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HOW TO HANDLE PROSPERITY

Genesis 30:25-31:16

by

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Genesis Lesson 56

HOW TO HANDLE PROSPERITY
Genesis 30:25-31:16

Although it's not as prominent since the fall of Jim and Tammy Bakker ten years ago, there are still many Christians, some here in Flagstaff, who teach that financial prosperity is the Christian's divine right. "We're King's Kids," they say, "and Kings Kids don't drive old Volkswagens; they drive new Cadillacs." They encourage people to claim by faith their right to financial prosperity.

On the other side of the spectrum, but much less popular, are those who argue that material wealth is incompatible with the Christian faith. Tony Campolo, for example, has argued that it is sinful to drive a Mercedes, because Jesus would never have done so. He and others of his persuasion champion the rights of the poor and urge believers to give away everything above a subsistence level.

These competing voices have created much confusion, guilt, and wrong thinking about the Christian view of prosperity. We need God's perspective on how to handle prosperity. You may be thinking, "I'd love to have that problem!" But as Americans, even the poorest among us is prosperous by the world's standards. We all need to understand how to handle the prosperity we do, in fact, have.

Our text does not provide a comprehensive biblical answer to this matter, but it does reveal Jacob's life as God begins to prosper him. He had fled to Haran with nothing (32:10). Now, as he prepares to leave with his wives, children, and possessions, the text describes him as "exceedingly prosperous" (30:43). At this point the Lord appears to Jacob and directs him back to the land of Canaan, reminding him, "I am the God of Bethel, where you anointed a pillar, where you made a vow to Me; ..." (31:13). If you

go back to Jacob's experience at Bethel, you find that God promised to give Jacob the land of Canaan and to multiply his descendants, in fulfillment of God's promises to Abraham (28:13-15). But God didn't make these promises so that Jacob would be happy and comfortable. The goal of God's promise to prosper Abraham and his descendants was that in them all the families of the earth would be blessed (12:3; 28:15). The blessed people were to become the channel for God's blessing to all people.

So the prosperity which God gives His people is never to be squandered on selfish living, but rather to be used for furthering His purpose of blessing all people. In God's reminding Jacob of his vow at Bethel and in Jacob's wives' words, "Now, then, do whatever God has said to you" (31:16), the Lord is saying to us:

Since God gives prosperity to be used for His purpose,
the prosperous must listen to and obey the Lord.

This is a difficult text to understand. The danger with such texts is that in the attempt to explain things, we'll lose the application that God wants to make in our lives. I don't want to do that, so I'm going to try to explain the passage in the process of developing three observations about prosperity which stem from this text. While this is not a comprehensive treatment of the subject, I hope it will give us a perspective on prosperity which will help clear up some confusion.

1. Prosperity comes from the Lord.

America takes pride in the "self-made man." The American dream is that if you work hard and smart enough, you can pull yourself up by your own bootstraps and make a fortune. But the teaching of the Bible is clear: *Prosperity comes from the Lord*, not from our ingenuity, hard work, or breaks. If we prosper, it is because God has prospered us. We don't have anything except that which we've been given by the Lord (1

Cor. 4:7). All we have belongs to Him and must be used as He directs.

Jacob seems to have realized this principle--in part. In 31:5 he tells his wives, "... the God of my father has been with me." In 31:7 he attests, "God did not allow [Laban] to hurt me." And in 31:9 he acknowledges, "Thus God has taken away your father's livestock and given them to me." Of course this could just be the common tendency we all have of thinking that God is on our side. But in light of Jacob's Bethel experience, I sense that he really does see God's hand on him over these difficult 20 years of working for Laban. In part he knows that his prosperity has come from the Lord.

I say, "in part," because the scheming side of Jacob's personality is still quite evident. He's still trying to pull his own strings, to work things out for his own advantage. He finally out-cons Laban, the con. Another pastor titled his sermon on this chapter, "Jacob Gets Laban's Goat." That's what's happening here as two schemers vie for advantage.

Rachel bore Joseph (30:25) toward the end of Jacob's second seven years of indentured service to Laban. His obligation being fulfilled, Jacob began yearning for home, so he approached Laban about returning to Canaan. Laban was the type of guy who is all for the Lord as long as it means prosperity. But he also had his other gods for good measure, just to keep all the bases covered. He's like people in our day who gladly add Jesus to their shelf of gods as long as He brings them success and happiness. So Laban says to Jacob, "Stick around a while, Jacob! I have divined that the Lord has blessed me on your account. Name your wages." (30:27, 28).

Jacob has dealt with this guy for 14 years, so he's not naive. He first builds his case by listing how much he has done for Laban; but the time has come where Jacob needs to provide for his own family (30:29-30). So Laban says, "All right,

what's the bottom line?" Jacob makes a proposal that sounds to Laban too good to be true. He says, "I'll keep pasturing your flock for a while. What I want out of the deal is all the spotted, speckled, and black sheep and all the spotted and speckled goats." Apparently these animals were more rare. Laban knows a good deal when he sees one, so he quickly agrees to it, thinking that he can't lose. But to make sure that he doesn't lose, he goes to the flock and removes all these kinds of animals and puts them in charge of his sons, three days' journey away from Jacob and the rest of Laban's flock.

Already Laban is changing the deal, because Jacob thought that all those sheep would be his that day (30:32). But Laban says, in effect, "Right, later on today, after I've removed them all, you can have what's left." (Some understand the flock entrusted to Laban's sons to belong to Jacob, but removed by Laban so that Jacob couldn't use them for breeding.) Laban later would change the terms of the deal every chance he got ("ten times," 31:7-8, an expression meaning "many times").

Jacob wasn't one to sit around bemoaning a setback. So he went to work implementing the latest scheme of animal husbandry which he'd read about in one of the farming journals. He took some fresh tree branches and peeled the bark away from part of them, so that they were striped, exposing the white wood underneath. Then he put them in front of the watering troughs where the sheep and goats mated. The theory was that a visual impression on the mother at the time of conception would affect the appearance of the animals conceived.

It's like the women who were chatting. One of them said, "The day my daughter was conceived I had been painting with red paint when a red fire engine drove by. I knocked over the paint can and got red paint all over. Sure enough, my daughter was born with red hair." Another woman in the group said, "That's ridiculous. My mother told me that the

day I was conceived she dropped and broke a whole stack of phonograph records, but it didn't affect me, affect me, affect me, affect me ..."

Well, that's the idea behind Jacob's breeding scheme, and it seemed to work. He also used some sort of selective breeding, separating out the speckled, spotted, and black sheep and then breeding the strongest of the flock for himself. He wasn't being dishonest, but he was looking out for himself. Both Jacob and Laban were out for their own advantage. This time, Jacob won.

If you'd asked, Jacob would have said that his success was due to a combination of hard work, ingenuity, his own integrity, and the Lord's help. But the key to the story is the dream in which the Lord reveals to Jacob that his prosperity had nothing to do with Jacob and everything to do with the Lord. In the dream, the male goats which were mating were the striped, speckled, and mottled goats (31:10, 12). The Lord calls this to Jacob's attention as if to say, "It's not your crazy scheme which is working. I'm the one who is causing these goats to mate, because I see how Laban has been treating you." God determined that the type of sheep and goats which Laban had agreed to pay to Jacob would multiply according to natural genetic laws. Jacob's peeled branches had nothing to do with it.

Neither did Jacob's hard work or integrity, as important as those factors are. Jacob was a hard worker, and hard work often brings financial success. The Bible commends hard work. But even when we work hard, we need to realize that any success we enjoy comes from the Lord, not from our hard work. Let's face it, some people work hard all their lives and never get rich. And while integrity is important for our testimony as God's people, rather than fostering success, integrity often militates against it. The scoundrel often prospers, while the man of integrity misses out on some easy

money. So the bottom line is always the same: *Prosperity comes from the Lord alone.*

Moses' readers needed to understand that. There were some parallels between Jacob's situation with Laban and their situation in Egypt. Jacob went to Haran without anything, just as Israel went to Egypt without much. Jacob became prosperous as God gave Laban's wealth to him, just as Israel became prosperous when God gave Egypt's wealth to them. They needed to remember that any prosperity they enjoyed, whether from Egypt or after they entered the promised land, came from the Lord, not from themselves.

This applies to us as well. It's the principle of stewardship, that we are not owners of anything, but only managers. God owns it all and as owner, He directs how it should be used. We tend to think that whatever we have is ours because we worked hard for it, and so we have the right to spend it as we please. If we're real generous, we'll give God ten percent. Then we squander the rest on ourselves. But that's not God's perspective on prosperity. All prosperity comes to us from the Lord. Thus,

2. Prosperity must be used for God's purpose.

When God gives prosperity, it's not for our enjoyment alone. He gives prosperity so that those He blesses will bless others. God promised to bless Abraham and his descendants so that they would be His channel of blessing to all nations. That's why God reminds Jacob, "I am the God of Bethel, where you anointed a pillar, where you made a vow to Me; now arise, leave this land, and return to the land of your birth" (31:13). The Lord is calling Jacob back to His purpose. He's saying, "I've kept My part of the deal. I protected and blessed you. Now, you keep your part of the deal by returning to the land which I'm going to use in My purpose of blessing all nations through your descendants."

I'm not sure to what extent Jacob understood this. My guess is that he was pretty foggy on God's purpose. He was inclined to enjoy the blessings and forget that those God blessed were to become a blessing to others.

Moses' readers were in the same place. They had come out of Egypt after spoiling the Egyptians. They were now ready to go into the promised land and live in cities and houses they hadn't built, to drink from cisterns they hadn't dug, to tend vineyards and olive trees they hadn't planted. Moses' warning to them was to beware, lest in their prosperity they forget the Lord and think, "My power and the strength of my hand made me this wealth" (Deut. 6:11, 8:7-18).

We're right there, too, aren't we? God has blessed Americans with more material prosperity than just about any nation in history. Even the poorest of us are rich by world standards. You only have to drive about 300 miles south of here to discover the contrast. It's incredible what a difference it makes to drive across an imaginary line that separates the United States from Mexico! When you cross that line, you are no longer middle class; you've just become rich.

The question is, Are we being good stewards with the wealth God has given us? God's purpose is to bless all nations through the seed of Abraham, who is, ultimately, Christ. Those of us who know Christ are to be channels of God's blessing. But if we squander the prosperity God gives us on ourselves, while the Scriptures go untranslated and nations go unreached because of a lack of funds to take the gospel to them, we're not being good stewards. I've never heard of a mission agency that says, "We've got more money than opportunities right now. Please don't send any more money until we have more opportunities."

I must add a caution: We're all prone to judge the guy who

has more than we have and decide that he is living extravagantly, while I'm sacrificing for Jesus. The truth is, we're just envious of his success. Each believer answers to the Lord, and we are not to judge our brother. Nor are we to impose legalistic standards, so that the most "spiritual" are those who drive the most beat up cars and live in the most run-down houses. God's command to the rich (which is most of us) is not to be conceited or to fix our hope on the uncertainty of riches, but on God, who richly supplies us with all things to enjoy. We are to do good, to be rich in good works, to be generous and ready to share (1 Tim. 6:17, 18).

While it's wrong to judge my brother, it is right to judge myself. Am I managing what God has entrusted to me so that I am a channel of His purpose of blessing the nations through Christ? Or could I be squandering God's blessings on myself, while the nations perish for lack of money to send out workers and supplies to spread the gospel? Prosperity comes from the Lord and must be used for His purpose.

3. Prosperity requires that we listen to and obey the Lord.

As far as the text reveals, the Lord didn't speak to Jacob during the 20 years he struggled under Laban. But as soon as Jacob "became exceedingly prosperous" (30:43), the Lord told him to return to Canaan (31:3; verse 3 is probably a synopsis of the dream which Jacob relates more fully in 31:10-13). To his credit, Jacob listened ("Here I am," 31:11) and obeyed, after getting his wives on board.

There are two dangers with regard to prosperity. The first is that before the Lord prospers us, while we're struggling, we will *think that God doesn't care* about our problems. Jacob could have wondered what happened to God during his 20 frustrating years under Laban's thumb. The Lord didn't tell Jacob until that time was over that He had seen all that Laban had been doing (31:12). When you're struggling financially,

it's easy to think that God doesn't care, because He doesn't seem to be answering your prayers. But He uses the difficult times to teach us to trust and obey Him. He *always* cares for His people!

The second danger with regard to prosperity is *the inherent danger of wealth*. Money itself is not evil, but when mixed with sinful human nature, it's always dangerous. When you're prosperous, it's easy to grow independent and forget the Lord. There is the danger of using God as long as He gives us what we want, but discarding Him if He doesn't, as Laban was doing. We're all prone to greed and covetousness, wanting what others have, even though we've got plenty. Before Jacob came, Laban and his sons didn't have much (30:30). Yet when Jacob grew rich, they accused him of taking away their father's wealth, which was due to Jacob's labor in the first place (31:1)!

That's another danger of wealth--family conflict. Laban and his sons grew hostile toward Jacob when his wealth increased (31:2). Jacob's wives were angry at their father, who used them to better his own financial position (31:15). Laban wasn't as worried about losing his daughters and grandchildren when Jacob moved away as he was about losing his wealth. The greed that lurks in every sinful heart can create bitterness and conflict in a family.

Because prosperity carries with it these built-in dangers, we who are prosperous must *be careful to listen to and obey the Lord*. It would have been easy for Jacob to get comfortable in Haran and forget about the land of promise. Maybe God put Laban and his sons there so Jacob wouldn't get too comfortable! It's easy to get comfortable in our abundant prosperity and forget about God's purpose of blessing every people and nation through the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ, who became poor for our sake, that we through His poverty might become rich (2 Cor. 8:9). We need to listen to

and obey Him who has blessed us so that we will become a blessing to others.

CONCLUSION

John Wesley preached the sensible formula, "Make all you can, save all you can, give all you can." Some wag pointed out that many modern Christians have concluded that two out of three is not bad! In 1991, among nine U.S. denominations, the highest per capita giving was \$887 among the Episcopalians; the lowest was \$241 by the American Baptists. If these church members were tithing, it means that their annual incomes ranged from \$8,887 to \$2,410! Other studies indicate that in general, conservative Protestants in America give about 3 percent of their income. Mormons give about 6 percent. Theologian Carl Henry noted that even among the Southern Baptists, who are noted for their extensive missionary programs, the average is less than \$10 per member per year for missions giving. He wrote, "Think of it--less than it takes for a restaurant meal on bargain night to save a world without Christ, a world of over four billion people, half of whom have yet to hear the gospel" (in "Pulpit Helps," 2/89).

I can't tell you how much to give or judge you on the matter. But I am telling you that you need to judge yourself as a steward of God's blessings who will give an account to Him someday. If you have squandered on yourself what He has entrusted to you, then you have not been a good steward and need to change some habits. If you're in debt because of poor spending habits, you're not being a good steward and you're not free to give generously to God's work. C. S. Lewis said, "I do not believe I can settle how much you ought to give. I am afraid *the only safe rule is to give more than we can spare*. In other words, if our expenditures on comfort, luxuries, amusements, etc. are up to the standards common among others with the same income as our own, we are probably giving away too little." (Source unknown.)

God has given us prosperity to be used for His purpose. We each

need to hear what the Lord is saying to us (not to our fellow Christians), and obey Him. That's how we should handle our prosperity.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How should an American Christian determine how much to spend on himself and his family versus how much to give away?
2. Is it wrong for a Christian to live in luxury? How do we determine what luxury is?
3. Do Luke 12:33 & 14:33 apply to all Christians or just some? What does Jesus mean?
4. Should all Christians adopt a "missionary" lifestyle (living on the same income level most missionaries do) and give the rest to the Lord's work? Why/why not?

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