Prosperity and poverty

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**Will God bless me with wealth if I am a good Christian?**
Not necessarily, but this is an understandable point of confusion. Parts of the Old Testament make statements to the effect that God shows favor to the righteous by giving them wealth. In the book of Proverbs we read, "The house of the righteous contains great treasure, but the income of the wicked brings them trouble" (Proverbs 15:6), and, "The blessing of the Lord brings wealth, and he adds no trouble to it" (Proverbs 10:22). As with all passages of Scripture, though, context must be taken into account. The book of Proverbs is a collection of wisdom sayings, observations about how God's world works. In other words, the proverbs are principles (how things normally go) rather than promises (how things will certainly go for you). While it is generally true that obedience and faithful stewardship lead to prosperity, it is quite inappropriate for any one person to presume on this rule of thumb, or to make demands of God. God does not promise us a life free of troubles, financial or otherwise. Quite to the contrary, Jesus warns, "In this world you will have trouble" (John 16:33a). Jesus suffered greatly on our behalf, and it is only natural that His followers should share in his suffering. But He goes on, "Take heart. I have overcome the world" (John 16:33b).

**Should I ask God to make me prosperous as Jabez prayed?**
Probably not, if our goal in praying it is to acquire wealth. While the prayer of Jabez (1 Chronicles 4:9-10) has inspired many, it is instructive to note that it is never modeled as a prayer for New Testament believers. Rather, the books of 1 and 2 Chronicles were written to Israelites who had returned from Babylonian captivity and needed encouragement to obey God and His law. The Bible portrays Jabez as someone who pursued God's holy intentions for Israel: occupying Canaan and experiencing God's physical and material blessings in that land while avoiding the harm and suffering which come from disobedience (Deuteronomy 30:19-20). Jabez was "more honorable than his brothers" (4:9), and thus God answered his prayer. Some of us are tempted to recite Jabez's prayer in a desire to build "bigger barns" for ourselves rather than being "rich toward God" (Luke 12:15-21). But God's intentions for present-day Christians include our willingness to follow Him in suffering and sacrifice for the sake of others (2 Corinthians 8:9; Matthew 25:31-46). Jesus never told us to ask for wealth: He tells us to ask for "our daily bread," or enough to live on (Matthew 6:11; 1 Timothy 6:6-10). Perhaps more appropriate than Jabez's prayer for Christians today is, "God, help me give generously as you provide more than I need." Or, "Lord, help me to do Kingdom work with the time, talents and treasure you richly provide." Nor does Jesus teach us that we will never be harmed; He tells us to pray that we won't be tempted, and to ask for strength in difficult times and deliverance from "the evil one" (Matthew 6:13). Yes, we are called to pray for healing and health, but the Lord's will is more important than our desires and earthly hopes and sometimes means walking through suffering (1 John 5:14-15; 2 Corinthians 12:7-9).

**Why does God allow poverty?**
Sometimes we know, and sometimes we don't. The Bible points to several reasons why God, in His sovereignty, allows poverty in the world. Some kinds of poverty are directly related to our own behavior. First, the Lord sent poverty upon the children of Israel as a punishment for their brazen covenant-breaking (Deuteronomy 28:48). Second, poverty is the natural consequence of laziness, which is the neglect of the responsibilities God gives us (Proverbs 6:10-11; 14:23). We bring this sort of poverty on ourselves. But on the other hand, some kinds of poverty have nothing to do with our behavior; they simply happen to us (e.g., the plight of millions of people in Third World nations). In fact, many instances of poverty are manifestly unjust. In these cases, God allows poverty in His mysterious providence, ultimately for His own glory (John 9:1-3). Here we must confess along with the Scriptures, "The Lord sends poverty and wealth; he humbles and he exalts" (1 Samuel 2:7), even if we cannot point to a satisfactory reason. And whatever the reasons, we know that part of God's gospel is that He will one day redress all these injustices.

**Why does God allow His own people to suffer financially?**
The Bible tells us that we sometimes experience trials for our own good, though we may not always understand how. We may be in financial trouble so that God can teach us to rely more and more on Him, not material possessions (James 1:2-5). We may be suffering unjustly due to corruption or theft, in which case we have to trust that the Lord ultimately will repay. After all, final justice and vengeance are His, not ours. Moreover, we may be suffering financial loss because of forces beyond anyone's control, such as a stock market crash, which are the result of living in a fallen world. But the Bible also reminds us that we can suffer for doing wrong—for example, we may be in financial trouble because of our own greed, laziness or lack of contentment (Proverbs 6:9-11; Luke 12:13-15; 15:11-17). Of course, in many instances of financial difficulty, there may be a mix of such reasons. In the end it is not our responsibility to solve all of the mysteries behind God's intentions. We need to take care that we are testing our hearts and lives for obedience and proper attitudes, trusting God to care for us in this life and to reward us for our faithfulness in the next, regardless of how much suffering He takes us through in this life.

**Why does God entrust wealth only to a few when so much poverty exists?**
It is hard to understand why, if God is in control, so few people are wealthy while so many are poor, but the Bible does point us to a few reasons. First of all, we cannot explain the uneven distribution of wealth and poverty simply by people's behavior (John 9:1-3). In the end we must trust God's mysterious providence in sending wealth and poverty (1 Samuel 2:7). But the Scripture does tell us one important reason that God entrusts people with wealth—so that they can give generously to others in accordance with the gospel. In the words of the apostle Paul, "You will be made rich in every way so that you can be generous on every occasion, and through us your generosity will result in thanksgiving to God" (2 Corinthians 9:11). The ideal envisioned in the Scriptures is an equality accomplished by voluntary sharing (2 Corinthians 8:13), not by forced redistribution. So we can say, at least, that God entrusts wealth to the few so that they will share it with the many.

**Why do so many evil people prosper?**
The fact that we will "reap what we sow" is certain (2 Corinthians 9:6). But reaping for our sins and good works primarily comes at the end of time, not necessarily in this life. God sometimes allows us to experience the terrible impact of our sin in this life, but He reserves much of his judgment for the end. Therefore, in this life we sometimes see righteous people suffer and wicked people prosper. While we don't know all the reasons for this, the Bible does tell us that He shows mercy even to the wicked (Psalms 145:9), giving sinners like us opportunities to turn from our sin and follow Jesus as our Savior and Lord. Because of God's mercy, He does not settle all His accounts in this life, nor does He always repay us as we deserve. Additionally, God gives us over to the things we love. Many have chosen to love money, comfort and the things of this world more than they love God and others. As a result, they may prosper—but only for a season (Psalm 37).

**Do I have an obligation to help the poor?**
Yes, though not in the way we might think. In God's economy, serving those in need is serving God Himself, and failing to serve those in need is failing to serve Him (Matthew 25:31-46). The Bible says, "Owe no debt to others except love" (Romans 13:8), and Jesus teaches that loving others means caring for them in the same way we would want to be loved. How then would we want to be cared for if we were poor and needy while others were rich? Clearly, we would want help getting our basic needs met when disaster strikes—war, natural disaster, job loss, illness, crippling government or corporate corruption, theft, struggles arising from systemic poverty and social degradation, lack of education and family support as with orphans, or any one of a number of problems. If we need a vivid example, Jesus provides an illustration in the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:28-37), where we see a complete stranger providing for the needs of another person in a dangerous place; should we Christians not do the same? In short, providing care for the physically and emotionally wounded; being a parent to an orphan or unwanted child; providing job training and economic empowerment; and providing emergency relief after famine, war, disease and natural disasters are all possible aspects of the Christian's debt of love. That is what we owe the poor—especially those who are our brothers and sisters, called by Jesus' name (Galatians 6:10). Not only this, but we also have an obligation to live together with the poor in fellowship for Jesus' sake (Luke 14:12-14 and 1 Corinthians 11:17-34). Of course, we should not help people indiscriminately in ways that encourage them to ignore their own responsibilities (see 1 Timothy 5:3-16).

**Won't giving to the poor simply make them dependent on others rather than help them out of poverty?**
Not always. Although medical problems and sustained, severe economic hardships can sometimes create lengthy dependent relationships, it is certainly important not to foster long-term dependence. To ensure that dependence is avoided, giving to those in need is best done through those with experience and relationships. But for our part, God tells us to give generously to the poor (Luke 12:33), period. We are not to sit in judgment over them (James 4:11), especially not in such a way as to keep our money to ourselves. In fact, the apostle Paul tells us, this is precisely why God has made so many of us rich—so that we might spread our gifts abroad as needed (2 Corinthians 8:9; 13-15; 9:9). Paul draws on the analogy of manna in the wilderness for the children of Israel: "Those who gathered much had none left over, and those who gathered little had no lack." Likewise, those of us who "have gathered much" at present should freely release it to those in need so that those in need do not suffer from having "too little." While we must be careful not to create unnecessary dependence, we must also avoid using the possibility of dependence as a convenient excuse not to be generous with the wealth that God has placed in our hands.

**Can't we just raise taxes on the rich until poverty disappears?**
No, although it's an enticing idea. Jesus is famous for saying, "The poor you will always have with you," and since poverty stems from human sin, we always will have poverty. But He never meant this to be taken as an excuse to not assist the poor (see Mark 14:7). In principle, if higher taxes will provide better education for the poor or better medical care for the most vulnerable citizens or safer streets in high-crime areas, Christians shouldn't always oppose higher taxes. However, the equation is rarely this easy. Often higher taxes can depress areas economically by driving away jobs and the very "rich" people who are best able to provide these jobs. (Many Christians have contributed to this problem by fleeing areas in need of economic renewal to avoid taxes or "evil" politicians. But the apostle Paul's command to pay taxes (Romans 13:7) refers to no less a despotic authority figure than the infamous Roman emperor Nero. Christians always should seek the good of all (Jeremiah 29:1-10; Galatians 6:10), and we have a special responsibility to bless fellow believers, extending God's Kingdom into darkness, regardless of the cost to our wallets or lives.) Moreover, the Bible gives us a better way to fight poverty: following Jesus' example. The government may have an important role to play in many matters, but that can never satisfy Jesus' call for those who would follow Him to care for those in need. Christians are called to "tax" themselves—giving their time, prayers, bodies and souls in friendships and Christian fellowship with those less fortunate. The hard work of fathering the fatherless, working with the uneducated, discipling struggling parents and teens, and renewing health care and education for our poorest citizens are tasks for followers of Jesus. God calls us to associate with the lowly (Romans 12:16) and with those who are below our social level (James 2:1-4, 8-9), giving generously for their needs. After all, that's what Jesus did.

**Why do I have trouble caring about the plight of the poor (or the fate of unbelievers)?**
Part of our trouble may stem from failing to study the priorities in God's Word. Meditating on the Scripture's message of mission and concern for the poor and the lost, memorizing relevant Scripture verses and reading relevant books can stimulate our concern for such vital matters. Supporting missionaries or organizations that are directly engaged in such ministries can be a great assistance to cold hearts. As Scripture indicates, our hearts follow our money (Matthew 6:19-21). When we invest in Coca-Cola, we care about Coca-Cola; when we invest in God's Kingdom, our hearts and minds inevitably will be much more in tune with His agenda. Above all, we simply may be growing cold in our appreciation for God's grace for us. God sacrificed His Son Jesus to save us from our sins, at great cost to Himself. A period of concentrated prayer, Bible study and fasting might strengthen our sense of gratitude and compel us to witness to the lost and care for the poor.

**Does God favor poor people over rich people?**
No and yes. No, because in an ultimate sense all human beings are the same. All are created in the image of God and therefore have dignity (Genesis 1:26-27; Proverbs 22:2); all are utterly lost in their sin (Romans 3:22-23); and all are called to receive God's gift of redemption (John 3:16). No human life is worth more or less than any other, regardless of wealth or poverty (Exodus 30:15). But on the other hand, yes, because God knows that the poor are more subject to abuse and therefore in need of protection and vindication. Therefore the Psalmist wrote, "I know that the Lord secures justice for the poor and upholds the cause of the needy" (Psalm 140:12). And for the same reason, Jesus said, "Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God" (Luke 6:20). The poor have a special place in God's affections because God is not blind to the harsh economic realities of the world. So, does God favor the poor over the rich? In one sense yes, but in another sense no.

**What did Jesus mean by saying it is hard for the rich to enter the Kingdom of God?**
When a certain rich young man turned down Jesus' invitation to follow Him because he was unwilling to leave his money behind, Jesus commented, "How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God" (Luke 18:24). He was pointing out a barrier to faith that especially affects people of means. Following Jesus means wanting Him more than anything else. This comes relatively easy to poor people, who have little to be attached to. But for the rich, who have a great deal, it is a hard thing to put their hope in God rather than their wealth (1 Timothy 6:17). This is not to say that poor people are more righteous than rich people, only that they do not have this particular barrier to reckon with. Indeed, it is a marvel of God's grace that anyone is saved at all (Luke 18:26); but we who are rich should take special care to humble ourselves and pray for God's grace.

**What is poverty theology or asceticism?**
The basic idea of asceticism is that wealth is wrong and poverty right; in many cases, it also includes the idea that voluntary poverty is a special class of moral excellence. Asceticism is a lifestyle philosophy characterized by the denial of the flesh, especially in the form of basic material pleasures (e.g., food, shelter, possessions). It is sometimes called "poverty theology" because its proponents subject themselves to poverty for theological reasons—the imitation of Christ (Colossians 1:24), the conflict between Spirit and flesh (Galatians 5:16-26), etc. Historically, ascetics have done things like renouncing material possessions, begging for food, living in solitude, even beating their own bodies. At its worst, asceticism is accompanied by an unbiblical merit theology. At its best, it is a spiritual discipline undertaken in response to the gospel of grace.

**Does the Bible teach poverty theology?**
No. The basic idea of poverty theology is that wealth is wrong and poverty right; in many cases, it also includes the idea that voluntary poverty is a special class of moral excellence. But against this, the Bible says, "Give me neither poverty nor riches, but give me only my daily bread" (Proverbs 30:8). In God's eyes, there is ultimately no difference between rich and poor, because all human beings are His creation (Proverbs 22:2). While it is true that Jesus blesses the poor (Luke 6:20), He does not give the sort of unqualified endorsement of poverty that poverty theology advocates. If one wants a one-word theology of money, then stewardship theology is certainly more biblical than poverty theology or other alternatives.

**Does faithfulness lead to prosperity?**

In general, yes. According to Scripture, faithfulness to God and His commands tends to lead to earthly prosperity. Because God made the world and the rules by which it operates, following His rules normally results in doing well for oneself (Proverbs 12:21). At times, God has demonstrated His special approval of His people by giving them great wealth (e.g., Genesis 26:12; 1 Kings 3:13). And to the Old Testament people of Israel, God promised prosperity for obeying Him and threatened curses for disobeying Him (Deuteronomy 28). In many cases, then, faithfulness to God leads to earthly prosperity. But this is by no means a guarantee. Both Scripture and experience show us that sometimes, contrary to the normal pattern, wicked people prosper while righteous people fall on hard times. This does not seem right to us, but it happens all the time (Psalm 73:1-14). Being a Christian does not guarantee that someone will be well off in this life. (Take as an example the millions of poor Christians in the developing countries of the world.) This is especially the case in the present age between Jesus' first and second comings. In the words of Jesus, no servant is greater than his master (John 15:20). If the Lord Himself was homeless (Matthew 8:20) and persecuted (John 15:20), then His disciples will experience the same. This does not undo the general connection between faithfulness and prosperity, but it does warn us against presuming upon the Lord's earthly blessings.

**Does generosity lead to prosperity?**
Yes, but with one important qualification. Both experience and Scripture show us there is a general connection between faithfulness and prosperity. This includes both non-financial blessings (e.g., the joy that comes from giving to the Lord) and financial ones. Thus in the Old Testament King Solomon writes, "A generous man will prosper" (Proverbs 11:25), and in the New Testament the apostle Paul writes, "Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously" (2 Corinthians 9:6). In other words, in giving as in many other areas of life, input often determines output. The money we put into God's Kingdom does not disappear. Rather, in many case, like a good investment, it often comes back to us. There is an observable and biblical correspondence between financial sowing and financial reaping. But just when we might think that the apostle Paul is giving us a biblically sanctioned get-rich-quick scheme, he goes on to explain the specific reason for this correspondence. Why does God enrich those who give generously to him? It is not for increased comfort but for further generosity. In the words of the apostle, "You will be made rich in every way so that you can be generous on every occasion" (2 Corinthians 9:11, emphasis added). God gives us more, yes. But what He gives us more of is seed, which is meant to be re-sown. If we try to turn God's promise into a means for selfish gain, we short-circuit the biblical process and the promise no longer applies to us. God replenishes the store of the generous; He does not line the pockets of the greedy.

**Does unfaithfulness lead to poverty?**
Often, but not always. Some forms of unfaithfulness naturally result in poverty. So for example, it is written, "All hard work brings a profit, but mere talk leads only to poverty" (Proverbs 14:23). In other words, there is a direct connection between laziness and loss. If we neglect our responsibilities, we should not be surprised to find ourselves poor. On the other hand, it is a fact that many wicked people live in luxury. Even the prophet Jeremiah cried out, "Why does the way of the wicked prosper? Why do all the faithless live at ease?" (Jeremiah 12:1). God, in His mysterious wisdom, allows some wicked people to enjoy riches in this life, even while promising to judge them on the last day (James 5:1). So, while unfaithfulness does not always lead to poverty in this life, it always leads to judgment in the end. Only the gospel of Jesus Christ saves unfaithful people like us from God's holy judgment.