Lk 7:36-50; cf. also Jn 12:1-8 pars.).³¹

A regularly misunderstood passage appears in Mark 14:7-8 and parallel, when Jesus praises Mary of Bethany for a similar gesture just before his death. Jesus insists that "the poor you will always have with you, and you can help them any time you want. But you will not always have me. She did what she could. She poured perfume on my body beforehand to prepare for my burial." Tragically, numerous Christians over the centuries, often knowing only the first clause of this quotation, have assumed that Jesus meant that there was no priority for helping the poor because we would never be able to alleviate their plight anyway. Quite the contrary! By alluding to Deuteronomy 15:11, Jesus implies that his followers will consistently want to help the poor and that they will regularly have opportunity to do so. Simply declaring that there will always be poor people does not mean that Christians cannot be of great help to many of them. Deuteronomy 15:4 has already explained that "there should be no poor among you, for in the land the Lord your God is giving you to possess as your inheritance, he will richly bless you, if only you fully obey the Lord your God..." So it is only the ongoing disobedience of God's people that guarantees the constant presence of some poor, but even then they could become quite small in number without contradicting Jesus' prophecy!³² And verse 11 *commands* the Israelites to be "openhanded" to the poor and needy among them.

³¹ Jesus' attitude directly contrasted with the conventional Judaism of his day. Where it saw ritual impurity as the greater danger, Jesus saw holiness as more "contagious." See Craig L. Blomberg, *Contagious Holiness: Jesus' Meals with Sinners* (Leicester and Downers Grove: IVP, 2005). Cf. also Blomberg, "Jesus, Sinners and Table Fellowship," *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 19 (2009): 35-62.

³² Scott C. Todd, *Fast Living: How the Church Will End Extreme Poverty* (Colorado Springs: Compassion International, 2011), 81-82 argues that Jesus' statement that the poor will

Some will appeal to Jesus' own socioeconomic standard to justify a lifestyle of poverty. But even though Mary and Joseph were poor enough when Jesus was born to qualify for offering the sacrifice of only a pair of doves or two young pigeons (Lk 2:24; cf. Lev 12:8), by the time Jesus was a young adult working with the family carpentry business he was much more likely to have been enjoying a somewhat higher standard of living within the working class of Galilee. The construction boom in Sepphoris in the 10s and 20s, when Tiberius was turning it into his capital, would have likely required workers from Nazareth, a scant five miles away, and provided more than usual work and earnings.³³ When 2 Corinthians 8:9 maintains that though the pre-incarnate Christ was rich, yet for our sakes "he became poor," Paul is not talking about Jesus' standard of living in Galilee but the vast contrast between his existence in heaven at the right hand of the Father and his experience on earth, however poor or well-off he may have been by the standards of this world.³⁴

When Jesus commands his followers in the Sermon on the Mount to "ask," "seek," and "knock," and promises them they will "receive," "find," and have the door "opened" to them (Mt 7:7-8 par.), it is easy to imagine he is offering them a blank check, so that if we just pray persistently enough he will give us anything we ask for. But Matthew expects his readers to remember what we call chapter 6:9-13, earlier in

always be with "you" is directed only to the disciples because the next "you," assuring them they will not always have him, must be directed only to those alive in Jesus' day. But *all* subsequent Christ-followers no longer have Jesus bodily present with them either, which is all that Jesus can mean here (because the disciples *will* have him spiritually present later, just as we do), so this logic fails. Todd's conclusion, however, that we can possibly come close to eradicating extreme poverty, remains valid.

³³ John P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus*, vol. 1 (New York: Doubleday, 1991), 278-85.

³⁴ Murray J. Harris, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 577-81.

the same sermon.³⁵ In the Lord's Prayer, Jesus explicitly commands his followers to pray "your will be done." (6:10) It is never appropriate to "name it and claim it," one must always include the caveat, "if it be your will, O Lord," or its semantic equivalent, unless one's request is clearly taught in the Bible as always God's will. Faithful pray-ers will consistently leave room for God's will to overrule theirs. Still, God's material provisions can at times prove breathtaking, as with the feedings of the 5000 and the 4000, with everyone eating until they were satisfied and an abundance of leftovers on top of that (Mk 6:30-44 pars., 8:1-10 par.).

Another frequently misunderstood teaching of Jesus appears in Matthew 6:33 and parallel: "seek first [God's] kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things [the food, drink and clothing that Jesus has just been talking about] will be given to you as well." In a passage in which all that has been offered are the basic necessities of life, we dare not imagine Jesus promising prosperity. He has already taught his disciples to pray for their "daily bread" (Mt 6:11), whereas we typically want our futures secured for considerably longer with a much more comfortable lifestyle. The plural pronouns, moreover, suggest that we are to think of this promise corporately. Millions of believers have died without having had access to even a minimally decent standard of living, so if Jesus is issuing promises to individual believers he has been proved wrong time and again! But if his point is that as "you all" (the church as a whole) seek God's righteous requirements, "you all" will have your basic needs met, then Christ's principle makes sense. Since caring for the poor in one's midst remains a fundamental priority throughout Scripture, seeking his righteousness (or justice) by definition means ensuring that no fellow

³⁵ Cf. John Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 325.

believer in one's immediate community of believers is allowed to suffer too much lack (cf. Jas 2:14-17).³⁶

A similar logic explains Jesus' promise to Peter and his companions in Mark 10:29-30 and parallels. How do disciples gain a hundred times as many homes and fields in this present age than they previously had? Not by sending one dollar to the address on the television screen during the show that promises you will receive one hundred in return. Tellingly, those organizations never implement their own advice in giving to other Christians, so obviously they know the scam doesn't work. But millions of Christians worldwide continue to fall prey to these financial extortioners. What then did Jesus mean? There is no question over how believers receive a hundred times as many family members—it is by realizing that fellow Christians are their spiritual kin (cf. also Mk 3:31-35 pars.). So the same principle must apply to the multiplication of possessions. We receive a hundred times as much because we have access, in theory, to all the wealth of all fellow Christians in the world.³⁷ They have the responsibility to share some of that with us if our needs become too desperate and we cannot provide for ourselves, just as it is our responsibility to do the same for others when we have the ability to provide for them.

b. The Book of Acts

In the Acts of the Apostles there are a significant minority of individuals who are the exceptions to the general rule that the Christians were somewhat poor and lacking in social status (1Co 1:26-29). A list of the principal persons who fall into this higher echelon of first-century Greco-Roman life would include Cornelius, the Roman

³⁶ See further Craig L. Blomberg, "On Wealth and Worry: Matthew 6:19-34—Meaning and Significance," *Criswell Theological Review* 6 (1992): 73-89.

³⁷ Craig A. Evans, *Mark 8:27-16:20* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2001), 102-3.

centurion (Ac 10:1), the family of John Mark (12:12), the Cypriot proconsul Sergius Paulus (13:6-12), the businesswoman Lydia (16:14-15), the Philippian jailer (16:31-34), Jason of Thessalonica, along with various prominent Greek women of that city (17:5-9, 12), certain members of the Areopagus in Athens, along with the guest Damaris (17:34), Aquila and Priscilla (18:2-3), Titius Justus (18:7) and Mnason in Caesarea (21:16). From Paul's letters we should add Erastus, the director of public works in Corinth (Ro 16:23), along with all those mentioned here and there as hosting house churches in their homes.³⁸

Indeed, Paul's upbringing in Tarsus, his ability to travel and relocate in Jerusalem with family already there, his study under the prestigious rabbi Gamaliel, his extensive journeying throughout the Roman empire as an itinerant minister, his voluntary (rather than necessary) adoption of manual labor when gifts of support were not forthcoming, and his inherited Roman citizenship all combine to suggest that he came from a family of some means. Still, he may not have always been free to avail himself of their possessions, or for a variety of reasons he may not have wanted to, especially if, in a culture of patronage and reciprocity, he thought they would come with strings attached.³⁹

c. The Letters of Paul

However this last issue is decided, at least in Philippians 4:12 Paul twice says that he has learned how to cope with the situation of

³⁸ Rodney Stark (*The Rise of Christianity* [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996], 3-26) overestimates the socio-economic level of many early Christians but does make the valid point that they were not uniformly poor. The classic study in this area remains Edwin A. Judge, *The Social Pattern of Groups in the First Century* (London: Tyndale, 1960), which Stark does not quite accurately summarize.

³⁹ Cf. Bruce W. Longenecker, *Remember the Poor: Paul, Poverty and the Greco-Roman World* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 301-10.

living with plenty as well as with scarcity: "I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want." The Greek verb behind having or living in plenty can mean to overflow, to abound, to have in excess, and even to be extremely rich!⁴⁰ Who knows for sure just what Paul's net worth was!

Perhaps 1 Timothy 6:17-19 best explains his perspective on standard of living. Those with surplus must give generously from that excess, but the rich are never called to trade places with the poor. That would simply reverse who is in need and who is called on to help! Nor does Paul ever call on anyone to give up all but the basics of life. Instead he refers to the God "who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment." (v. 17b) Sandwiched in between his mandates to be generous and not trust in wealth, this clause suggests that once believers have established regular practices and habits in order to obey these commands, they may then take pleasure in utilizing what remains for the satisfaction of various wholesome desires. This concept fits what Paul has already highlighted in 4:4 that "everything God created is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving, because it is consecrated by the word of God and prayer."⁴¹

Second Corinthians 9:6-11 is a popular text for the health-wealth heresy. Verse 8 promises us as believers that "God is able to bless you abundantly, so that in all things at all times, having all that you

⁴⁰ *BDAG*, 805.

⁴¹ Abraham J. Malherbe ("Godliness, Self-Sufficiency, Greed and the Enjoyment of Wealth: 1 Timothy 6:3-19, Part II," *Novum Testamentum* 53 [2011]: 73-96) shows that this is the most distinctive element of vv. 17-19 within their Greco-Roman environment, but also that the infinitives of v. 18 are appositional, explicating an important component of what enjoyment of wealth consists of, namely, its benevolent use.

need, you will abound in every good work." Haranguing us with these words, various preachers conclude that "all things" must include material riches. But that is not what the text is promising. Verse 10 speaks of increasing the Corinthians' store of seed, but "seed" is a metaphor here for spiritual blessings. Specifically, the seed stands for a "harvest of righteousness," (v. 11) not of earthly wealth. The metaphor of sowing began already in verse 6, so we may assume it is what unites this passage, so that Paul is talking about spiritual riches throughout. But what of verse 11? Doesn't this include material riches when Paul continues with his assurance that we "will be enriched in every way so that [we] can be generous on every occasion?" If we are still thinking corporately, then certainly the church collectively will have enough physical as well as spiritual resources to be generous whenever there are dire physical needs. But Paul need not be claiming that each Christian individual has a surplus of property throughout their entire lives. Some may never gain it; most will have spells when they will be better off and times when they will be less affluent. But they can always tap into Christ's spiritual riches.

Indeed, "in every way" in 2 Corinthians 9:11 may overtranslate the simple Greek *en panti*, which literally means just "in everything." "In every situation" or "in every context" is just as legitimate a rendering and does not lead people in the same way to expect material possessions when God may be offering spiritual ones.⁴² Galatians 6:7-8 likewise employs the metaphors of sowing and reaping. But here, Paul is even more unambiguously talking about spiritual blessing and

⁴² See the comments of Paul Barnett (*The Message of 2 Corinthians* [Leicester and Downers Grove: IVP, 1988], 154) countering a "theology of prosperity" here. The core issue is that the New Testament reinterprets Old Testament enrichment "as spiritual fruitfulness and caring support in the family of Christians." Scott J. Hafemann (*2 Corinthians* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000], 170) adds that Paul's own catalogues of sufferings throughout this epistle make it clear that "he does not have material prosperity in view."

sharing, as these verses conclude with the reference of that which will lead to "eternal life."

d. The Letter of James

According to the most probable structure of James, the right attitude to riches and poverty constitutes one of this epistle's three key themes. A few commentators have insisted that James cannot envision anyone being both rich and Christian, but this seems unlikely. Four passages in particular provoke controversy. In 1:9 the fellow believer in humble (or even humiliating) circumstances must boast in his or her exalted spiritual state. But then James continues by calling the rich person to glory in his or her humiliation. Conspicuously absent is the Greek word *adelphos* for spiritual brother or sister in v. 10. Is this because James now shifts to addressing the rich non-Christian, or is it because he realizes his readers will infer that *adelphos* carries over from the immediately preceding verse? Commentators are split 50-50 at this point. More probably, the latter of these two options is correct.⁴³ For James to be referring to the rich non-Christian would require him to be unleashing some of the most biting irony anywhere in Scripture, commanding the unsaved person to boast in his coming damnation, which is of course the exact opposite of what he really wants, namely that as many persons come to repentance as possible. But if he is referring to the rich believer, then that person can exult in their low spiritual position (compared to the high social status their

⁴³ See further Craig L. Blomberg and Mariam J. Kamell (*James* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008], 57-58). Kamell has since changed her mind, however, and written that the humiliation of the rich, if non-Christian, "might be well their one chance at salvation, if they can actually learn to rejoice in it and gain a true understanding of their position before God rather than relying on their wealth for their identity and comfort." ("The Economics of Humility: The Rich and the Humble in James," in *Engaging Economics: New Testament Scenarios and Early Christian Reception*, ed. Bruce W. Longenecker and Kelly D. Liebengood [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009], 167, n. 24.)

wealth affords them in this world), because they can look forward to the glory and grandeurs of the new heavens and earth.

The second controversial text is 2:1-4. What setting does James have in mind as he depicts an extremely rich and an extremely poor person coming into the Jewish-Christian assembly? Only here does he use the word *sunagōgē* ("synagogue") for the assembly, yet *ekklēsia* ("church") is certainly in his vocabulary (5:14). The context of showing so much deference to a wealthy individual and so much discrimination against a poor one does not fit much of what we know about early Christian worship services. But, combined with the judicial language dotting verse 4 and continuing throughout verses 6-13, this hypothetical scenario seems more likely to reflect the assembly functioning as an early Christian courtroom. Rabbinic literature suggests this is one of the roles for which Jewish synagogues were utilized, and there are some strikingly parallel warnings against the kind of discrimination denounced here. If this view is correct, then the rich person is likely to be a believer, however immature in his faith he may be.⁴⁴ After all, it is unlikely that any rich unbelievers would seek redress of some kind in a Christian assembly rather than in the Jewish or pagan courts of the area.

The third passage in question involves the planning by the traveling merchants in James 4:13-17. These individuals are not called *plousioi* ("rich") and more likely fit the small "middle-class" of the first-century Roman world. That James rebukes them for not taking the Lord's will into account in their planning suggests they are members of the Christian community who should have known better. Especially, given the frequency with which "Lord" in James seems to refer to Jesus rather than just to God, James could hardly have been

⁴⁴ Blomberg and Kamell, *James*, 110-11.

expecting that non-Christian businesspeople make room for Jesus in their prayers.⁴⁵

The one exception to the pattern that has been developing appears in 5:1-6. Here James unleashes commands to weep and wail to an unspecified group of rich individuals who are oppressing the agricultural day laborers in his churches. It seems highly unlikely that these individuals are part of the community; more likely, they are the (often absentee) landlords who are failing to pay even a minimal wage to their field workers. James addresses them merely by the rhetorical device of apostrophe. But the parallels between how James describes them in 5:5 and the context of many affluent Christians around our world today are stunning: "You have lived on earth in luxury and self-indulgence. You have fattened yourselves in the day of slaughter." The point of this observation is not to suggest that these rich individuals really are believers but to warn us against thinking that all rich who have made apparent professions of faith throughout church history and today are necessarily Christian!⁴⁶ After all, James is the epistle that stresses that claims to have faith without accompanying deeds of mercy prove vacuous (2:18-26).

e. The Rest of the New Testament

Third John contains another passage that has often been misinterpreted by the proponents of the prosperity gospel. John greets his friend Gaius and tells him that he is praying "that you may enjoy good health and that all may go well with you, even as your soul is getting along well."(v. 2) Some Bible translations in various languages use words that easily suggest that material prosperity is at least part of what John means by all going well with Gaius. Yet this

⁴⁵ Blomberg and Kamell, *James*, 208-9.

⁴⁶ Blomberg and Kamell, *James*, 233.

is not a primary meaning of the Greek. Even if it were in view here, John's point in context would be that he prays that Gaius' physical health and financial circumstances might prove as solid as his spiritual health.⁴⁷ For many caught up in the so-called health-wealth gospel, that might not be much of a prayer! At any rate, it hardly suggests that God is promising us all economic well-being.

Finally, we turn again to the book of Revelation and remind ourselves of the very earthy, material, luxurious nature of the eternal state—new heavens to be sure but also a new earth, complete with a new Jerusalem descending from the heavens. As has often been noted, the Bible begins with humanity in a garden but it ends with them in a city. Given the number of people you have packed into Hong Kong, you may be as well prepared for eternity as anyone on the planet! Cities do not often appear attractive in a fallen world, especially to Christians, because of the potential for disease, decay and destruction when large numbers of sinful human beings are crowded close to one another. But in eternity, the only people experiencing the blessings of the renewed creation will be believers, and all of us will have glorified bodies and spirits (1Co 15:42-57). In a state of sinlessness, we will passionately enjoy being close to all the company of the redeemed from all time in a way we can scarcely begin to imagine today.

II. The Mandate to Help the Poor

If wealth is inherently good, if God desires that all of his people have at least a minimally decent amount of it, then it follows naturally that he wants those with excess to be conduits in sharing it with those

⁴⁷ Cf. Colin G. Kruse, *The Letters of John* (Leicester: Apollos; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 221.

who have too little. Time requires us to treat the second theme of this lecture much more briefly. All we can do here is highlight some of the most famous or important texts.

1. The Old Testament

The Torah regularly commands God's people to exhibit justice to the poor, rather than neglecting or exploiting them as it is so easy to do (e.g., Ex 23:6; Lev 19:15; Dt 10:17-19). As we have seen above, the poor are permitted to offer less expensive sacrifices (esp. Lev 5:7-13). The sabbatical year and the Jubilee release the poor from their debts and enslavement (Lev 25; Dt 15). Given the fifty year cycle of the Jubilee, it is as if they have a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to declare bankruptcy and start afresh, with no economic penalties.⁴⁸ In the book of Ruth, Boaz demonstrates his righteousness by giving Ruth generous opportunities to glean in his fields after instructing others to help her get a little extra, and then expends a considerable sum to redeem her. We know this because there is a nearer kinsman-redeemer who refuses to do so because he is afraid it will jeopardize his estate (Ru 4:6).

Hannah imagines God raising "the poor from the dust" and lifting "the needy from the ash heap" (1Sa 2:7). Mary, the mother of Jesus, echoes this and other language from Hannah's prayer (2:1-10) more than a millennium later in her song that has come to be known as the *Magnificat* (Lk 1:46-55). In 1 Kings 17:7-24, God sends Elijah to a poor Gentile widow and her only son to work a miracle so that they might have enough food and drink to live, and he later raises the son back to life again after he gets sick and dies. Elijah's successor, Elisha, having asked for and received a double portion of his master's spirit, works strikingly similar but even more dramatic miracles in 2 Kings

⁴⁸ It is often argued that ancient Israel never actually implemented the Jubilee, but there are at least some hints that they may have done so occasionally. See John S. Bergsma, *The Jubilee from Leviticus to Qumran: A History of Interpretation* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2007), 149-76.

4:1-37.⁴⁹ Nehemiah models the obedience to the Law that he calls on the Israelites to exhibit as well, by lending to the poor in Jerusalem without interest and by not accepting the rich daily fare allotted to him as governor, because of the burden it would have put on the people to keep him and his entourage so luxuriously supplied (Ne 5).⁵⁰

The Psalms are replete with teaching about the need to improve the lot of the poor whenever possible. God is himself frequently depicted as the defender of the needy and oppressed (Ps 9:9, 12, 18; 12:5, etc.). Psalm 35:10 proclaims about the Lord, "You rescue the poor from those too strong for them, the poor and needy from those who rob them." It follows naturally that God's people should imitate him in this respect. Psalm 41:1 thus declares, "Blessed is he who has regard for the weak; the Lord delivers him in times of trouble." Psalm 68:5-6 expands the purview of God's concern to include the fatherless, widows, lonely and prisoners. The prayer attributed to Solomon in 72:1-11 asks God to empower him to defend the afflicted among the people and to save the children of the needy (v. 4), while 82:3 directly commands the people to "defend the cause of the weak and the fatherless" and "maintain the rights of the poor and oppressed." In 113:7-9, the psalmist envisions God reversing people's fortunes in the future, when the Lord "raises the poor from the dust and lifts the needy from the ash heap; he seats them with princes, with the princes of their people. He settles the barren woman in her home as a happy mother of children." In 132:15, finally, this reversal includes blessing the poor in Israel with an abundance of food.⁵¹

⁴⁹ Nachman Levine, "Twice as Much of Your Spirit: Pattern, Parallel and Paronomasia in the Miracles of Elijah and Elisha," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 85 (1999): 25-46.

⁵⁰ On which, see esp. Gary R. Williams, "Contextual Influences in Readings of Nehemiah 5: A Case Study," *Tyndale Bulletin* 53 (2002): 57-74.

⁵¹ For the full range of concepts and themes in Psalms relating to poverty, see W. Dennis Tucker, Jr., "A Polysemiotic Approach to the Poor in the Psalms," *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 31 (2004): 425-39.

A key distinctive of the proverbs is the repeated observation that there are worse situations to be in than to be poor. For example, 17:1 insists, "better a dry crust with peace and quiet than a house full of feasting, with strife." In other words, if you are blessed with a happy family or good interpersonal relationships, you should prefer those even if you are poor, to a life of riches with estrangement and hostility (cf. 21:9). In 19:1, the "poor man whose walk is blameless" is better "than a fool whose lips are perverse." Perhaps, in light of similar but more detailed texts (e.g., 28:6—"better the poor whose walk is blameless than the rich whose ways are perverse"), we should assume a contrast between a wise poor person and a rich fool here too. Verse 22 makes an even more compact comparison: "better to be poor than a liar." But none of these comparisons excuses those with surplus from helping the poor when they can. Proverbs 21:13 is as pointed as any text in the corpus: "If a man shuts his ears to the cry of the poor, he too will cry out and not be answered."⁵² How many Christians today are not having their prayers answered because they pay little or no attention to helping the neediest in their world?

The prophets regularly repeat the convictions of the Torah and the Wisdom literature that God is a defender of the fatherless, widow, foreigner and numerous other kinds of poor and needy people. In Isaiah 25:4, he is their "refuge." In 41:18, he will turn their parched lands into pools of water. In a particularly memorable passage, often cited in Christian discussions about the important of social justice, Isaiah announces God's word by means of two rhetorical questions: Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen: to loose the chains of

⁵² For more extensive reflections on this proverb than he typically gives elsewhere, in light of the other proverbs both on the goodness of wealth and the need to be generous to the poor, see Robert L. Alden, *Proverbs* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983), 156. On poverty in the Proverbs more generally, cf. Lechion P. Kimilike, *Poverty in the Book of Proverbs* (New York: Peter Lang, 2008).

injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke? 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? (Isa 58:6-7). Jesus will combine part of verse 6 here with his quotation of Isaiah 61:1-2a into his Nazareth manifesto, introduced in Luke 4:18-19. And the entire so-called parable of the sheep and the goats (Mt 25:31-46) appears to build on this image as well.⁵³

The whole book of Lamentations should dispel any idealistic notion that poverty is somehow an inherently blessed condition. The horrors of the plight of those left behind in Jerusalem at the time of the Babylonian captivity refute this idea in every chapter. Zechariah 7:9-10 issues another direct mandate to the children of Israel: "Administer true justice: show mercy and compassion to one another. Do not oppress the widow or the fatherless, the alien or the poor." The vexed question of immigration plagues many of our world's nations today, and this is not the place to solve the political questions, if that were even possible. However, looking at the issues of political and economic refugees who move from one country to another, legally or illegally, at least one comment may merit mention. If God had promised the land of Israel to Abraham's descendants through the line of Isaac, Jacob and his twelve sons, then in a sense there was no distinction between later legal and illegal immigrants. All were illegal to the extent that God had not earmarked the land for them. Yet, the Hebrew Scriptures consistently call on the Israelites to treat the aliens and sojourners in their land with the identical justice and compassion they must exhibit among one another (e.g. Lev 19:34; Dt 1:16-17).⁵⁴

⁵³ E.g. R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 963.

⁵⁴ On the topic of undocumented residents of a nation in today's world, see esp. M. Daniel Carroll R., *Christians at the Border: Immigration, the Church, and the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008). On the legal texts in particular, see 95-112.

Modern nations no doubt have something to learn from this lack of discrimination. Moreover, contemporary Christians who think that the presence of a Jewish nation in the land of Israel is a prelude to certain end-time events need to recall that the Old Testament pictures of a restored Israel always portray them as obeying the Law afresh with a new enthusiasm. Whatever else this means, it would surely mean treating the Palestinians in the land as their own, yet no government from 1948 to the present has come remotely close to implementing this. It would seem we are at best a very long way from seeing in Israel anything that could be declared potentially to have eschatological significance!⁵⁵

2. The New Testament

When we turn to the distinctively Christian part of our Scriptures, we are quickly confronted with the beatitude, "Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God." (Lk 6:20) Most Christians throughout church history quickly interpret this text in light of its parallel in Matthew, in which Jesus blesses "the poor in spirit" (Mt 5:3), and assume there is nothing about material poverty in either text. Such a ploy does rightly recognize that there is nothing inherently fortunate or happy about physical impoverishment. But it misses the background of the Hebrew *anawim*, the pious, godly poor, so common in the Psalms, Proverbs and Prophets.⁵⁶ Those of low socio-economic standing have regularly found it easier to turn to God in most cultures of the world than the well off, because they are not so deluded as to think that they can find happiness in the things of this world.

⁵⁵ Cf. esp. Gary M. Burge, *Whose Land? Whose Promise? What Christians Are Not Being Told about Israel and the Palestinians?* (Cleveland: Pilgrim, 2003).

⁵⁶ Craig L. Blomberg, "The Most Often Abused Verses in the Sermon on the Mount—And How to Treat Them Right," *Southwestern Journal of Theology* 46 (2004): 1-17.

In Luke 14:12-14, Jesus makes a contrast between inviting to a dinner those who are affluent enough to return the favor with inviting those who cannot—"the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind" (v. 13). These people cannot repay in kind but their hosts will be blessed, now and "at the resurrection of the righteous" (v. 14). The parable that follows refers again to these four categories of individuals as the replacement guests at a great banquet after the originally invited guests all beg off with exceedingly lame excuses (vv. 15-24).⁵⁷ God cares deeply about the poor and so should we.

The book of Acts introduces three quite different models for helping the poor. At first, the believers in Jerusalem use a common treasury, replenished by believers selling goods and property as needs emerge (2:44-45; 4:32-35). Later, when the Hellenistic Jewish Christians are being overlooked, the first "deacons' fund" is established and the apostles, representing the Hebraic Jewish Christians, turn over the responsibility to leaders chosen by the other ethno-cultural branch of the church who come from their midst. Finally, after Agabus' prophecy about the coming famine, which would hit Judea the hardest, a special collection is arranged to alleviate the severest of the needs in that part of the empire (11:27-30). This diversity teaches us that there need be no one right model that fits all circumstances so long as the objective remains the same throughout—helping the physically neediest of fellow Christians, especially those who are suffering through no fault of their own.⁵⁸ For at least one short period of time,

⁵⁷ On which, see Blomberg, *Interpreting the Parables*, 2d ed. (Downers Grove and Nottingham: IVP, 2012), 303-8.

⁵⁸ Craig L. Blomberg, *From Pentecost to Patmos: An Introduction to Acts through Revelation* (Nashville: B & H, 2006), 46.

the church could claim that there were "no needy persons among them." (4:34)⁵⁹

The most important teaching in the epistles reflects the follow-up to the famine relief work in Judea. 1 Corinthians 16:1-4, 2 Corinthians 8-9 and Romans 15:26-28 all contain information, instructions or thanksgiving concerning a multi-year campaign Paul spearheaded to help the most impoverished believers. He further understood this to be a very natural way for the "daughter churches" of the "mother church" in Jerusalem to pay back their spiritual debts via these very tangible, material helps. The general epistles do not contain nearly as much about the poor as any comparably sized section of Paul, but James 2:5 has become one very programmatic text worthy of note. God does indeed have a "preferential option for the poor," to use the slogan made famous by liberation theology. But we must always read the entire verse from which this slogan came: "Listen, my dear brothers: Has not God chosen those who are poor in the eyes of the world to be rich in faith and to inherit the kingdom he promised those who love him?" The poor in view are not all the economically impoverished people in the world, but those who love God, which in a Christian context means to love Christ and follow him.⁶⁰

III. Conclusion

God created this material world good. He intends to completely vindicate his original creative purposes by recreating it perfectly good. Humanity's sin seriously tarnished this goodness but in no

⁵⁹ See esp. Steve Walton, "Primitive Communism in Acts? Does Acts Present the Community of Goods (2:44-45; 4:32-35) as Mistaken?" *Evangelical Quarterly* 80 (2008): 99-111.

⁶⁰ Blomberg and Kamell, *James*, 114.

way obliterated it. Redemption means the progressive remolding of forgiven human beings into everything God originally intended them to be; it likewise means refashioning this world into what he wanted it to be. The so-called prosperity gospel has captured at least this dimension of biblical truth. But after that, it starts to distort the biblical balance of teaching about poverty and riches fairly quickly.

God does desire for his people to live a decent, material life in this world. But precisely because he desires that for all people, and especially all of Christ's followers, those of us with significant surplus must share with those who have much less. One can debate the most effective mechanisms of doing this. Depending on the country, people group, community, nature of the need, available technology, form of government, health of the private sector, size of the church or Christian population and various other factors, different portions and percentages of the needs can be addressed by governments, by the business community, or by NGO's—not-for-profit, private organizations including Christian churches and even individuals.

The commitment that cannot be in doubt, however, even after just this brief survey, is that God does want his people involved in alleviating the plight of the poor. The three points of John Wesley's famous sermon on stewardship need frequent repetition in this context: "Make all you can," "save all you can," and "give all you can."⁶¹ There is nothing wrong with responsible investment so that Christians can have even more resources to channel to those who have less, though of course there is always the risk that the market will not perform as anticipated. But the more pervasive danger is that monies initially earmarked for the Lord's work and for others will wind up being spent on oneself or one's family as one again and again redefines "needs" to

⁶¹ John Wesley, "The Use of Money," (1760), <<http://emmanuelcairns.com/files/documents/Sermon-44-The-Use-of-Money.pdf>>.

include what used to be merely "wants"! For those who know they may succumb to this temptation, it is better to give away their excess sooner rather than later.

In our third lecture, we will return to this topic of giving in more detail. The point of this first lecture is merely to stress the goodness of wealth. If some of God's people have too little of it, at least one of the reasons is that others have too much of it. This is not to endorse a Marxist theory of economics; Adam Smith's conviction that the wealth of nations can grow without others being inherently impoverished has been vindicated time and again. But from a *Christian* perspective, as long as there are desperately poor and hurting people in the world, however they got that way, and especially among fellow believers, then God's people with unnecessary surplus do have too much, not inherently, but because those needs exist and have not yet been met. If wealth is good, then it is good for everyone to have some. There need not be anything remotely like the socialist ideal of complete economic parity. Those who work longer and harder with highly specialized expertise to meet particularly valued needs should be rewarded with more. The biblical ideal is not that everyone in the world has the same quantity of material resources, but that no one has so few resources that life remains a misery for them. Once everyone has been lifted above a reasonable "poverty line," economic diversity may ensue. But then Christians must become conscious of a second pervasive feature of wealth. Material possessions may be inherently good, but in a fallen world they are also a major seduction to sin. To that topic we will return in our second lecture.

ABSTRACT

God created the material world good. Even in its fallen state material possessions remain a good thing God wants his people to enjoy. Countless passages in both Testaments demonstrate this but all of them must be qualified by balancing themes. The so-called prosperity gospel goes too far in its estimation of how well-to-do God wants his people to be. It relies too heavily on Old Testament promises made uniquely with Israel and not carried over to the New Testament church. Precisely because God wants all people to have a measure of the goodness of his material world, those with surplus have the responsibility to share with the neediest of the world.

撮 要

上帝創造了美好的物質世界。即使世界已經墜落，上帝仍視物質擁有為美好的，希望祂的百姓能享受物質。新舊約聖經中有無數經文談及這主題，但這些經文都必須經過全面的考慮。所謂賜人福氣的福音似乎過分估計豐盛的上帝對祂百姓的期望，過於強調上帝在舊約單獨賜予以色列人的應許，然而這些應許卻沒有延伸至新約教會。上帝希望所有人都能分享物質世界的美好，因此那些有餘的就有責任跟世上有需要的人分享所有。