

The Argument for Prosperity

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The first type of response I think we need to heed is the arguments for the prosperity gospel. In a short post, we can do no more than summarize the major threads. While any complete response and assessment will need to attend to the various hermeneutical and socio-contextual factors embedded or presumed within the many versions of the prosperity gospel, here I want to focus on the alleged biblical rationales. Next month, we will identify counter-arguments that also claim to be biblically based.

One of the most prevalently quoted scriptural texts among prosperity proponents is 3 John 2: "Beloved, I pray that all may go well with you and that you may be in good health, just as it is well with your soul." According to Rev. Dr. David Yonggi Cho, founding and senior pastor emeritus of the world's largest congregation, the Yoido Full Gospel Church in Seoul, South Korea, this prayer identifies three dimensions of blessings: the spiritual, the physical, and life in general. Cho's "triple blessing" message resonates with other advocates of the prosperity gospel, especially in light of the life and ministry of Christ.

Christ's ministry, understood within the prosperity framework, operates at each of these levels. First, there is not only the forgiveness of sins but also the spiritual healing and deliverance of people from the powers and forces that oppress them. Just as in Jesus' teaching that the exorcism of evil spirits needs to be followed by a holy occupation (Matt. 12:43-45), so also does the spiritual freedom and liberation that Christ brings need to be followed by obedience to the teachings of Christ. Thus, with deliverance comes faith that can move mountains and make possible, with God, what is otherwise impossible (Matt. 17:20-21), so that "Whatever you ask for in prayer with faith, you will receive" (Matt. 21:22).

Second, Jesus not only delivered the oppressed but also healed the sick. On numerous occasions, the synoptic evangelists affirmed that Jesus "healed all" the sick who came to him (Matt. 14:36; Mark 1:34, 6:56; Luke 6:19, 9:11). His disciples were also empowered to heal the sick (Luke 9:11; Acts 5:16, 8:7, 28:9). Prosperity thus involves not just wealth, but health and physical well-being.

Last but not least, the argument goes that while Jesus himself lived a life of simplicity (on which more later), he both insisted that he came in order that others might enjoy abundant life (John 10:10) and he accepted the ministry of the more well-to-do. For example, many of his women disciples appear to have been materially and financially well endowed (Luke 8:3), and Jesus' reception of their resources indicates his endorsement of their affluence. Similarly, the earliest followers of Christ included homeowners and relatively wealthy people like Joseph (called Barnabas), Tabitha (aka Dorcas), and Lydia, among others.

Going back then to the First Testament, prosperity advocates suggest that God not only called Abraham as the "father" of the chosen and elect people of God, but also blessed him abundantly in every way: socially, economically, and materially. Joseph's many colored robe foreshadowed his prosperity as second-in-command over the whole of Egypt later in life. Job's faithfulness was also rewarded, not only with the full restoration of his health, but with double the prosperity that he had before his calamity. In each of these instances and many others, then, the Bible portrays God's desire to bless his people with spiritual, physical, and material abundance.

But critics charge that this is a one-sided reading of the broad scope of the biblical narrative (and we will see why next month)?