

Prosperity

Should a Christian expect a life of prosperity? God tells Joshua that if he's careful to do all that the Word of God commands, ***"then you will make your way prosperous, and then you will have success,"*** Joshua 1:8. We also read verses like, ***"he who trusts in the LORD will prosper,"*** Proverbs 28:25. And Jesus tells His followers that He has come to give them an abundant life (John 10:10). Many verses in the Bible emphasize blessings, prosperity, success, and abundance. However, these promises need to be rightly understood, so that the reader doesn't make false assumptions about what will happen to him if he puts his trust in Jesus.

A consistent theme in the Bible is that God's ways are right, best, and fruitful. The Bible uses opposing words, like wise versus fool, or wisdom versus folly, to describe the difference between God's ways and man's ways. Proverbs 1:7, ***"Fools despise wisdom and instruction."*** Proverbs 12:15, ***"The way of a fool is right in his own eyes."*** If a man governs himself instead of submitting to the governance of the Lord, the man will be operating under his own compulsions and desires. He will pursue things quickly, selfishly, believing his way is best. Proverbs 14:16, ***"a fool is arrogant and careless."*** Proverbs 15:5, ***"A fool rejects his father's discipline."*** A fool might also lie, cheat, and steal in order to accomplish his goals. Proverbs 10:23, ***"Doing wickedness is like sport to a fool."*** The point is simple; God tells us how life works best, and when we follow His directions, we tend to experience positive outcomes.

Consider the obvious truth of this statement from Galatians 6:7, ***"whatever a man sows, this he will also reap."*** Sowing is the act of scattering seed or planting, while reaping is gathering the fruit of whatever you planted. It's common sense to say that one who farms properly tends to yield a bountiful harvest, while one who farms carelessly will not yield a crop. Imagine a farmer who doesn't wait for the proper season, but sows early. Adding to that, he scatters seeds where they can't grow, on untilled soil. That same farmer waters randomly and is too lazy to weed his field. Will this farmer produce the crop he's expecting? Of course not.

The Bible teaches the concept of propriety: conforming to standards that are proper, right, appropriate. We see this in 2 Timothy 2:4-6, ***"No soldier in active service entangles himself in the affairs of everyday life, so that he may please the one who enlisted him as a soldier. Also if anyone competes as an athlete, he does not win the prize unless he competes according to the rules. The hard-working farmer ought to be the first to receive his share of the crops."*** A soldier who wants to please his commander will attend to his duties and will not allow himself to become distracted. An athlete who desires to win the race will take seriously the rules of the competition, and will also have propriety about his sleep, diet, and training. Likewise, a farmer who is diligent and rightly addresses his duties to the field ought to be rewarded at harvest time. In summary, God says that if we obey Him, follow His instructions, and do things the way that they're supposed to be done, we'll be successful and prosperous. It's not a hard concept to grasp. However, the fool who cuts corners and thinks he knows best is likely to experience a life of consequences and hardship, always needing to get out of holes that he's dug for himself.

God tells Joshua to live life according to His Word, and then Joshua's ways will be prosperous and successful. This same teaching is as true for us today as it was for Joshua many thousands of years ago. The late Charlie Kirk, a Christian man who in recent years aimed to teach moral propriety to college students, often said, ***"Anytime you apply God's Word to your life, your life will improve."*** It's simple; God's ways work best!

The book of Proverbs is a great place to go if a person wants to know how to have prosperity in life. Proverbs is not a book of guarantees, but it tells us how life tends to work. A proverb is a statement of ethical wisdom, often stated very bluntly, something like, if you do “X,” then you’ll experience “Y.” A modern-day proverb might say, *“A man who sleeps with his girlfriend gets herpes, but the couple who waits for marriage enjoys their sexuality.”* Now, one might argue, *“That’s not true! I’ve slept with my girlfriend before and I never got a disease!”* While that may be the case, we have to remember, a proverb isn’t a guarantee. It’s true, that the guy who avoids fornication is the guy without the sexually transmitted disease. Another might argue, *“I know a couple that waited to have sex until they were married, and they didn’t have a happy marriage and ended up divorced.”* We can find an exception, but the point of the proverb is to say that when people do things God’s way, their marriages are the ones that tend to be fulfilling and satisfying.

A famous proverb is Proverb 22:6, ***“Train up a child in the way he should go, even when he is old he will not depart from it.”*** This is certainly how life tends to work. Parents who are diligent to train up their kids will likely produce kids that are wise and prosperous. Are there exceptions? Of course. But clearly, we can see how proverbs are right and fitting. Again, if you want to have prosperity in life, do things God’s way.

While success and prosperity tend to accompany a man who obeys the Lord, we must also understand that the Bible never promises that life will always be fair. The book of Job illustrates this point. Job was a man who was blameless and upright before God, living with propriety in all he did. This didn’t mean Job was sinless, but more so that he strove to honor the Lord and live with godly wisdom. If you’re familiar with the story of Job, Satan had attacked Job’s livelihood; killing Job’s kids, destroying Job’s wealth, and covering Job’s body with sores. Was this fair? Why would a wise and God-fearing man suffer? Despite these things, Job kept his faith.

Job himself points out the lack of fairness in the world. He points to the fact that sometimes God allows even the worst of sinners to live out their days in prosperity. Job states, ***“Why do the wicked still live, continue on, and also become very powerful? Their descendants are established with them in their sight, and their offspring before their eyes, their houses are safe from fear, and the rod of God is not on them. They spend their days in prosperity, and suddenly they go down to Sheol,”*** Job 21:7-17. Let’s unpack this. Job seems to know evil men, perhaps men who lie, cheat, and steal to gain what they have, yet they seem to live a trouble-free life. They are blessed in seeing their kids and grandchildren grow up, who also enjoy a life of peace. Job even notes that the manner in which they die seems unfair, ***“suddenly they go down to Sheol.”*** This means that their death is quick and sudden, i.e. they don’t even suffer long in their dying. Sheol is a word that means the place of the dead, the grave. So, all this being said, Job is simply stating that sometimes, life isn’t fair. These lessons remind us that one’s circumstances don’t validate if he is righteous or not. In other words, we would be wrong to say, *“Look at his prosperity! He must be righteous!”*

The book of Job also clarifies that prosperity can be a hinderance to one’s spiritual life, blurring one’s need for God. When referring to those who are both wicked and prosperous, Job 21:14-15 says, ***“They say to God, ‘Depart from us! We do not even desire the knowledge of Your ways. Who is the Almighty, that we should serve Him, and what would we gain if we pray to Him?’”*** So, why would God allow some wicked people to enjoy prosperity? The answer is free will. Consider the following quote from the movie *God’s Not Dead* (2014). In this scene, a son, who is not a believer, is talking to his mother, who is a Christian. The son, who is

in the prime of his life, is wealthy, handsome, successful, and healthy. The mother, in her later years is struggling with her health. The son says to his mom, *"You've prayed and believed your whole life. Never done anything wrong, and here you are. You're the nicest person I know, I'm the meanest. You have dementia, my life is perfect. Explain that to me."* Though the mother has dementia, the Holy Spirit guides her to respond with the following, *"Sometimes the devil allows people to live a life free from trouble because he doesn't want them turning to God. Your sin is like a jail cell, except it's so nice and comfy, there doesn't seem to be any need to leave. The doors wide open. Until one day, time runs out. The cell door slams shut, and suddenly it's too late."* This scene makes the same point that Job was making, that comfort doesn't always imply God's blessing and approval! Though some wicked people may experience prosperity, they will get their just punishment for eternity to come.

The Prosperity Gospel

The "prosperity gospel" is a false gospel used by a growing number of false teachers. The term "prosperity gospel" has become a way to describe the type of message that emphasizes that if you turn to Jesus, you'll become healthy, wealthy, and prosperous. While God does say that if we follow Him, we'll have prosperity, however, the "prosperity gospel" promises far more than what the Bible actually teaches. Promising health and wealth give people a false motivation to pursue Jesus and provides a false sense of spiritual security.

The Bible tells us to avoid false preachers who preach a different gospel than the gospel of Jesus. 1 Timothy 6:3-5, ***"If anyone advocates a different doctrine and does not agree with sound words, those of our Lord Jesus Christ, and with the doctrine conforming to godliness, he is conceited and understands nothing; (those) who suppose that godliness is a means of gain."*** Many prosperity gospel teachers are living extravagant multi-million-dollar lifestyles, who exploit the spiritual needs of people for the purpose of riches. Or, 2 Timothy 4:3-4, ***"For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but wanting to have their ears tickled, they will accumulate for themselves teachers in accordance to their own desires."*** Prosperity gospel churches are full of people who want a message that satisfies their fleshly desires. And 2 Peter 2:1-3, ***"But there were also false prophets among the people, just as there will be false teachers among you...In their greed these teachers will exploit you with fabricated stories."*** Many prosperity gospel teachers today preach outrageous stories, insisting that if you turn to their Jesus that your diseases will go away, and your bank accounts will swell to overflowing.

The central tenant of the prosperity gospel is the pursuit of your own happiness. This is very contradictory to what the Bible teaches, which emphasizes one's holiness above all else. Joel Osteen, one of the most famous prosperity gospel teachers, says, *"I do believe that God wants us to be happy, healthy, and whole."* In another quote he says, *"God wants you to prosper in your health, in your family, in your relationships, in your business, and in your career."* Quotes like this seem like a good encouraging word, but the big difference between Osteen and the Bible is that the Bible teaches that God is concerned with our holiness, and that God's blessings are derived from faithful obedience to the Lord and properly stewarding what He's giving us. As we focus on righteous living, benefits are manifested in our bodies, relationships, and work. For example, if I understand that I need to honor the Lord with my body, then I choose to stop abusing my body with drugs, alcohol, smoking, or unhealthy eating, and then my health improves. Or, when I honor the Lord in how I deal with my relationships and my career, then my relationships and my career improve, etc.

Another false teacher, Creflo A. Dollar, says, *"You need to hear about money, because you aint gonna have no love and joy and peace until you get some money!"* False teacher, Joseph Prince, says, *"You are destined to reign in life. You are called by the Lord to be a success, to enjoy wealth, to enjoy health, and to enjoy a life of victory."* He also says, *"Jesus has paid for my healing. Disease has no right to be in my body."* You can see why Biblically naïve people will flock to these teachings. These false preachers are why Christians are expected to test what they hear, ***"Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world,"*** (1 John 4:1), and 1 Thessalonians 5:21, ***"examine everything carefully; hold fast to that which is good."***

The Abundant life

What does Jesus mean when he says, ***"I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly,"*** John 10:10. The word abundant doesn't mean trouble-free, disease-free, or that God will make us financially rich. The word abundant here literally means something superior and advantaged. So, how does the Christian experience the advantaged/superior life?

Someone close to me once asked me, *"Darin, why should I become a Christian? I see your life in comparison to non-Christians, and you seem to have the same number of problems as anyone else. So, how is following Jesus a better life?"* That's such a great question! It can be answered in two parts. First, eternal life is the most obvious blessing that comes with following Jesus. But his question was more so focused on the value of following Jesus in this present life. To answer that, I gave him the following illustration.

Suppose two cars are driving down a long stretch of highway; a Christian in one car, and a non-Christian in the other. Eventually a big storm system rolls in, and soon it's almost too dark to see. Add to that the heavy rain that begins to downpour and now driving is incredibly tough. Both the believer and the non-believer are experiencing the same storm. However, the Christian has advantages. The Bible says that when a Christian is going through troubles in life, that he has the Holy Spirit to be a guide, counselor, comforter, and helper. Let's say that the Holy Spirit is represented by headlights and windshield wipers, which are only available functions for the Christian. The Christian prays and calls upon God for help to navigate the storm, and suddenly, on come the lights and wipers. The non-Christian in the other lane doesn't have the Holy Spirit. He's left navigating the storm without the advantages of the lights/wipers. Perhaps the illustration is a bit cheesy, but the Christian's ability to handle the troubles of life are superior, advantaged, because of God working in his life.

Conclusion

The blessings, advantages, success, and prosperity that come from following the Lord and His Word, are not the same as pursuing happiness and riches. God's ways are best, and those that follow His wisdom will experience the prosperity that come with living rightly.