

The Prosperity Gospel – Here’s What Hit Me #7 – 2.28.10

Deuteronomy 28 - Blessings for Obedience

¹ If you fully obey the LORD your God and carefully follow all his commands I give you today, the LORD your God will set you high above all the nations on earth. ² All these blessings will come upon you and accompany you if you obey the LORD your God:

³ You will be blessed in the city and blessed in the country.

⁴ The fruit of your womb will be blessed, and the crops of your land and the young of your livestock—the calves of your herds and the lambs of your flocks.

⁵ Your basket and your kneading trough will be blessed.

⁶ You will be blessed when you come in and blessed when you go out.

⁷ The LORD will grant that the enemies who rise up against you will be defeated before you. They will come at you from one direction but flee from you in seven.

⁸ The LORD will send a blessing on your barns and on everything you put your hand to. The LORD your God will bless you in the land he is giving you.

⁹ The LORD will establish you as his holy people, as he promised you on oath, if you keep the commands of the LORD your God and walk in his ways. ¹⁰ Then all the peoples on earth will see that you are called by the name of the LORD, and they will fear you. ¹¹ The LORD will grant you abundant prosperity—in the fruit of your womb, the young of your livestock and the crops of your ground—in the land he swore to your forefathers to give you.

¹² The LORD will open the heavens, the storehouse of his bounty, to send rain on your land in season and to bless all the work of your hands. You will lend to many nations but will borrow from none. ¹³ The LORD will make you the head, not the tail. If you pay attention to the commands of the LORD your God that I give you this day and carefully follow them, you will always be at the top, never at the bottom. ¹⁴ Do not turn aside from any of the commands I give you today, to the right or to the left, following other gods and serving them.

What's in it for me?

Admit it or not, most of us have asked God this before, in one way or another. And maybe we could go so far as to say that most of us have some kind of unspoken deal with God in our heads.

"God, if you protect me, if you keep my family safe, if you help it to go well for me at work, then you'll never have a servant as loyal as me."

You've heard of the prosperity gospel? At its extreme, it teaches that God will bless you with riches, actual straight cash, if you are faithful to him. You are a child of the king, says this viewpoint, and the king doesn't want his kids doing without. In fact, the most extreme form of the prosperity gospel says that if you're not driving a Lexus or an Escalade, you're letting God down in your testimony, so get busy getting rich and let the world know!

Now, we don't believe that here.

Anyone want to change churches?

More on that later. For now, notice that the surprising truth of **Deuteronomy 28** is that God Himself preached a prosperity gospel to the Israelites. No doubt about it! The Lord will bless your barns. Wouldn't you like to have your barns blessed? You will be blessed in the city and blessed in the country. You'll have lots of healthy kids and lots of healthy crops. Your enemies will come at you from one direction (just like in a Chuck Norris movie) and run away in four directions. All the work of your hands will be blessed. You will be the head, not the tail (no one wants to be the tail!), and you will lend to many nations and borrow from none (just the opposite of the situation our country has been in for many years).

In this current series, I'm listening through the Bible and preaching on what hits me the hardest, and here's what hit me this week: The Israelites had a prosperity gospel preached to them, and it came from the mouth of God himself.

Now notice some important things about it. First, it was a conditional gospel, of course: ¹ **If you fully obey the LORD your God and carefully follow all his commands I give you today... AND ¹⁴ Do not turn aside from any of the commands I give you today, to the right or to the left, following other gods and serving them.**

Second, notice this was a national blessing rather than one directed at individuals. I'm not saying that it didn't apply to individuals. Surely obedience could result in God's favor on your household. But primarily, the promise here is to Israel as a whole. God will set you high above all the nations on earth, it says. Because it isn't a promise to individuals, it was possible (as we saw last week) for God to say that there would always be poor people in the midst of Israel even when God was pouring out his blessing on the nation as a whole, and it is why, when God's judgment fell on Israel in later years, the godly suffered along with the wicked.

Third, this promise of national blessing (and others like it) were made to Israel, not the USA. That means that we can't claim this promise directly and tell each other that God says that if we honor him in this land, he will lift us up above all other nations and make us the lender rather than the borrower. This was his agreement with Israel, not us. Now we CAN and SHOULD learn from the principle here, which is if we honor God in our land, his hand will be with us and not against us. But we have to let him define how he will bless us. And we also have to be discerning as we evaluate our nation. If we say, "Oh, we were strong and wealthy in the past because our country was faithful to God and he poured out his blessing upon us," we're ignoring the more complex truth. Remember that the Roman Empire was strong and wealthy for a time, and so were the Babylonians, Assyrians, Persians and Egyptians. None of them were being rewarded for their godliness and all of them were eventually used to do God's work of blessing his people. So we have to be careful, and not take prosperity and good times as a sign of our own national godliness.

Fourth, this chapter isn't just about blessing. In fact, the larger part is taken up with curses, curses for disobedience and unfaithfulness. If we skim the rest of **Deuteronomy 28**, we see: You will build a house but not live in it. You'll plant a vineyard but you won't even begin to eat the grapes. Enemies will come and slaughter your livestock and carry your sons and daughters off to a foreign land. You will plant much and harvest little. ⁴⁷ **Because you did not serve the LORD your God joyfully and gladly in the time of prosperity, ⁴⁸ therefore in hunger and thirst, in nakedness and dire poverty, you will serve the enemies the LORD sends against you. He will put an iron yoke on your neck until he has destroyed you.**

By the way, these curses, like the blessings before them, are part of God's agreement with Israel, not us, but again, we can learn from the principle and apply it. If as a nation we mock God, we can last only so long.

The story of the OT is the story of God keeping these promises, both the blessings and the curses. So is the story of history, whether we are talking about God's people known as the church or the people who are Jewish by birth. God disciplines us for our sins, like it says in **Hebrews 12:4-11**, and yet in his mercy he does not treat us as our sins deserve, as it says in **Psalms 103:10**. And I believe God showed his faithfulness in one of the miracles of modern history when he pulled Israel back together as a nation again in 1948.

What I want to talk about today is the modern prosperity gospel that seeks to take these OT promises to Israel and apply them to us today as individuals and families. In addition to promises like **Deuteronomy 28**, prosperity gospel adherents also turn to **Malachi 3:8-12**, so let's read that:

⁸ **"Will a man rob God? Yet you rob me.**

"But you ask, 'How do we rob you?'

"In tithes and offerings. ⁹ You are under a curse—the whole nation of you—because you are robbing me. ¹⁰ Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house. Test me in this," says the LORD Almighty, "and see if I will not throw open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that you will not have room enough for it. ¹¹ I will prevent pests from devouring your crops, and the vines in your fields will not cast their fruit," says the LORD Almighty. ¹² "Then all the nations will call you blessed, for yours will be a delightful land," says the LORD Almighty.

What's a tithe? Tithe means tenth, and to tithe is to give the first 10% of your income to the Lord. The Israelites were required by God's Law to do this, and for a farmer or a shepherd, tithing was a tremendous act of faith. If you wait and work all summer for the wheat harvest to come in, and last year's wheat is almost gone, it takes faith to give God the first 10% of the harvest and then trust him to allow you to harvest the rest and make it to be enough for you. It isn't quite the same when you get your paycheck for two weeks and deposit it and then write a check a few days later on what you have already received.

Notice too that this also is a promise to the nation rather than to the individual. "You are under a curse – the whole nation of you", it says. And: If you obey, "yours will be a delightful land".

Now I believe in the tithe for today, even though we aren't under the OT Law. I believe in it because there is a principle behind it that never changes, and that principle is that God owns everything we have. In **Psalm 50**, God says:

**⁸ I do not rebuke you for your sacrifices
or your burnt offerings, which are ever before me.
⁹ I have no need of a bull from your stall
or of goats from your pens,
¹⁰ for every animal of the forest is mine,
and the cattle on a thousand hills.**

Our tithes and offerings aren't about giving God his share but rather acknowledging that all of it is God's already. Businessman R. G. Letourneau used to say that it isn't a question of how much of my money I give to God, but rather of how much of God's money I keep for myself. And for the Israelites, the tithe was only the start. They were required to give other offerings to God at the temple and they were required (as we talked about last week) to be open-handed and generous to the poor and to anyone in need. In Jesus Christ, we have received so much more than they. How could we give less? One of our late members, Allean Bailey rarely used to speak up in church, but one Sunday night we were talking about tithing, and she raised her hand and said: "The tithe belongs to the Lord. Until I tithe, I haven't GIVEN God anything."

But we have to be careful how we claim this blessing. God does bless us when we are faithful to him. That's the principle behind the Law. But we misread this Scripture if we say that if you tithe, God will make you personally wealthy with material things. There are people here today who can testify that God began blessing them when they finally stopped robbing God and began tithing. Some of those folks WILL tell you about material blessing and others will speak of other blessings that came to them even though financially, things remained tight. My Grandma Daniel was a godly woman and a faithful tither who tithed of her meager Social Security check, and though her check remained meager, she was richly blessed by God in a hundred ways. And she wasn't someone who needed or wanted great wealth, nor did she have skills to handle it. She was like the Levites in Israel, who didn't receive an inheritance in the land because the Lord Himself was her inheritance.

So the prosperity gospel says that you can't tithe and remain poor. But my understanding of Scripture is: Be faithful to God in everything and trust him to give you the blessing HE wants you to have, and you'll find that you can never out-give God.

The big problem with the prosperity gospel is that it ignores Jesus and it ignores reality.

In the New Testament, some of the worst people were rich – Herod the Great and Herod Antipas are good examples. And in the New Testament, some of the most godly people were rich too. There was Joseph of Arimathea, who gave his tomb to Jesus, not realizing that it was just a three-day loan! There was Joanna the wife of Cuza, the manager of Herod's household, of whom it is said in **Luke 8:3** that she was helping to support Jesus out of her own wealth.

What about poor people in the New Testament? Interestingly, it's hard to find examples of poor people who are singled out for their wickedness, which is instructive about the temptations of wealth. There are a few, however, in the parables of Jesus. In **Matthew 18**, Jesus tells of a man who was so deep in debt that he could never repay it – poverty. But when he was forgiven his debt, he went out and punished someone else who owed him only a small amount. Jesus held him up as an example of wicked unforgiveness. In **Matthew 25** (thanks Joanie!) Jesus uses an example of three servants of a rich man who are given money to manage, and the one who receives the least to manage and who achieves nothing with it is called a “wicked, lazy servant”.

But the thing to really take note of is that, contrary to the prosperity gospel, some of the most godly people in the NT are poor. There is Lazarus (**Luke 16**) who sits in miserable poverty and a rich man who allows this to happen at his own gate. There is the poor widow (**Luke 21**) who tosses two small coins into the offering at the temple, and Jesus says that she outdid everyone in giving to God for she gave all that she had to live on.

Between poverty and riches stands the man we call the rich young ruler. He comes to Jesus in **Luke 18** and though he seems like a good man, Jesus apparently sees that his riches stand between him and salvation, so he tells him: **"You still lack one thing. Sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me."**

²³**When he heard this, he became very sad, because he was a man of great wealth.** ²⁴**Jesus looked at him and said, "How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God! ²⁵Indeed, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God."**

Everything in that passage screams against the prosperity gospel. This man was rich, but not as a reward for godliness. Jesus told him to become poor, literally, in order to remove the one obstacle between him and God. And then he doesn't say, “But don't worry because when you start tithing, you'll get it all back!” And then when he walks away, Jesus talks about how hard it is for rich people to submit to God and be saved.

But the rest of the conversation is important too, because if you take that first part by itself, you might say: “Oh, rich people CAN'T be saved. Money is the devil!” In fact, that's kind of what the disciples said: ²⁶**Those who heard this asked, "Who then can be saved?"**

²⁷**Jesus replied, "What is impossible with men is possible with God."** Salvation is impossible for rich people...without God. And BTW, salvation is impossible for poor people too...without God. But with God, all things are possible.

²⁸**Peter said to him, "We have left all we had to follow you!"**

²⁹**"I tell you the truth," Jesus said to them, "no one who has left home or wife or brothers or parents or children for the sake of the kingdom of God ³⁰will fail to receive many times as much in this age and, in the age to come, eternal life."**

This week I did some deep research about the prosperity gospel...which means I typed it into Google. I found some deeply troubling mishandling of Scripture, but I also gained a valuable insight: Some of the teachers of the prosperity gospel are reacting against another false teaching which we'll call the poverty gospel. The poverty gospel says that money is evil, and rich people are rich because of their sin and that poverty is spiritual. That's the poverty gospel. Be poor and be saved. It's not as popular as the prosperity gospel for some reason ☺ but it is equally false.

Notice that Jesus promised his disciples plenty of rewards, both in this life and the one to come. Now when it comes to the next life, we're all prosperity gospel-ers I suppose, because we're all looking forward to those crowns and streets of gold and whatever else God has for us – treasures in heaven, just as Jesus promised to the rich young ruler. But what about this life? Did the apostles get paid back with many more homes, for example, than they had left behind? In a way, they did. If you read through Acts and the Epistles, you don't read about Peter and John and eventually Paul and the others making lots of money selling their DVDs or whatever. But as the word of God spread and the family of God spread, they soon had homes and brothers and sisters and a hot meal and a warm bed in every town...and not only that, but people who would pray for them and help them and stand up for them when they were persecuted. And that's just in this life.

I could go on about this for a long time, but instead I'll sum up.

God made a covenant with the Israelites in **Deuteronomy 28** and throughout the Law that was very concrete. As I have said several times in this series, Paul teaches in **Galatians 4** that the Law guided God's people through a childhood phase, and with children, rewards and punishment have to be very concrete. God promised to make them into a rich nation if they obeyed. He hasn't made that promise to us, neither as a nation nor as individuals, although we've seen that some of the same principles apply to us as well as to them.

And the New Testament doesn't give us a simplistic picture of money. It shows money being used for good and for evil, but it teaches that money is a little more dangerous than we think...it makes us want to serve it. The same chapter, **1 Timothy 6**, says that the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil (**v. 10**) AND it commands rich Christians NOT to become poor, but ¹⁸...**to do good, to be rich in good deeds, and to be generous and willing to share.** ¹⁹**In this way they will lay up treasure for themselves as a firm foundation for the coming age, so that they may take hold of the life that is truly life.**

One of the silliest things I read about the prosperity gospel this week is the claim that Jesus himself was rich. I won't cite the supposed evidence for this. We have already seen that he and his disciples depended on some wealthy women for their support. I'll just site these words from **2 Corinthians 8:9 - For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich** (in heaven, with the Father, before he came here), **yet for your sakes he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich** (emphasis added).

You know, he HAS made me rich. And I want that to continue. I don't mean in material things. I mean by giving me of himself. Giving me you, my church family. Giving me salvation, peace and hope and the promise of treasures in heaven.

THAT is a prosperity gospel.

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