

# **“WEALTH” IN PROVERBS: FIVE PRINCIPLES FOR MELANESIAN BELIEVERS**

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Does God bless believers with wealth? Melanesian believers often place great importance on wealth, as a sign of God’s blessing. A popular Pidgin chorus, sung in Papua New Guinea churches during the collection of tithes and offerings, includes the words: *Givim, givim long God; God bai blesim yu* (“Give, give to God; God will bless you”), and *Sapos you givim long God; God bai blesim yu* (“If you give to God; God will bless you”).

The chorus has a catchy tune, and congregations sing it with enthusiasm. Nevertheless, we must look to God’s Word for the answer to our question, “Does God bless believers with wealth?” The Old Testament book of Proverbs says much about wealth. By looking at the word “wealth” in Proverbs, we can draw some conclusions as to whether God blesses believers with wealth.

The use of the word “wealth” in Proverbs leads to five principles of wealth. These five principles of wealth are: (1) God blesses all believers with spiritual wealth; (2) God blesses all believers with varying abilities to gain material wealth; (3) believers should focus on spiritual wealth, and not material wealth; (4) believers should gain material wealth in a godly manner; and (5) believers should spend material wealth in a godly manner. Various verses in Proverbs support each of these five principles.

## GOD BLESSES ALL BELIEVERS WITH SPIRITUAL WEALTH

Prov 8:18; 8:21; 15:6 show that God blesses all believers with spiritual wealth. In Prov 8, Wisdom, as an attribute of God, is personified. In Prov 8:18-21, Wisdom states, “With Me are riches and honour, enduring wealth and prosperity. My fruit is better than fine gold; what I yield surpasses choice silver. I walk in the way of righteousness, along the paths of justice, bestowing wealth on those who love Me and making their treasuries full.”<sup>1</sup> Wisdom has spiritual wealth and gives it to all who love her.

What is the spiritual wealth that Wisdom possesses, and gives to us? McGee, in his commentary on Proverbs, titled *How to Live Longer and Better, More Peaceful and Prosperous, Now and Forever*, states, “These are not stocks, or bonds, or real estate, but wonderful gifts He bestows.”<sup>2</sup> Spiritual wealth, according to this passage, is characterised as “enduring”, “better than fine gold”, and “surpasses choice silver”. Buzzell states, “The riches that come to the possessor of wisdom are genuine, not artificial substitutes, purchased with silver or gold . . . Godly living is the major benefit of having wisdom.”<sup>3</sup> God blesses believers with great spiritual wealth while on the earth, including true love, true joy, and true peace.<sup>4</sup>

Prov 15:6 offers further evidence that God gives all believers spiritual wealth: “Great wealth is *in* the house of the righteous, but trouble is in the income of the wicked” (NASB).<sup>5</sup> Assuming the righteous are believers, and the wicked are non-believers, this proverb shows that believers have much wealth. Since not all believers have a good deal of material wealth, this wealth must refer to spiritual wealth. Bridges supports this conclusion, in stating that wealth is “a portion in God, His favour, His

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<sup>1</sup> All scripture quoted is from the New International Version (NIV), unless otherwise noted.

<sup>2</sup> J. McGee, *How to Live Longer and Better, More Peaceful, and Prosperous, Now and Forever*, Dallas TX: International Prison Ministry, 1988, p. 84.

<sup>3</sup> S. Buzzell, *Proverbs*, The Bible Knowledge Commentary: Old Testament, J. Walvoord, and R. Zuck, eds, Wheaton IL: Victor Books, 1985, p. 922.

<sup>4</sup> See the fruit of the Spirit in Gal 5:22-23.

<sup>5</sup> New American Standard Bible (NASB).

image, His everlasting joy”.<sup>6</sup> McGee offers further support by commenting, “The treasure, that is in the house of the righteous, consists of things like joy, peace, sympathy, comfort – wonderful treasures . . . The contrast is with the revenues of the wicked, which are trouble.”<sup>7</sup>

In summary, Prov 8:18; 8:21; 15:6 shows that the first principle of wealth is true: God blesses all believers with spiritual wealth. Believers can live godly and satisfying lives, because of God’s spiritual blessings.

### **GOD BLESSES ALL BELIEVERS WITH VARYING ABILITIES TO GAIN MATERIAL WEALTH**

Four proverbs illustrate the second principle: God blesses all believers with varying abilities to gain material wealth. Prov 13:11 commends those who work hard to obtain wealth: “Wealth from get-rich-quick schemes quickly disappears; wealth from hard work grows” (NLT).<sup>8</sup> This is an antithetical parallelism. Wealth obtained by fraud is contrasted with wealth obtained by labour. The underlying assumption, though, is that one is to gather wealth. According to Thomas, “The Bible does not despise wealth. It legislates for its employment, and denounces its abuse.”<sup>9</sup>

Prov 10:15 also supports the gathering of wealth: “The wealth of the rich is their fortified city, but poverty is the ruin of the poor.” Most commentators believe this verse is speaking negatively of wealth – that a rich man believes his wealth protects him. However, Buzzell seems to capture the positive intent of the verse in stating, “Wealth can provide a hedge against some disasters.”<sup>10</sup> Wealth, for instance, can provide appropriate medical care, housing, and food for believers in time of need. The next verse, Prov 10:16, supports such a positive interpretation, “The

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<sup>6</sup> C. Bridges, *An Exposition of Proverbs*, Marshallton DE: The National Foundation for Christian Education, 1980, p. 200.

<sup>7</sup> McGee, *How to Live Longer and Better*, p. 135.

<sup>8</sup> New Living Translation (NLT).

<sup>9</sup> D. Thomas, *Book of Proverbs*, Grand Rapids MI: Kregel Publications, 1982, p. 190.

<sup>10</sup> Buzzell, *Proverbs*, p. 926.

earnings of the godly enhance their lives, but evil people squander their money on sin” (NLT).

Another verse that talks positively of the accumulation of wealth is Prov 19:14: “Parents can provide their sons with an inheritance of houses and wealth, but only the LORD can give an understanding wife” (NLT). This antithetical parallelism contrasts the obtaining of wealth, and the obtaining of wives. It says that a wife is from the Lord, but material wealth is from man. This suggests that God gives believers the ability to earn material wealth, however, it is up to believers to use their skills to acquire wealth.

### **BELIEVERS SHOULD FOCUS ON SPIRITUAL WEALTH AND NOT ON MATERIAL WEALTH**

The third principle of wealth is a warning: believers should focus on spiritual wealth, and not on material wealth. Prov 23:4-5 states, “Do not weary yourself to gain wealth, cease from your consideration of it. When you set your eyes on it, it is gone. For *wealth* certainly makes itself wings like an eagle that flies *toward* the heavens” (NASB). At first reading, this proverb seems to criticise any pursuit of wealth. However, as we have seen previously, material wealth is not bad, in and of itself. Therefore, these verses do not negate the pursuit of wealth, they just negate the incorrect attitude towards pursuing wealth. Getz, in his book, *A Biblical Theology of Material Possessions*, writes, “A Christian’s first priority should be to focus on godliness and contentment, rather than on riches, which often brings discontentment.”<sup>11</sup> Likewise, McGee states, “There is nothing wrong in being rich. There is nothing wrong in working to be rich. However, don’t make that the goal in life. Wealth should not be the very object of our hearts. Some men have a lust, a thirst, a covetousness to make the almighty dollar, and the dollar becomes their God. A child of God is not to do that.”<sup>12</sup>

Believers have to be careful not to equate material wealth with spiritual wealth. Prov 13:7 testifies, “One man pretends to be rich, yet has nothing;

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<sup>11</sup> G. Gets, *A Biblical Theology of Material Possessions*, Chicago IL: Moody Press, 1990, p. 321.

<sup>12</sup> McGee, *How to Live Longer and Better*, p. 198.

another pretends to be poor, yet has great wealth.” According to Buzzell, “A rich person may be rich in material goods, but have nothing, socially or spiritually. Conversely another person may be poor materially, but rich spiritually.”<sup>13</sup>

Prov 18:11 offers further evidence that pursuing material wealth is less important than pursuing spiritual wealth: “The rich think of their wealth as an impregnable defence; they imagine it is a high wall of safety” (NLT). This verse warns believers not put their confidence in material wealth. Believers should not think that material wealth will protect them. Material wealth cannot protect one from cancer, automobile accidents, or hell. Believers should use their God-given abilities to accumulate wealth, but should not put their confidence in it.

### **BELIEVERS SHOULD GAIN MATERIAL WEALTH IN A GODLY MANNER**

We now turn to our fourth principle of wealth: believers should gain material wealth in a godly manner. Prov 28:8 warns, “He who increases his wealth by exorbitant interest, amasses it for another, who will be kind to the poor.” Wealth obtained by usury (charging interest, especially excessive, when lending money to a friend) will eventually find its way to the poor. Justice will prevail. It may take one day, one decade, one generation, one millennium, but it will happen.

Prov 28:22 offers interesting insight on how to pursue material wealth: “A man with an evil eye hastens after wealth, and does not know that want will come upon him” (NASB). Who hastens after wealth? It is the man with the evil eye. Assuming this means non-believers, then the opposite would be true for believers. Believers are not to hasten after wealth. Believers are to use godly principles in accumulating wealth. Believers are to be honest, forthright, and consistent in their attempt to build material wealth. Consequently, material wealth may take longer to build than if one were to take advantage of others. If Prov 28:8 and 28:22 show

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<sup>13</sup> Buzzell, *Proverbs*, p. 933.

that believers are to earn wealth in a godly manner, then what are believers to do with their wealth?

### **GOD COMMANDS BELIEVERS TO SPEND THEIR WEALTH IN A GODLY MANNER**

Three proverbs confirm the fifth principle of wealth: God commands believers to spend their wealth in a godly manner. Prov 3:9 asserts, “Honour the LORD with your wealth, with the firstfruits of all your crops.” This is a synthetic parallelism. Believers are to honour the Lord with their wealth, giving the first of what they earn to God. Getz states, “Christians are out of God’s will, when they cannot give God the ‘firstfruits’ of their income, because they have obligated themselves to pay off debts.”<sup>14</sup> McGee, in his direct-to-the-point style, states, “Don’t tell me you are totally committed to the Lord until your pocketbook is committed, too. The Lord gave you everything. Some folks say, ‘I worked hard, and I earned this.’ But who gave you the health to work? Who gave you the work to do? Who made it possible for you to make money? My friend, God did all that for you. Acknowledge Him. That is evidence of total commitment.”<sup>15</sup>

An interesting note on material wealth in Proverbs is the idea that believers should try to leave an inheritance for their descendants. Prov 13:22 maintains, “Good people leave an inheritance to their grandchildren, but the sinner’s wealth passes to the godly” (NLT). If possible, believers should attempt to leave an inheritance for their grandchildren. However, believers must remember that proverbs are merely principles, and may not apply in all situations.

There is one final point from Proverbs to highlight about spending wealth in godly ways. Apparently, prostitution was a major problem for believers in Old Testament times, because Prov 29:3 states that believers are not to waste their wealth on harlots: “The man who loves wisdom brings joy to his father, but if he hangs around with prostitutes, his wealth

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<sup>14</sup> Getz, *A Biblical Theology of Material Possessions*, p. 278.

<sup>15</sup> McGee, *How to Live Longer and Better*, p. 41.

is wasted” (NLT). As an antithetical parallelism, the primary purpose of the proverb is to encourage men to be wise. The example given of being unwise is to spend money on prostitutes. This verse illustrates that believers should honour God in the use of their wealth. Fitch, in *Baker’s Dictionary of Christian Ethics*, states, “Wealth should be used by the Christian to care for the saints, who, by force of circumstance, sickness, or accident, are unable to help themselves. There will always be a need to give money for the preaching of the gospel, and to spread abroad the good news of the Kingdom of God.”<sup>16</sup>

### CONCLUSION

In conclusion, does God bless Melanesian believers with wealth? Yes, God blesses all believers with spiritual wealth. Yes, God blesses all believers with varying abilities to gain material wealth. However, believers should focus on spiritual wealth, and not material wealth. In addition, believers should gain and spend material wealth in a godly manner. Melanesian believers should not be ashamed of their material wealth; neither should they be enamoured with it. A statement from Ryrie, from his book, *Balancing the Christian Life*, offers a fitting conclusion to this study of wealth: “A spiritual Christian will practise full giving in full employment, inflated giving in an inflated economy, and careful buying at all times. And, by use of his money, he will prove or disprove his love for God.”<sup>17</sup> Amen!

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<sup>16</sup> W. Fitch, “Wealth”, in *Baker’s Dictionary of Christian Ethics*, C. Henry, ed., Grand Rapids MI: Baker Book House, 1973, p. 706.

<sup>17</sup> C. Ryrie, *Balancing the Christian Life*, Chicago IL: Moody Press, 1969, p. 93.

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