

Christian Riches

Practicing Our Faith
Cautiously
Within an Awareness of
God's Peaceful Vigilance.

John H King

Christian Riches: Practicing Our Faith
Cautiously

John King

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Sitz Im Leben

WHAT does the Bible actually tell us about “being rich”? Is it even a concern for God? Does a personal quest for climbing the economic class ladder come with God’s blessing? Is christian faith in conflict with wanting to be a millionaire? Is the stock market something in which we can invest with a clear christian conscience and without cognitive dissonance? And what about saving for retirement, does the Bible have anything to say about it?

To undertake a study of “wealth” in the Bible, it is important to have some knowledge of the life situations of the ancients. We need to walk in their sandals and—I maintain—learn somewhat about their language which is the vehicle by which they communicated their feelings and thoughts. The german theologians calls this their “sitz im leben,” their life situation.

The biblical culture and history is inseparable from any discoverable truth that might be applicable to us. And that truth becomes that much more applicable if we see it in an absolute sense as an extension of God’s holiness in our experience. The historical narrative ties us to the literal world in which Israel lived. God’s interests in Israel recorded in its pages, which should be our interests as well, can thus become part of a real world situation and have practical as well as spiritual meaning to us.

The historical context also challenges any rationalization intent on interpreting the Word only to justify or confirm what we want it to say. If we do not actually care what God thought through the pages of scripture or if we do not believe there is any message for us when it comes to wealth and poverty, relative to our

world—well—we don't need to read this! The real discovery of Biblical Truth is a revelation that is left up to our individual conscience and conviction to accept. Our desire and ability by faith to own that message then can become part of who and what we are becoming in Christ.¹ Perhaps I could say all this another, clearer, way: Are there any lessons we can take from the testimonies of those men and women in Bible days who were wealthy or who lived in poverty? What can their experience teach us and is this something God is sharing with us through His inspired Word?

I need to look at the language since my knowledge of culture is below poor. But language has a lot to offer. Most Old Testament words were more descriptive than definitive, more picturesque than analytical, more a verbal representation of what the ancients saw, heard, or felt than any scientific taxonomy that would give us the distinguishing nuance of a word or that might differentiate a word from all its synonyms. Here are a few examples:

- If something “flew” it was a bird. ...even locust! There was no Darwin then to give us a more granular description of animal life. If it didn't fly, it crawled or swam.² Some animals had a split hoof

¹ 2 Corinthians 3:18 *And we all, who with unveiled faces contemplate the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.*

² Genesis 1:26 “Then God said, “Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.””

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and chewed their feed,³ some fish had scales.⁴ These you could eat.

- An orphan was a child without a father, even if mom was still there.⁵ She was a widow. There is no word for widower. But there is a word for marrying your brother's widow.⁶ Oh, a man's first wife called his other wives her "rivals,"⁷ (There was no word for *bigamy*.)
- There was no word for any particular disease. A person could be wounded or suffering illness or some other form of pain which weakened them. Individual diseases were not categorized. Strong men who became weak through illness were said to be effeminate.⁸ One word used derives from the idea of being pierced and "in pain."⁹ (More often than not this happened on the tip of a sword.) There is one notable exception to all this: They knew leprosy as any skin legion, tumor, or

³ Leviticus 11:3 "You may eat any animal that has a divided hoof and that chews the cud."

⁴ Leviticus 11:9 "Of all the creatures living in the water of the seas and the streams you may eat any that have fins and scales."

⁵ Lamentations 5:3, We have become fatherless, our mothers are widows.

⁶ Deuteronomy 25:5 בַּיְתָא,

⁷ I Samuel 1:6 "*Because the LORD had closed Hannah's womb, her rival kept provoking her in order to irritate her.*"

⁸ 10 times in the Old Testament a word which may have derived from the word "woman" is used of sickness. eg. 2 Samuel 12:15 "*After Nathan had gone home, the LORD struck the child that Uriah's wife had borne to David, and he became ill.*"

⁹ Deuteronomy 7:15 "*The LORD will keep you free from every disease. He will not inflict on you the horrible diseases you knew in Egypt, but he will inflict them on all who hate you.*"

neoplasm. The priest¹⁰ was a trained dermatologist who could identify malignancies from simple moles, etc. If it was malignant, it was leprosy¹¹ and they referred to this as being smitten by God.¹²

- There was no word for depression—let alone the five stages of grief. What was Jonah feeling when he was “*eviled with a great evil*” [that’s what the language reads] in Jonah 4:1? Translators like to believe it was “anger.” I think this translation does not do justice to the drama Jonah was experiencing.
- On the subject of sin, Professor Girdlestone informs us, “*The Hebrew Bible meets us with a full acknowledgement of these manifold aspects of human suffering, and blends wrong doing and suffering to a remarkable degree, setting forth sin in its relation to God, to society, and to a man’s own self.*”¹³
- I like one Hebrew word for *crying out loud*. We can appreciate this word since it is simply a ringing or reverberating loud sound made in an excited moment. It could be a complaint¹⁴ or a shout for

¹⁰ Leviticus 13:2 *When anyone has a swelling or a rash or a shiny spot on their skin that may be a defiling skin disease, they must be brought to Aaron the priest or to one of his sons who is a priest.*

¹¹ The NIV notes “*The Hebrew for leprosy was used for various diseases affecting the skin.*” See 2 Samuel 3:29.

¹² The word for leprosy, נַעֲצָרָה, comes from a word which some believe comes from a root meaning “to smite.” The idea was held that they were struck by God with the disease.

¹³ Robert Girdlestone. *Synonyms of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Grand Rapids Book Manufacturers, Inc. 1974), 76.

¹⁴ Psalms 17:1 “A prayer of David. Hear me, LORD, my plea is just; listen to my **cry**. Hear my prayer—it does not rise from deceitful lips.”

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joy¹⁵ a heralded shout or proclamation,¹⁶ even a song,¹⁷ ...and, perhaps a wail in distress.¹⁸ (Mostly joy, I am pleased to inform.)

- *Holiness* derives from the idea of being separate and distinct from what is general or common.¹⁹ All this really tells us is that God is unique and there is no other One like Him! You have to get to know Him to learn more.
- “The system of offerings appointed to Israel,” explains Professor Girdlestone, “*may thus be regarded as a book of pictures, sketched in shadowy outline, indicating to God’s people the work which was to be accomplished by Divine grace when the fulness of the time should have come.*”²⁰

There are over 14,000 words in the Old Testament and each has a story to tell. So, I ask myself, what might the words for “wealth” and “riches” be telling us? And when we reach the New Testament the language changes to Greek and we enter another grammatical world of not just spiritual but literary intrigue. The New Testament, to

¹⁵ Proverbs 29:6 “Evildoers are snared by their own sin, but the righteous **shout for joy** and are glad.”

¹⁶ .1 Kings 22:6 “

As the sun was setting, a **cry** spread through the army: “Every man to his town. Every man to his land!”

¹⁷ .2 Chronicles 11:22 “...they began to **sing**”

¹⁸ Lamentations 2:19 “Arise, **cry out** in the night, as the watches of the night begin; pour out your heart like water in the presence of the Lord.”

¹⁹ Exodus 15:11 “Who among the gods is like you, LORD? Who is like you—majestic in holiness, awesome in glory, working wonders?”

²⁰ Robert B. Girdlestone. *Synonyms of the Old Testament: Their Bearing on Christian Doctrine* (Grand Rapids, MI: Grand Rapids Book Manufacturers, Inc. 1974), p. 185.

the degree it represents the occidental mind—the way you and I think—it gets easier to understand. But, for what it's worth, they were semitic, judeans, who penned God's thoughts. To what extent did God utilize the Greek meanings or was it possible God preferred to filter the text through the writer's understanding, his "*sitz im leben*"?

Life Is For Living

THE Old Testament record is not a John Bunyan Allegory like *Pilgrim's Progress*. It is not a fabled story intended to explain morals or outline theological ideas. It is not an anthology of parables designed to expound on those deeper spiritual truths that challenge our logical thinking.

The Old Testament, perhaps in incomplete form or perhaps with details yet to be archeologically verified, is—nonetheless—*historical* because its people were realists and not just story tellers. This simple point is critical to an understanding of the record. Even prophecy is rooted in history—an anticipated tomorrow when God will restore the blessings once enjoyed. Prophetic visions are not of a new distant world, some heavenly sphere above—no! It is *this* world, according to their understanding, that God plans to renovate and restore. The New Covenant themes of grace, heaven (as we think of it), and resurrection are little understood by a people who see truth only in terms of the life they are living. Christians, understandably, after Paul's leadership will see prophecies more clearly in terms of Calvary but Old Israel lacked the language and vision to do so. It shouldn't sound mysterious to hear that in Old Testament times people who faced internecine warfare, cyclical famines, and pandemics, bacterial and viral locust, (oh, and locust, multiple species of the things)—it shouldn't surprise us that—they were more concerned about tomorrow's meal than some promise of a world to come. It was the Greeks who like to sit around sipping tea and philosophizing. ...not the Ancient Israelites!

But if we care to philosophize, Solomon's your man. And he is the one to give a talk on wealth and poverty. He is the expert. When we talk about wealth and riches we are relying primarily on Solomon for answers because he wrote extensively on the subject, as we shall soon see. But Solomon was what we would call "worldly." This is not a derogatory appraisal of his thoughts but a realistic profile of a man, whom God once chose to be king but who, in turn, enjoyed wine, women, and song, and who spend money like water building his own mansion before he thought to review his dad's design for the Lord's house. Solomon ruled in a time of relative peace (this, too, was a gift from God) and was famously admired far and wide. His wealth was part of this package and, yes, God gave it to him as part of a covenant agreement along with the wisdom he asked for.

Yet, Solomon learned his wisdom in a tragic way. He won the lottery and discovered what vain living does to one who does not stay in prayerful proximity to the God who rescues us from ourselves. Much of his testimony is the book of Ecclesiastes.

Friar Lohfink sums up Solomon's advice to anyone caring to attend his lecture, learned through the "blessings," the great fortune, God gave him:

Real life happens here, in this world. The place of humans is in the history that is happening now. This is the place for blessing, joy, in praise of God. Community with God remains entirely bound to earthly life.²¹ ... Enjoy life with the wife whom you love, all the days of your vain life that are given you under the sun, because that is your portion in life.²²

²¹ Gerhard Lohfink. *Is This All There Is?* p. 66.

²² *ibid.* p. 67

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As mystical or esoteric such a quote must sound, it evokes a sense of earthliness, of a material existence. It offers no knowledge of the hereafter or of spiritual truths. In Israeli thought, a man's thoughts are tied to a realistic view of life as he is living it.

A word as meaningful to us as "security" from which we argue the availability of "eternal" security—this word for the greater part in the Old Testament —referred to economic security: investments in sheep, cattle, crops and land. Solomon qualifies to be our guest lecturer because he personally knew what the blessing of wealth could mean to a person. Solomon's many proverbs on riches reference his own material wealth, not spiritual riches.²³ The subject of *riches* must include his story.

²³ Matthew 6:20 *But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moths and vermin do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal.*

Riches In The Old Testament

A cursory review of the uses of one of the two Hebrew terms for “being rich” or “wealthy” reveals—or appears to suggest—the term has little to do with our cultural understanding of what it means to be wealthy. But we come close.

One word for riches is used 243 times in our Old Testament, but it means “riches” or “wealth” in only 21 references. Most of the 243 verses describe *military* strength. If I may: this word can be descriptive of all areas of strength. The Bible speaks of

- Strength of character: Ruth 3:11 speaks of a *virtuous* woman. She is rich in virtue.
- Military strength: Exodus 14:28 refers to an army. A rich army is a military force.
- Ability : Rich in power or ability. Psalms 49:6²⁴ uses the word wealth²⁵ but actually means, “*they trust in their own abilities*” (which, no doubt, includes “resources” of all kinds)²⁶ The Greek translation suggests the same.²⁷

The Psalmist is not using the word [translated] “riches” to reference “money” but the misleading notion

²⁴ They trust in their wealth and boast of great riches.

²⁵ לְמָה לְאִרְאָה בְּיָמֵי רָע עַן יַעֲקֹבִי יְסוּבֶנִי:

²⁶ Proverbs 12:27 refers to “*the riches of the hunt.*” which in the New American Bible reads “*Sloth does not catch its prey, but the wealth of the diligent is splendid.*”

²⁷ (LXX 48:7) οἱ πεποιθότες ἐπὶ τῇ δυνάμει αὐτῶν καὶ ἐπὶ τῷ πλῆθει τοῦ πλοῦτου αὐτῶν καυχώμενοι

that self-reliant and self-sufficient peoples need claim no real need for a trust in God. They mistakenly think that they can make it on their own without God or prayer.²⁸

They say, "How would God know? Does the Most High know anything?" This is what the wicked are like— always free of care, they go on amassing wealth. — Psalms 73:11-12

The second word, "riches" in this Psalm [49:6] means "great riches" in the Hebrew language. 37 times in the Old Testament, this is all it means which seems to simplify the matter for us. Wealth is wealth. ...Right?

*And king Solomon passed all the kings of the earth in **riches** —2 Chronicles 9:22
Hezekiah had very great **wealth**..., and he made treasuries for his silver and gold and for his precious stones, spices, shields and all kinds of valuables. —2 Chronicles 32:27*

But the Psalmist is saying the same thing about one's actual wealth that he said of one's abilities or sense of self-reliance. The Psalmist again is warning against thinking that our resources translate into our security. It is a false trust. Psalms 52:7 cautions, "*Here now is the man who did not make God his stronghold but trusted in his **great wealth** . [The abundance of resources]."*

²⁸ Deuteronomy 8:17 "My power and the strength of my hands have produced this wealth for me."

Are Riches A Blessing?

Is wealth ever a blessing from God? It certainly should be if we are people of faith!

The blessing of the LORD brings wealth, without painful toil for it.—Proverbs 10:22²⁹

Solomon appears to allude to God's blessing introduced at his coronation. The Lord blessed Solomon with wealth and fame though he didn't ask for these. He didn't toil for it. It was a divine gift in response to his prayer for wisdom. Solomon could later write, "*Do not wear yourself out to get rich; do not trust your own cleverness.*"³⁰ Let God decide.³¹ Samuel might have been a voice from his past: "*The LORD sends poverty and wealth; he humbles and he exalts.*"

When Solomon encountered God at his coronation, he asked only for wisdom to rule God's people. God was impressed with Solomon's request, his disinterest in being renown or rich; so, God added these to the package.³²

²⁹ Psalms 127:2

In vain you rise early and stay up late, toiling for food to eat—for he grants sleep to those he loves.

³⁰ Proverbs 23:4

³¹ 1 Samuel 2:7

³² 2 Chronicles 1:11-12 *God said to Solomon, "Since this is your heart's desire and you have not asked for wealth, possessions or honor, nor for the death of your enemies, and since you have not asked for a long life but for wisdom and knowledge to govern my people over whom I have made you king, therefore wisdom and knowledge will be given you. And I will also give you wealth, possessions and honor, such as no*

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Solomon memorialize the occasion in verse 18 of chapter 8 of his Proverbs:

With me [wisdom] are riches and honor, enduring [surpassing, eminent] wealth and righteousness [prosperity.]

“With wisdom,” Solomon affirmed, “comes wealth and fame.” And then he qualified his understanding of God’s answer to his prayer: *with great wealth and prosperity*:³³ One commentary explains, “*That which God of His goodness*³⁴ *causes to flow to men...*”³⁵

The idea that Solomon’s wealth surpassed in description that of any other monarch in his time is no surprise; since, God never does anything halfheartedly. I Kings 4 records the expansion of Solomon’s world, influence and fame well beyond what kings historically reigned over:

- :1 all Israel;
- :21 all the kingdoms from the Philistines to Egypt;
- :24 all lands west of the Jordan;
- :22-23 massive provisions daily;
- :26 large stables [40,000 stalls];
- :29-30 “*And God gave Solomon wisdom and understanding exceeding much, and largeness of heart,*

king who was before you ever had and none after you will have.”

³³ The word “righteousness” as used here indicates God vindication (confirming His promise to enrich Solomon reign. [Psalm 24:5 *They will receive blessing from the Lord and vindication from God their Savior.*]

³⁴ We might say, “God did right by Solomon.” In Psalms 103:6 “righteousness” is translated “merciful” in the Septuagint (102:6).

³⁵ Keil & Delitzsch. vol VI.Proverbs. p. 181

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*even as the sand that is on the sea shore. And Solomon's wisdom excelled the wisdom of all the children of the east country, and all the wisdom of Egypt."*³⁶

Indeed, for Solomon, wealth was "a gift from God."³⁷ But his writing under the theme of the vanity of life begs the question: Did he consider this gift in turn a blessing?

³⁶ Ephesians 3:20 *Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us,*

³⁷ Ecclesiastes 5:19

Are Riches Problematic?

Wealth, in another sense, might not be a blessing from God if it leads us away from a humble trust in God.

“Two things I ask of you, Lord; do not refuse me before I die: Keep falsehood and lies far from me; give me neither poverty nor riches, but give me only my daily bread. Otherwise, I may have too much and disown you and say, ‘Who is the Lord?’ Or I may become poor and steal, and so dishonor the name of my God.”—Proverbs 30:7-9

Ecclesiastes 5:18-20 is revealing of Solomon’s view of riches—and I have to think, his own wealth. His regret is evident, since, he learned, as we, that life is more than *“food, and the body more than clothes.”*³⁸

“...with these great evils [verses 16-17: sorrow, darkness, hatred, grief, frustration, affliction],” Professor Keil comments, *“...the possession of riches is also connected: of their deceitful instability, and their merely belonging to this present life...”*³⁹ Solomon’s disappointment rests in the fact that wealth provides a fleeting pleasure.

³⁸ Matthew 6:25

³⁹ Keil & Delitzsch. vol VI. Ecclesiastes. p. 301

This is what I have observed to be good: that it is appropriate for a person to eat, to drink and to find satisfaction in their toilsome labor under the sun during the few days of life God has given them—for this is their lot. Moreover, when God gives someone wealth and possessions, and the ability to enjoy them, to accept their lot and be happy in their toil—this is a gift of God. They seldom reflect on the days of their life, because God keeps them occupied with gladness of heart.⁴⁰

I interpret this to mean: “It is good for some to work for a living. But some of us do not need to; God has made us wealthy enough to pass the time occupied with merriment.”

Is there a “gift” of riches from God designed to provide toil free hours to preoccupy the heart so that the rich now doesn’t face the realities that life imposes on those that need to work for a living? This was Solomon’s experience.

Poverty is no fun. Poverty, at its worse, in Solomon’s day amounted to begging but the person in Solomon’s memory here is a day laborer who revisits his needs and those of his family on a daily basis. The laborer—to turn a phrase—goes from paycheck to paycheck.

For Solomon, wealth *was* a gift from God. He prayed for wisdom and this was the fringe benefit. God’s prophet anointed him as king, which means God gave him Israel to rule over. All his prosperity was thanks to God’s goodness (Proverbs 8:18 righteousness) toward him. What Solomon did with this gift was another matter.⁴¹

⁴⁰ LXX ὁ θεὸς περισιᾷ αὐτὸν ἐν εὐφροσύνῃ καρδίας αὐτοῦ [God occupies him with merriment.]

⁴¹ 1 Kings 11:6-11 “So Solomon did evil in the eyes of the Lord; he did not follow the Lord completely, as David his father had done.

On a hill east of Jerusalem, Solomon built a high place for Chemosh the detestable god of Moab, and for Molek the

No surprise Solomon would think that God made him rich just as God assigned all men their lot in life. *“Rich and poor have this in common: The LORD is the Maker of them all.”*⁴² But the paradox of life is that sometimes the wealthy lives a prodigal life while God somehow extends the 2 fish and few loaves of the poor. *“One person pretends to be rich, yet has nothing; another pretends to be poor, yet has great wealth.”*⁴³ The preacher has a profound truth here to expound. What are true riches?

So, if we want a principle to live by, Solomon said it best, *“Better the poor whose walk is blameless than the rich whose ways are perverse.”*⁴⁴ I would rather be a poor man with his integrity intact than rich but living a lie.

You decide: Are riches a blessing from the Lord? Solomon remained somewhat ambivalent. He afterward cautioned, *“... as for the rich, their abundance permits them no sleep. I have seen a grievous evil under the sun: wealth hoarded to the harm of its owners,”*⁴⁵ Hoarded! The Hebrew word means “to guard.” Rich people need to stay alert and keep watch over their wealth. A person’s assets seem to evaporate unnoticed. It is a constant worry!

detestable god of the Ammonites. He did the same for all his foreign wives, who burned incense and offered sacrifices to their gods.

The Lord became angry with Solomon because his heart had turned away from the Lord, the God of Israel, who had appeared to him twice. Although he had forbidden Solomon to follow other gods, Solomon did not keep the Lord’s command. So the Lord said to Solomon, “Since this is your attitude and you have not kept my covenant and my decrees, which I commanded you, I will most certainly tear the kingdom away from you and give it to one of your subordinates.”

⁴² Proverbs 22:2

⁴³ Proverbs 13:7

⁴⁴ Proverbs 28:6

⁴⁵ Ecclesiastes 5:12

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We can question how blessed we are if wealthy. Additionally riches can tempt us away from a humble dependence on God and each other. We might find ourselves more blessed if we are among the gleaners, who somehow sense that their “daily bread” was in answer to prayer..

A faithful person will be richly blessed, but one eager to get rich will not go unpunished. —Proverbs 28:20

Anyway: a search for the words “blessing” and “riches” in the same breath is missing in the Old Testament, though, clearly, God might “bless” us financially. What we do with it is another matter.

So, where do we go from here! What does God think about our modern interest in fund raising, purchasing lottery tickets, saving for retirement, and our dependence on government subsidized funds. Is the dream of upward class movement a worthy desire? Perhaps, there is nothing in the ancient biblical cultures or in their language that addresses these modern concerns.

Enough Is Enough

I sit here in a circle of piles of books looking at a computer screen opened to more electronic references and I am beginning to see how deep in the weeds one can walk pondering the inexhaustible source of Biblical knowledge on the subject of riches. It is not evident at first devotional glance.

Take, for instance, Proverbs 30:15-16⁴⁶ which offers an interesting use of this term “riches.” It is translated: *enough*. Amen to that!

“The leech has two daughters. ‘Give! Give!’ they cry. “There are three things that are never satisfied, four that never say, ‘Enough!’: the grave, the barren womb, land, which is never satisfied with water, and fire, which never says, ‘Enough!’”

According to Solomon, leaches never get enough blood, the grave is never satisfied, neither is a parched land. I am reminded of my Uncle’s lawn. The ground was cracked and dry when he would turn a garden hose lose to drown it. But I watched for the longest time while the water streamed into those muddy crevices disappearing into the abyss. The ground was not rich; it was so impoverished with thirst! Rich ground is ground that is

⁴⁶ (In LXX follows 24:34) τῆ βδέλλη τρεῖς θυγατέρες ἦσαν ἀγαπήσει ἀγαπώμεναι καὶ αἱ τρεῖς αὐταὶ οὐκ ἐνεπίπλασαν αὐτήν καὶ ἡ τετάρτη οὐκ ἠρκέσθη εἰπεῖν ἰκανόν [the horse-leech had three dearly beloved daughters: and these three did not satisfy her; and the fourth was not contented, so as to say, Enough.]

satiated. My uncle's garden and lawn on hot summer days seem to cry out in its poverty for more water!

Put simply: "riches" as an Old Testament term is nuanced to refer to one's possessions. (That would include assets in today's parlance.) Some people are probably "leaches" of sort never satisfied. [There is a New Testament Greek word for this that we will look at a little later.]

As enlightening as all this is, "riches" is a term Solomon, among so few Bible writers, found instructive. (The earlier books of the Bible make no reference to it.) Aside from the Wisdom literature (and Ezekiel to a smaller degree of interest), however, *wealth* as distinguished from poverty was not a useful discussion. "*Social problems, the distinction between rich and poor, were not considered in Israel until the time of the monarchy.*"⁴⁷ During the time of the patriarchs, the wilderness years, and the period of the judges in Israel, there was no serious look at the influences, for good or ill, riches might have on a society.⁴⁸ The poor were accepted as a part of culture.⁴⁹ They have always been and will always be. In general in scriptures, in a cultural sense, rich people owned the land and the crops; the poor had to sell off at least some of their possessions to subsist.⁵⁰ Eventually, however, many joined the beggars who gleaned in their neighbors' fields.⁵¹

⁴⁷ .G Johannes Botterweck & Helmer Ringgren. Transl: John T. Willis *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1977. Vol III. p. 367

⁴⁸ There are only 2 isolated references to riches in Genesis 14:23 and 31:16 which have nothing to tell us here.

⁴⁹ Deuteronomy 15:11 *There will always be poor people in the land.*

⁵⁰ Leviticus 25:25 'If one of your fellow Israelites becomes poor and sells some of their property

⁵¹ The Hebrew word, שָׁרָה, for poverty is found only in Proverbs. To Solomon wealth was a symbol of power and security as well

But if we are privileged to be one of the “haves” instead of the “have-nots,” our good fortune comes with instructions in the Old Testament—which will become warnings under the new covenant in Christ, later. In Proverbs 3:9 we are enjoined to “*Honor the LORD with your wealth, with the firstfruits of all your crops;*” which the Greek correctly translates not “*wealth*” but “*labor:*”⁵² [or the product of your labor]⁵³ This verse is probably among the many unread and forgotten footnotes on the Biblical text. Here is one piece of Solomonic wisdom worth remembering: what we possess is, in fact, not all ours—no matter how meager the collection. Whatever we “have” we should credit coming from God. Some of what we have could be thought of as “held in trust” for others. It is not really ours.⁵⁴ Solomon later concluded, “*when God gives someone wealth and possessions, and the ability to enjoy them, to accept their lot and be happy in their toil—this is a gift of God.*” The biblical concept is that some of what we possess, if gotten by the providential care of a loving God, should be thought of as “held in trust” for God to call for later.

Doesn't this make riches and wealth ..a blessing? More like a test of character and faith! God doesn't shower us with good fortune so we can slither off furtively to some distant island where the cries of the poor cannot be heard and indulge ourselves. But I didn't need to tell you this.

as prestige. Misusing this precious resource, cautions Solomon, will inevitably bring economic ruin.

⁵² τίμα τὸν κύριον ἀπὸ σῶν δικαίων πόνων

⁵³ Deuteronomy 28:33

⁵⁴ The parable of “the unjust steward” teaches the need for faithfulness to God in the area of our resources. Food for thought. See Luke 16:11 So if you have not been trustworthy in handling worldly wealth, who will trust you with true riches?

The Poor In Ancient Israel

To understand wealth, we have to introduce the term *poverty*. One word for “poor” means “humbled” and I think we can appreciate the connection.

The Psalmist observed, “ *This **poor** man called, and the LORD heard him; he saved him out of all his troubles.*”⁵⁵ The New Living Bible uses the word “desperation” for “poor.” It reads: “*In my **desperation** I prayed, and the LORD listened; he saved me from all my troubles.*” It is significant to observe that the poor by definition are humble folk in an Old Testament economy⁵⁶ which encourages a dependence on God for support. I am reminded of Peter’s encouraging thought. You should “*clothe yourselves with **humility** [because] God ... shows favor to the humble.*”⁵⁷

You save the humble but bring low those whose eyes are haughty. — Psalms 18:27

More about this shortly but for now: the poor are described in the Old Testament world as those in need of daily sustenance. They are not independent countrymen and women. They subsist on what others, of more means, provide for them.⁵⁸

⁵⁵ Psalms 34:6

⁵⁶ .

⁵⁷ 1 Peter 5:5

⁵⁸ • Allow them to “pick up the grapes that have fallen” from your vineyard harvest Leviticus 19:10

- the gleanings of your harvest. Leave them for the poor Leviticus 23:22

If a fellow Israelite became poor and had to sell some or all of their property⁵⁹ they needed to have recourse to have it all returned since it was their inheritance under Old Testament Covenantal Law. In a word, God's compassion toward the plight of the poor is everywhere in evidence in His commandments to Moses.

What if he could not buy back what he sold? God came up with a festival for burning the IOU: *"But if they do not acquire the means to repay, what was sold will remain in the possession of the buyer until the Year of Jubilee. It will be returned in the Jubilee, and they can then go back to their property."*⁶⁰

The poor is spoken of throughout scripture. 5 different words used 199 times⁶¹ describing a state of being underfed, thin, gaunt, weak, in need of basic subsistence. The poor tended to be thin and underfed. Their health was probably affected if gleaning was sparse.

There might be a better way to describe them. The 23rd Psalm should come to mind for the believer: *"The Lord is my shepherd. I shall **not** want."* A good shepherd provides for his sheep; so, this is not a description of them. Matthew, however, caught Jesus sorrowfully, yet with compassion, scanning the crowd with His eyes and remarking, *"... they were harassed and helpless [in want of care], like sheep without a shepherd"*⁶²

• be openhanded toward the ... poor and needy [in need of your help] in your land. Deuteronomy 15:11

⁵⁹ Leviticus 25:25

⁶⁰ Leviticus 25:28

58 אֶבְיָן 46 לְ 24 רש 58 הָעֲנִי 13 מְחֻסֵּר ⁶¹

⁶² Matthew 9:36

Summary So Far

I can draw a general summary which, I believe, is supportable in the Scripture: the poor are those who do not have tomorrow's meal on hand. Are they homeless? Some were, if they had to sell off their homestead for food. Some were living as the servants or hires of their fellow countrymen. They were fellow Israelites that had fallen on hard times. But those more economically fortunate could not mistreat their fellow countrymen in their poverty. Deuteronomy 24:14 records, "*Do not take advantage of a hired worker who is **poor and needy**,*⁶³ *whether that worker is a fellow Israelite or a foreigner residing in one of your towns.*"

The poor were the beggars and the needy where the day laborers who worked for their fellow countrymen of better means.⁶⁴

He who was financially well off enough to have property, fields of crops, and sheep or cattle must not take undo advantage, extort, defraud or otherwise treat violently his fellow Israelites, especially those whose poverty brought them to his door.

עֲנֵי וְאֶבְיוֹן⁶³

⁶⁴ We should recall Matthew 20:1ff. "*For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire workers for his vineyard.*"

Prosperity In The Old Testament

PSALM 35:27 is a good place to begin to investigate prosperity in the Old Testament. The KJV [King James Version of the Bible] reads *Let the LORD be magnified, which hath pleasure in the **prosperity**⁶⁵ of his servant.* But the NIV translates correctly: *The LORD be exalted, who delights in the **well-being** of his servant.* In Hebrew thought, prosperity comes in many shapes and sizes, not just monetary. “Well-being” which is what the word SHALOM describes here speaks to physical, emotional, spiritual[?] as well as financial well-being. It is a peaceful life. It is enjoying a continuing sense of security. It includes a good harvest and sheep that are reproducing every Spring. It is a blessing of rain, the former and later, in season, on schedule. It is a successful achievement whether building something or harvesting crops. It is a prosperous journey to somewhere, unharmed and in health. These are all examples of prosperity.

Prosperity in the Old Testament culture was not limited to business success. It was *success*⁶⁶ on many levels.⁶⁷ It signified as well *usefulness*⁶⁸ and being *victorious*.⁶⁹ In Genesis 39:2 we read that “*The LORD was*

⁶⁵ The well know Hebrew word shalom, שָׁלוֹם

⁶⁶ Psalm 45:4 *In your majesty ride forth **victoriously** in the cause of truth, humility and justice; let your right hand achieve awesome deeds.*

⁶⁷ This is the Hebrew word in Psalm 1:3, prospers, צָלַח

⁶⁸ Ezekiel 15:4 *And after it is thrown on the fire as fuel and the fire burns both ends and chars the middle, is it then **useful** for anything?*

⁶⁹ 1 Kings 22:12 *All the other prophets were prophesying the same thing. "Attack Ramoth Gilead and be **victorious**," they said, "for the LORD will give it into the king's hand.*

with Joseph so that he *prospered*, and he lived in the house of his Egyptian master.” This can only mean that God made all his efforts produce results favorable to Potiphar.⁷⁰ Even children are a sign of prosperity.⁷¹

This begs a question: what does the word *prosperity* signify in Psalm. 1:1-3? The Dictionary of Biblical Imagery defines this prosperity “in terms of a process that leads to fulfillment of the purpose for which a thing or person was created.”⁷²

Blessed is the one who does not walk in step with the wicked or stand in the way that sinners take or sit in the company of mockers, but whose delight is in the law of the LORD, and who meditates on his law day and night. That person is like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither— whatever they do prospers.

C. H Spurgeon interprets this to say, *It is not outward prosperity which the Christian most desires and values; it is soul prosperity which he longs for.*⁷³ Even though, for christians, this interpretation seems most appropriate, the likelihood that this was David’s mindset is less so. But it is equally unlikely David was referring to obtaining wealth. The prosperity David is probably emphasizing is personal well-being and a meaningful life. His overall devotion in

⁷⁰ Professor Keil interprets this to mean “*To who God causes all that he undertakes and does to prosper.*” - Keil-Delitzsch Vol I, p. 344.

⁷¹ Deuteronomy 28:11 *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 ancestors to give you.*

⁷² Leland Ryken, ed. et al. *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery.* Intervarsity Press: Downers Grove, IL.1982. p. 675

⁷³ C. H. Spurgeon, *Treasury of David*, Scripture Truth Book Co.:Fincastl, VA. 1984. p. 2.

the Psalms to the Word of God and God's commandments as wise counsel more than suggests this. A life lived godly is indeed a life worth living. The thought that David might be suggesting that God's wisdom could be used to increase wealth and, therefore, the pleasure it provides is unthinkable in light of his passion for the Word of God.⁷⁴

Psalm 23:6, a very familiar verse, uses the word *goodness*,⁷⁵ which is elsewhere another word for prosperity.⁷⁶ *Surely your goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever.* David affirms that the best definition of prosperity, for the believer, is the abiding presence of the Good Shepherd, who protects us in danger, and leads us to peaceful pastures.

⁷⁴ Psalm 25:4=5 *Show me your ways, LORD, teach me your paths. Lead me in thy truth, and teach me: for thou art the God of my salvation; on thee do I wait all the day.*

⁷⁵ To be clear: This is not David's word for prosperity, but it was used this way elsewhere in the Old Testament.

⁷⁶ I Kings 10:7 *But I did not believe these things until I came and saw with my own eyes. Indeed, not even half was told me; in wisdom and **wealth** you have far exceeded the report I heard.*

Solomon On Prosperity

Solomon also understood a link between God's mercy to the penitent and their prosperity: Proverbs 28:13 reads: *Whoever conceals their sins does not prosper, but the one who confesses and renounces them finds mercy.* So one may see their prosperity as a display of divine mercy, lovingkindness, and benevolence.

Solomon at life's end, however, was left with a very pessimistic view of his prosperity. *When times are **good** [prosperous], be happy; but when times are bad, consider this: God has made the one as well as the other. Therefore, no one can discover anything⁷⁷ about their future.⁷⁸*

Anything!? This is the teenager's disinterested discuss at a parental rebuke. It's good; it's bad!? *Whatever!!* If Solomon were living today, I might consider him an existentialist with a tinge of nihilism in his words. He has resigned himself to the meaninglessness of life. ... to "...what - ever!"

In Deuteronomy 29:9 we read the injunction, which hopefully has not become cliché, *"Carefully follow the terms of this covenant, so that you may **prosper**⁷⁹ in everything you do."* A believer may interpret this to include financial success and wealth but the "Old Covenant" was an

⁷⁷ Reminds me of the colloquialism: "Whatever" מְאִוְמָה

⁷⁸ Ecclesiastes 7:14

⁷⁹ to be prudent and act prosperously תִּשְׁכִּיל וְתִפְרוֹס

agreement of faithfulness between Israel and God. They would be His people which came with blessings.⁸⁰

Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine,—Exodus 19:5

It is no wonder that the concept of riches, as already noted, did not come up for biblical discussion. It was irrelevant. The “blessing of God” was not an abstract idea arguable in terms of wealth vs. poverty. The average Israelite in their world saw life’s successes and their own well-being in terms of enough food to eat and a place to rest their heads. Their peace was more at risk by famine than a market crash. The average citizen in Ancient Israel was content to live in peace from military and political conflicts with other nations and to be free from sweeping plague. The seasonal rains were themselves considered—and rightly so—a divine blessing.⁸¹

Of 72 uses of this word—translated *prosperity* here in Deuteronomy 29:9—it is translated “prosper” 3 times in Jeremiah referring to the king; once in Joshua 1:7-8;⁸² once

⁸⁰ Deuteronomy 28:1-2 *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. All these blessings will come on you and accompany you if you obey the Lord your God:*

⁸¹ Deuteronomy 28:12 *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.*

⁸² Be strong and very courageous. Be careful to obey all the law my servant Moses gave you; do not turn from it to the right or to the left, that you may be successful wherever you go. Keep this Book of the Law always on your lips; meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do everything written in it. Then you will be **prosperous** and successful.

in 2 Ki 18:7;⁸³ once in Proverbs 17:8;⁸⁴ and once in Isaiah 52:13.⁸⁵ Only Proverbs referencing a bribe speaks specifically of financial prosperity. The other references to this word translate: *act wisely, teach, instruct, and show understanding* which support the basic meaning of the word, to be *prudent* and *insightful*.

⁸³ And the LORD was with him; he was **successful** in whatever he undertook.

⁸⁴ A bribe is seen as a charm by the one who gives it; they think *success* will come at every turn.

⁸⁵ See, my servant will **act wisely** [will prosper]; he will be raised and lifted up and highly exalted.

Summary

THE Hebrew language supports a cultural interpretation of wealth as possessions, such as, land, crops, flocks and herds. With a covenantal theocracy these were blessings promised by God congruent with Israel's faithfulness to serve Him and Him only. ...an agreement they broke.

Do we conclude that wealth is a blessing of the faithful? Is this prosperity? Well, yes and no. Yes, prosperity is the result often of following God's commands but not all prosperity translates as wealth.

Prosperity in the Old Testament is more correctly a success story or the result of a successful endeavor. A prosperous journey accomplishes in the mind of the journeyman whatever he set out to accomplish—and little doubt—in the way and timeframe he anticipated for it. Such prosperity in the theocratic sense (Old Testament theology) is the result of honoring God's counsel or wisdom. Thus prospering is synonymous with listening to God.

Wealth until Solomon's ruminations was not a common topic. Solomon not only wrote about prosperity and riches because he was wise but because this was a responsible part of his life.

The poor came on 2 levels: those who lived paycheck to paycheck and those who were unemployed. In Old Testament terms, day laborers were the first class, the "needy" who found work; beggars were the second.

Does any thing here imply that being poor is a sign of sinfulness?

Is it a time for you yourselves to be living in your paneled houses, while this house remains a ruin?" Now this is what the Lord Almighty says: "Give careful thought to your ways. You have planted much, but harvested little. You eat, but never have enough. You drink, but never have your fill. You put on clothes, but are not warm. You earn wages, only to put them in a purse with holes in it." — Haggai 1:4-6

I cannot conclude this absolutely. Some poverty was clearly the result of disobedience to God, but in a more general way God thought kindly toward the poor and wanted those of means to be His instruments of mercy toward them.

There will always be poor people in the land. Therefore I command you to be openhanded toward your fellow Israelites who are poor and needy in your land. — Deuteronomy 15:11

Another question worth asking is: must a blessing always be understood in material terms as possessions? In the Old Testament, sadly, this was the mindset of most of the ancients. There was a relationship, to be sure, between following God's commandments and all levels of well-being and health, financial as well as physical and political, but always prosperity translated into an immediate and natural benefit.

To prosper spiritually or think of this life as an investment in the next was not in the language. We can not confirm that the Israelites in Bible days ever thought in terms of *spiritual* riches. The idea of laying up "*treasures in heaven*"⁸⁶ was an idea introduced by the Savior.

⁸⁶ Matthew 6:20

One more thing: the purpose behind this brief study is not to challenge one's faith in God's provisions or God's promise to provide, nor do we want to suggest that wealthy believers have no scriptural basis for calling their fortunes a divine blessing. But do we go so far as to suggest that wealth is always a "good and perfect gift" from God?⁸⁷ I think not.

Better the little that the righteous have than the wealth⁸⁸ of many wicked; — Psalm 37:16

And what about spiritual prosperity? It would be John who would express such a sentiment,⁸⁹ "*Dear friend, I pray that you may enjoy good health and that all may go well with you, even as your soul is getting along well.*"

⁸⁷ James 1:17

⁸⁸ an uncommon word for wealth, "abundance." See also Ecclesiastes 5:9 and Isaiah 60:5.

⁸⁹ 3 John 1:2

Riches In The New Testament

THE New Testament carries the Old Testament themes forward. Wealth is still primarily the possession of things, principally land, and we have a right to enjoy such good fortune, but Jesus added a condition, reiterated by Paul, to stay “poor in spirit.”⁹⁰

Command those who are rich in this present world not to be arrogant nor to put their hope in wealth, which is so uncertain, but to put their hope in God, who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. Command them to do good, to be rich in good deeds, and to be generous and willing to share.⁹¹

In calling the merciful blessed⁹² (it is more blessed to give than to receive), Jesus agreed with Paul that a portion of one’s wealth is “held in trust” for giving.

In so doing, Jesus ransoms wealth from worldliness and as He did with so many other earth bound qualities and attributes, such as love,⁹³ joy,⁹⁴ unity⁹⁵ and peace⁹⁶ He

⁹⁰ Matthew 5:3

⁹¹ 1 Timothy 6:17-18

⁹² Matthew 5:5

⁹³ John 15:10 *If you keep my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s commands and remain in his love.*

⁹⁴ John 15:11 *I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete.*

⁹⁵ John 17:11 *Holy Father, ...that they may be one as we are one.*

⁹⁶ John 14:27 *Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives.*

redefined wealth. Riches in His kingdom become heavenly treasures⁹⁷ and spiritual investments.⁹⁸

It remains unreasonable to me, therefore, to assume that in God's new covenantal relationship with His people, since Calvary, that wealth is to be considered a natural blessing which some receive while others don't. What the new covenant suddenly reveals is a riches of *spiritual* blessings: of glory,⁹⁹ of grace,¹⁰⁰ of wisdom,¹⁰¹ of an inheritance in Christ,¹⁰² and the "*boundless riches of Christ,*"¹⁰³ which is Calvary's provision to "*strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being.*"¹⁰⁴

Speaking of material needs, Paul reminded us, "*my God will meet all your needs according to the riches of his glory in Christ Jesus.*" There is no clear interest here on God's part to raise us all into the 1% upper class just because we are people of faith! Paul's summation of the matter is noteworthy:

*My goal is that they may be encouraged in heart and united in love, so that they may have the full **riches** of complete understanding, in order that they may know the mystery of God, namely, Christ,*¹⁰⁵

Material blessings or wealth God now distributes to provide the means to sponsor His work.

Rev. Arthur T. Pierson taught,

¹⁰⁴ Ephesians 3:16

¹⁰⁵ Colossians 2:2

¹⁰⁶ Taken from **OUR LORD'S TEACHINGS ABOUT MONEY**
https://www.blueletterbible.org/Comm/torrey_ra/fundamentals/81.cfm?a=1086009

We ascend a step higher, and consider our Lord's teaching as to the law of recompense. "Give, and it shall be given unto you". We are taught that getting is in order to [be] giving, and consequently that giving is the real road to getting. God is an economist. He entrusts larger gifts to those who use the smaller well. Perhaps one reason of our poverty is that we are so far slaves of parsimony. The future may reveal that God has been withholding from us because we have been withholding from Him.¹⁰⁶

The *Ministry of Giving* is an unmistakable example.

...if it is giving, then give generously Romans 12:8

Riches in and of themselves are no longer the play toy of the fortunate. Believers are now equipped for ministry, blessed to become a blessing. Material possessions come with a warning.

When Ancient Israel "spoiled"¹⁰⁷ the Egyptians on Passover Eve, the text clarifies that, Israel was viewed favorably by the Egyptian people. Israel took what they wanted by merely asking for it.

The LORD had made the Egyptians favorably disposed toward the people, and they gave them what they asked for; so they plundered the Egyptians.

But for what purpose would shepherds need bags and bags of gold and silver jewelry ...in the wilderness! These were held in trust for the Tabernacle, a detail probably unknown during the Exodus.

¹⁰⁷ NIV says plundered

Warning! Warning!

“The deceitfulness of wealth chokes the Word, making it unfruitful.” — Matthew 13:22

Too many possessions sometimes control (own) the owner—not the other way around—and can prevent spiritual growth if they are prioritized¹⁰⁸ over spiritual concerns.¹⁰⁹ Those who have them should consider their possessions as part of a test to see how they handle them responsibly before God.¹¹⁰ Not without good reason, therefore, Jesus counseled a young heart to drop his wealth in the nearest Goodwill and live free from the binding commitments his possessions would inevitably demand of him, then, come walk beside the Savior and learn of another more lasting source of wealth. But *“When the young man heard this, he went away sad, because he had great wealth.”*¹¹¹

It is not without reason that we may consider the poor in some ways more blessed. In their humble existence God has more opportunity to show His love, to be visible through prayer, and to relive the miracle of the

¹⁰⁸ The seed sown among thorns is the only Gospel reference to wealth in the NIV.

¹⁰⁹ Luke 8:14 *The seed that fell among thorns stands for those who hear, but as they go on their way they are choked by life's worries, riches and pleasures, and they do not mature.*

¹¹⁰ Luke 16:11 *So if you have not been trustworthy in handling worldly wealth, who will trust you with true riches?*

¹¹¹ Matthew 19:22

loaves and fishes as He creates abundance out of meager means.

There might be a “but” here. I knew a young christian years ago who as a business man acquired a small business along with other assets. Among them, he had purchased a cab tractor. He was going to add transporting goods to his résumé. But when he became a believer, in his anxiety and passion, he wanted to follow Christ the “right” way. He fell under the teaching of a TV preacher (always fund raising) who told him that somehow faith requires a financial response. So, he liquified his business and all his assets and gave the proceeds to the preacher. Lastly, he took a leisurely stroll into the woods and tossed his expensive watch into the underbrush. He chose a self-imposed poverty going to work for his brother who now was sole owner of what they shared before. Then, I met him.

I would have advised against this move, even though, it is important for his faith that God have a voice. Is this what Jesus meant when he told the young rich man to sell all and give it to the poor? Even if it might be, is this a general principle for all believers to consider? Being “poor in spirit” which is the first beatitude makes believer happiness dependent on a *willingness* to do this if Jesus required it of us. But we probably should not assume this always and only the case.

Short Shelf Life

THERE are only 3 New Testament references remaining of wealth or riches.¹¹² None of these speak favorable to any interest in treasuring material things for their monetary value. We can view them in a glance:

*Your wealth has rotted, and moths have eaten your clothes.
James 5:2*

*In one hour such great wealth has been brought to ruin!
Revelation 18:17*

*He regarded disgrace for the sake of Christ as of greater value
than the treasures of Egypt, because he was looking ahead to
his reward. Hebrews 11:26*

New Testament treasures are spiritual treasures, are qualities of the heart and life that represent a growing relationship with a holy God.

The larger question which must be asked: Is the possession of “things” more interesting than a closeness to God? When have we crossed that invisible line into greed?

¹¹² According to the NIV

Greed

“There are,” Cowley says, “two words of avarice; the one is but a bastard kind, and that is the rapacious appetite for gain; not for its own sake, but for the pleasure of refunding it immediately through all the channels of pride and luxury; the other is the true kind, and properly so called, which is a restless and insatiable desire of riches, not for any further end or use, but only to hoard and preserve, and perpetually increase them.”¹¹³

The psalmist warned, *“Do not trust in extortion or put vain hope in stolen goods; though your riches increase, do not set your heart on them.”¹¹⁴*

In this new age, we are rightly labeled 'consumers' who are objectifying every aspect of life in an effort to secure a sense of wellbeing. We desire things in order to find happiness. We are addicted to 'things' that we imagine will define fulfillment, success, significance. This is the context by which we perceive what is moral, aesthetic and spiritual. But like all things that evolve, it is a never ending process, a search for utopia.¹¹⁵

¹¹³ Richard Trench. p.82.

¹¹⁴ Psalms 62:10

¹¹⁵ Taken from my word “Challenged” p. 359.

"...Desire," Ward says, "does not seek its fulfillment, for that would terminate the pleasure of desiring. Desire promotes the allure and attraction of an object that stands in for what it lacks, but its enjoyment lies in not having what it wants. The commodified object then becomes the cause of desire rather than the object of desire itself."¹¹⁶

In *The Parable of the Rich Fool* Jesus assured His disciples that hoarding assets is not a wise thing to do. At some point the wisdom of saving for a raining day turns into an expression of greed hidden in the rationalization that it might be needed tomorrow. *"Watch out!"* The Savior spoke with uncommon authority, *"Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; life does not consist in an abundance of possessions."¹¹⁷* Then He shared a story about a rich man who expanded his business¹¹⁸ to provide for himself an early retirement.¹¹⁹ Jesus called him a "fool"¹²⁰ He never thought through what his real future was all about ... *eternity.*

We retire for a few years but the real retirement is where we spend eternity. *"This very night your life will be demanded from you."¹²¹* Jesus looked ahead. And then underscored His point: *"This is how it will be with whoever stores up things for themselves but is not rich toward God."¹²²*

To me, the narration continues unbroken. *"life is more than food, and ... clothes."¹²³* Worrying about future needs can turn into an irrational passion to hoard. At what point does this become greed? The point where we "set our heart" on riches. *"..do not set your heart on what you will eat or drink;"* Jesus counseled, *"do not worry about it."¹²⁴*

¹²¹ Luke 12:20

¹²² Luke 12:21

¹²³ Luke 12:23

¹²⁴ Luke 12:29

Prosperity In The New Testament

THE term “prosperity” in both the King James and the New International Bibles has no references in the New Testament. The word in the Old Testament is the word SHALOM or “peace.” So, what does the New Testament say about our peace?¹²⁵

A cursory glance down this list offers many examples of spiritual prosperity, success in service, and all that the word peace means to us:

The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet. The grace of our Lord Jesus be with you — Romans 16:20

and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross. — Colossians 1:20

Peacemakers who sow in peace reap a harvest of righteousness. — James 3:18

Very few references contextually suggest monetary or material blessing. In order for *peace* to suggest material prosperity, we need to assume it in a greeting or salutation of peace after the Hebrew idea in *SHALOM*. To greet someone with “shalom” meant wishing them a material prosperity in the Old Testament economy, as was already explained.

¹²⁵ There are 252 references to “peace” in the NIV.

While people are saying, "Peace and safety," destruction will come on them suddenly, as labor pains on a pregnant woman, and they will not escape. — 1 Thessalonians 5:3

If one of you says to them, "Go in peace; keep warm and well fed," but does nothing about their physical needs, what good is it? — James 2:16

Even here the New Testament message is not one of material wealth but of a peaceful life which for believers is peace with God and His peace in our lives.

But does this mean following in Jesus's footsteps? In other words, if He had no place to lay His head (He was homeless in adult life) should we be? Obviously not, but it should also be obvious that following Him¹²⁶ is necessary to living a godly life. Are some believers privileged, rich, as a gift from God? Or are the Savior's teachings disinterested in wealth and poverty? (Does it really matter to God?) Maybe the question is: does God care if we are "poor"?

¹²⁶ Luke 14:27 *And whoever does not carry their cross and follow me cannot be my disciple.*

Caste System

IN Israel, there was a caste system with the sovereignty at the very top, the military and priesthood under the monarchy. Below them were the farmers and artisans, such as, carpenters. If the poor were to be considered part of this system they would be the day-laborers who probably worked the farms. The beggar was anyone who had no livelihood at all—perhaps due to illness.¹²⁷ The handicapped also often went begging,¹²⁸ or maybe as a result of war.¹²⁹ Lepers were beggars at the very bottom of any social order because of the danger of contagion.

For purposes, therefore, of understanding the value of wealth or poverty to a believer, the caste system should be of no importance.¹³⁰ God saves kings and tax collectors as well as prostitutes and blind beggars. God as well might reverse the fortunes or misfortunes of the rich or poor which makes a caste system of little significance to Him.

¹²⁷ Luke 16:20 *And there was a certain beggar named Lazarus, which was laid at his gate, full of sores,*

¹²⁸ Luke 16:20 *And there was a certain beggar named Lazarus, which was laid at his gate, full of sores,*

Acts 3:2 *Now a man who was lame from birth was being carried to the temple gate called Beautiful, where he was put every day to beg from those going into the temple courts.*

¹²⁹ Psalm 109:10 *May his children be wandering beggars; may they be driven from their ruined homes.*

¹³⁰ James spoke of only these 2 classes in James 2:2 *"Suppose a man comes into your meeting wearing a gold ring and fine clothes, and a poor man in filthy old clothes also comes in"* Any more granular class distinction is lost in the message of scripture.

Those who were full hire themselves out for food, but those who were hungry are hungry no more. - 2 Samuel 2:5

Discussions of wealth and poverty need not, therefore, be a condition of class, per se. Anyone could find themselves during famine or some other economically devastating downturn scrapping to make ends meet—as might be the case in our society.

So, poverty in Jesus's day was both a social condition (men waiting in the market place in a sort-of labor pool to be called to work)¹³¹ and an economic one (during famine or disease, for example).

¹³¹ Matthew 20:3 *About nine in the morning he went out and saw others standing in the marketplace doing nothing.*

The Poor In Jesus's Day

THERE are 2 levels of poverty in the New Testament worthy our interest. Paul encouraged the Corinthian Christians to be generous givers to supply the needs of others. In usual fashion, he had a verse, this time, from the Psalms¹³²

They have freely scattered their gifts to the poor,¹³³ their righteousness endures forever.” — 2 Corinthians 9:9

This word for poor, we should translate, “needy” because it isn’t the usual New Testament term to identify the “poor.” That term used 34 times is best translated “beggar.” The word “needy” is found in the New Testament only here.

The distinction between these words should be almost self-evident: To quote Richard Trench,

This word for poor “... properly signifies one so poor, (needy) that he earns his daily bread by his labor. The word does not indicate extreme want. ...the other is the beggar and lives not by his own labor for industry, but another man’s alms (Luke 16:20-21).¹³⁴ These words are clearly distinct. A far deeper depth of destitution is implied in beggar than in needy, The

¹³² Psalms 112:9: *They have freely scattered their gifts to the poor, their righteousness endures forever; their horn will be lifted high in honor.*

¹³³ πενησιον is used only here and is different from the usual word, beggar, πτωχος , found 34 times in the New Testament.

¹³⁴ At his gate was laid a beggar named Lazarus, covered with sores and longing to eat what fell from the rich man’s table. Even the dogs came and licked his sores.

*needy may be so poor that he earned his bread by daily labor; but the beggar is so poor that his only option is living by begging. There is an evident climax intended: the needy has nothing superfluous, the beggar nothing at all*¹³⁵

The needy are those who live from paycheck to paycheck. The poor have no work. The New Testament word 'poor,' aside from 2 Corinthians 9:9, everywhere else refers to a 'beggar' who has nothing, a homeless vagabond who must exist on whatever others toss his or her way. Understanding this meaning of the term puts the scriptures in a more dynamic light:

The Greeks of Macedonia and Achaia took up collections for the destitute christians lining the thoroughfares of Jerusalem.

For Macedonia and Achaia were pleased to make a contribution for the poor among the Lord's people in Jerusalem. —Romans 15:26

Paul's passion to raise funds across cultures was reasonable. All believers, rich and poor, Greek and Roman and Jew are part of one universal fellowship. In Galatia, he urged an equal commitment to always care about the beggars who lived there.

Galatians 2:10 All they asked was that we should continue to remember the poor, the very thing I had been eager to do all along.

For James, taking care of the homeless was a sign of true faith and real godliness.

¹³⁵ Trench, p. 128-129

Listen, my dear brothers and sisters: 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? ... Suppose a brother or a sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to them, "Go in peace; keep warm and well fed," but does nothing about their physical needs, what good is it? In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.—James 2:5, 15-17

Poverty was not a curse in any sense. It could almost be deemed a blessing because it often came with ministry. We used to refer to this as a vow of poverty to give it a polite respectability. But Paul saw no shame in humble service if this was the cost. To the Corinthians, he boasted:

... as servants of God we commend ourselves in every way: ...poor, yet making many rich; having nothing, and yet possessing everything. —2 Corinthians 6:4, 10

Much more could be said about the blessings that come with a spirit¹³⁶ of poverty or a willingness to live without while God supplied the need for that day. We appreciate reserves. We stock-piled supplies and feel more secure with a steady guaranteed surplus when we plan our tomorrows but sometimes that's not God's way.

¹³⁶ Matthew 5:3 *Blessed are the poor in spirit,*

The Early Church

BUT are you asking what I am asking? How is it David could testify, *“I was young and now I am old, yet I have never seen the righteous forsaken or their children begging bread.”*¹³⁷

The homeless and destitute who come to Christ should not be begging. Fellow believers should be distributing to their need for food. On chilly nights, the homeless could curl up in their outer coat used as a blanket¹³⁸ but food was another matter.

Something seems too simplistic for the widows who are being neglected in the early days of the church.

*In those days when the number of disciples was increasing, the Hellenistic Jews among them complained against the Hebraic Jews because their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food.*¹³⁹

But technically, this is not a lack of provision but of distribution. It bears emphasizing that God has set in the church those whom He has blessed with the resources¹⁴⁰ to tend to the poor, and especially the widows¹⁴¹ who are in genuine need.

¹³⁷ Psalms 37:25

¹³⁸ But ἱμάτιον is used also in a more restricted sense, of the large upper garment, so large that a man would sometimes sleep in it. Exodus 22:26: *If you take your neighbor's cloak as a pledge, return it by sunset,*

¹³⁹ Acts 6:1

¹⁴⁰ Romans 12:8 *if it is giving, then give generously*

¹⁴¹ 1 Timothy 5:3 *Give proper recognition to those widows who are really in need.*

Summary

POVERTY in the scriptures, therefore, speaks of living day to day either on one's own labor or through the gifts of others. It is a daily undertaking to find provision. There is no surplus. (This is why I conclude that if I have at least 2 days supply of food and shelter, I am not poor. I must be rich!)

Poverty, therefore, is not a disgrace. Sometimes God sends us forth with a simple prayer, "*Give us this day our **daily** bread.*"

Give Us This Day Our Daily Bread

*“Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. **Give us today our daily bread.** And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one.”¹⁴²*

Dr. Gerhard Lohfink wrote a short work on *“The Our Father”*. He contextualized “Give us this day our daily bread” as a prayer after the evening meal where a disciple of our Lord (you and I?) would ask for tomorrow’s meal: *“bread ...for the day to come.”*¹⁴³

This is not an anxious prayer at sunset as a necessary prayer to guarantee tomorrow’s provisions. Nor is it a morning prayer, necessarily, for the upcoming day’s meals. Either time is good. This might be viewed as a general prayer to ask God often that the daily meals keep coming. The importance of this part of our Lord’s prayer is to remind us each time we ask that God is sponsoring our discipleship, since He sent us forth as His witnesses.¹⁴⁴

This reminds me of the manna in the wilderness.¹⁴⁵ Moses gave strict instructions, *“You shall gather it (manna) on a daily basis.”*¹⁴⁶ Dr. LohFink correctly observes the Hebrew carries the meaning, *“the measure of the day on its*

¹⁴² Matthew 6:9-13

¹⁴³ Lohfink, p. 18. Greek for the ensuing day

¹⁴⁴ John 17:18 *“As you sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world.”*

¹⁴⁵ The Septuagint reads: "συλλεξουσιν τὸ τῆς ἡμέρας εἰς ἡμέραν "

¹⁴⁶ Exodus 16:4.

day" which sounds similar to Jesus's instruction to His disciples when they toured their homeland with the message of the Kingdom, Mark 6:8 reads, "*Take nothing for the journey except a staff—no bread, no bag, no money in your belts....*" They went with this prayer, "*Father, supply us with our daily provisions...*" Or what Jesus emphasized as Matthew recalled,

"So do not worry, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own."

Seek first the Kingdom of Heaven or in the words of the Lord's Prayer: "*Thy Kingdom come....*" and in that context pray for tomorrow's provisions. The Lord's Prayer looks forward in faith. It is for tomorrow—not because God requires us to seek it lest we starve but—because prayer feeds our relationship with Him and is a constant reminder,

... my God will meet all your needs according to the riches of his glory in Christ Jesus. — Philippians 4:19

If you are one of Jesus's disciples, you have no need to define a metric to measure wealth or to worry about poverty.¹⁴⁷ You are laboring on the Master's dime and he promised you a daily allowance which marvelously matches your commitment and need. The words *wealth*, *riches*, *poverty*, and *need* have been redefined in spiritual

¹⁴⁷ Proverbs 30:8 - according to Keil is not what is required, but what is appropriate . God determines what "daily" means?
לֹא יִשְׁתַּחֲוֶה וְלֹא יִשְׁתַּבַּח

terms rather than financial. Paul asserted confidently, “*God will meet all your needs*”¹⁴⁸ When? “...*in our time of need.*”¹⁴⁹

But does all this come in conflict with what we do in modern times: managing 401K’s and other retirement funds, savings accounts, and market investments?

¹⁴⁸ Philippians 4:19

¹⁴⁹ Hebrews 4:16

Final Thoughts

MANY questions can be asked about the moral or ethical rational that justifies investments, savings, and living comfortably. We can even deduce, a priori, a scriptural basis for seeking a higher standard of life or purchasing a lottery ticket even though we have to know these topics are not culturally part of the Biblical world.

We might consider the first part of Hebrews 13:5:

Keep your lives free from the love of money and be content with what you have, because God has said, "Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you."

The love of money is the lesser evil compared to greed because it is a mindset to spend rather than hoard or save. "*The root of all evil*"¹⁵⁰ isn't a desire to be rich as much as an overpowering interest in what money provides in merriment and amusement.

Aside, therefore, from stepping over the line into avarice, we might agree with the statement, "freedom within limits." If the Bible doesn't clearly pronounce our thoughts "unholy" they can be contemplated and practiced cautiously within an awareness of God's peaceful vigilance.¹⁵¹ All our inquiries can be quietly put to rest.

¹⁵⁰ 1 Timothy 6:10 *For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs.*

¹⁵¹ Philippians 4:7 *And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.*

The fruit of that righteousness will be peace; its effect will be quietness and confidence forever. My people will live in peaceful dwelling places, in secure homes, in undisturbed places of rest. — Isaiah 32:17-18

To see our well-being or “good fortune” outside an interest in furthering the cause of Christ in our lives, developing a stronger faith, confirming an active hope, or expressing an extended love—to seek wealth for personal pleasure alone—contradicts everything we know about being rich in a New Testament theological sense.

The Old Testament message, which was primarily from the wisdom of Solomon is worthy our consideration, too, but framed in the spiritual message of the New and not the materialism of the Ancient cultures. We are aware of a spiritual dimension to life they did not consider in their earthliness.

For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich. — 2 Corinthians 8:9

Who does not realize that this is a spiritual wealth not a material one. Regarding our many resources, John Wesley reprimands us,

Do you not know that God entrusted you with that money (all above what buys necessities for your families) to feed the hungry, to clothe the naked, to help the stranger, the widow, the fatherless; and, indeed, as far as it will go, to relieve the wants of all mankind? How can you, how dare you, defraud the Lord, by applying it to any other purpose?¹⁵²

¹⁵² Taken from Goodreads Quotes: <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/tag/money?page=3>

John Wesley

And speaking of Wesley: John Wesley was called perhaps the most charitable man in England. His liberality to the poor knew no bounds short of an empty pocket. ... We read, *"He gave away, not merely a certain part of his income, but all that he had: his own wants provided for, he devoted all the rest to the necessities of others."*¹⁵³ In the course of 50 years, it has been supposed, he gave away between 20,000 and 30,000 pounds,¹⁵⁴ *"a great part of which, most other men would've put out at interest, upon good security."*¹⁵⁵

The story goes that when John Wesley died he possessed but a few shillings in his pocket. *"He had declared in print, that, if he died worth more than 10 pounds, independent of his books, and the arrears of his fellowship, which he then held, he would give the world leave to call him, "a thief and a robber."*¹⁵⁶

¹⁵³ The Journal of The Rev John Wesley, p. 506

¹⁵⁴ £100 in 1790 is equivalent in purchasing power to about £14,687.91 in 2018. 20 to 30 thousand pounds sterling in Wesley's day would have been the spending power of about 3.6 to 5.4 million dollars in 2018 dollars.

¹⁵⁵ The Journal of The Rev John Wesley, p. 507

¹⁵⁶ *ibid.*

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