



Session 7 – The Prosperity Gospel

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We have two more counterfeit gospels to cover. I use that term intentionally here because I would more definitively not call these last two cults simply because they are not centralized and organized in ways that Mormonism, Jehovah's Witnesses and Catholicism are. They are counterfeit gospels—fraudulent imitations—that deceive and yet are spread throughout all kinds of churches and denominations around the world, even potentially so in your church. First, we will talk about the Prosperity Gospel.

What Is the Prosperity Gospel?

Here is a quote from one of the prominent spokesmen of prosperity theology, Kenneth Hagin, whom some call the father of the Word of Faith movement:

“Jesus, however, came to redeem us from Satan’s power and dominion over us. We are to reign as kings in life. That means that we have dominion over our lives. We are to dominate, not to be dominated. Circumstances are not to dominate you. Poverty is not to rule and reign over you. You are to rule and reign over poverty. Disease and sickness are not to rule and reign over you. You are to rule and reign over sickness. We are to reign as kings in life by Christ Jesus, in whom we have our redemption” (Kenneth Hagin).

Other high-profile proponents have included evangelists—or not really evangelists—Oral Roberts, Kenneth and Gloria Copeland and Benny Hinn.

Here is the deal, brothers and sisters: this is not just evident in the fanatical we might see in some religious circles. The Prosperity Gospel is subtly deceptive and is woven into some of the most successful churches in America and around the world. It’s all over Latin America, Sub-Saharan Africa and North America. I think of preachers who are widely influential, like Joel Osteen, and teach this sometimes subtly and sometimes blatantly. Some of the fastest growing churches in the United States right now that seem harmless at first glance teach this.

This is one prominent church's statement of faith on God's will for provision:

It is the Father's will for believers to become whole, healthy and successful in all areas of life, but because of the fall, many may not receive the full benefits of God's will while on earth. That fact, though, should never prevent all believers from seeking the full benefits of Christ's provision in order to better serve others. The emphasis here is on spiritual, mental, emotional, physical and financial wholeness, health and success.

Before attending, and all the more so before joining a church, every follower of Christ must read that church's statement of faith. Evaluate it in light of the gospel and the whole of Scripture. Make sure the gospel and Scripture are not being minimized or twisted. Beware of deception, particularly in this area, because we will suddenly and gladly drink this Kool-Aid. It doesn't seem crazy to us. It feels really good to us.

This is **a theology which asserts that God's aim is to make believers healthy and wealthy in this life.** A common phrase is that we live like "King's kids." That God desires us to enjoy excesses.

Global Christianity today is unfortunately explicitly characterized by the Prosperity Gospel. Approximately half of self-proclaimed Christians in the United States believe that God gives material wealth to those who have enough faith. That number rises to 96% of self-proclaimed Christians in Nigeria, 82% of self-proclaimed Christians in India, and 71% of self-proclaimed Christians in Guatemala. Some are exclusive.

Other parts of global Christianity are subtly infused by the Prosperity Gospel. How else do you explain our massive buildings, budgets in contemporary churches designed to appeal to our preferences and luxuries while we spend relative pennies on the poor and unreached?

What Does the Prosperity Gospel Teach?

There is a range here. There is not one place you can go—one book, one website or anything along those lines because different people, pastors and churches approach this in different ways. In the Prosperity Gospel, there is often, **a distorted view of God** and the Trinity even teaching that the Father, Son and Spirit are not distinct Persons but rather manifestations of God.

This is most evident in the prominent teaching of T.D. Jakes: "There is one God, Creator of all things, infinitely perfect and eternally existing in three manifestations: Father, Son and Holy Spirit." We saw earlier that this is a heretical statement.

There is also **a distorted view of man.** Basically, the idea is that man has spiritual power to manipulate the physical realm. An example here is Joel Osteen:

Maybe Alzheimer's disease runs in your family genes, but don't succumb to it. Instead, say every day, 'My mind is alert. I have clarity of thought. I have a good memory. Every cell in my body is increasing and getting healthier.' If you'll rise up

in your authority, you can be the one to put a stop to the negative things in your family line... Start boldly declaring, "God is restoring health unto me. I am getting better every day in every way."

This is a repacking of "the power of positive thinking"—man has spiritual power to manipulate the physical realm. It's like the phrase: "Think it and become it."

In this way, the world revolves around man's wants. Hear this played out in the words of Kenneth Copeland: "You don't have a god in you, you are one."

Putting yourself at the center in such a way that you come to believe that everything and others exist to serve you is the essence of sin.

Joel Osteen writes:

"I've come to expect to be treated differently. I've learned to expect people to want to help me. My attitude is this: I'm a child of the Most High God. My Father created the whole universe. He has crowned me with favor; therefore, I can expect preferential treatment. I can expect people to go out of their way to want to help me."

This is a distorted view of man.

There is a distorted focus on health and wealth that includes promises of financial success through faith. "Trust in God and He will give you financial success." Or hear it in the words of Paula White: "God is not magnified when you are broke, busted or disgusted."

It also includes promises of physical health through faith. In the words of Kenneth Hagin: "I believe that it is the plan of God our Father that no believer should ever be sick. It is not—I state boldly—it is not the will of God my Father that we should suffer with cancer and other dread diseases which bring pain and anguish. No! It is God's will that we be healed." He uses Scriptures like 1 Peter 2:24 to assert this: "*He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed.*"

We'll talk about this in a minute but don't miss at this point that this is not just Kenneth Hagin. How many times are we sick or praying for someone who is sick and think, "If only I had enough faith, then they would be healed?" That is driven, at least in part, by an expectation of physical health through sufficient faith. We're going to talk more about that too.

There is a distorted understanding of salvation. Put it this way: Does Jesus save us from sin and damnation in eternity? Or does Jesus save us from sickness and poverty on earth? Which of these does the Bible address; one, the other or both? If both, is it in equal proportion? The emphasis in the Prosperity Gospel is constantly on the latter and rarely on the former.

There are distorted interpretations of Scripture. This is key. I don't want to envision people who believe the Prosperity Gospel as a bunch of greedy people who want to leave Scripture behind. These

are often well-meaning people, like pastors, who see Scripture but begin to twist it into something that the whole of Scripture does not support at all and end up undercutting what Scripture—and most importantly, the gospel—teaches.

The Prosperity Gospel continually rips texts from their contexts in the Bible. Think about 3 John 2: “*Beloved, I pray that all may go well with you and that you may be in good health, as it goes well with your soul.*”

Based on that verse, does prayer guarantee good health? Certainly. That verse is not a problem. It says good health to everyone who trust in God when you read from 3 John. This verse is a prayer for good health. It’s a good and right thing to pray. One of the most popular proof texts for prosperity theology is Mark 10:29-30 when Jesus said:

Truly, I say to you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or lands, for my sake and for the gospel, who will not receive a hundredfold now in this time, houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and lands, with persecutions, and in the age to come eternal life.

When you study that passage, you know this is a reference to the community of faith—the church, brothers and sisters—who surround the Christ follower upon their profession of faith.

If somebody in Malaysia comes to Christ, they could lose their family and whole social structure. They need brothers and sisters around them, which is one of the things we were praying for.

Jesus is saying, “When you come to me, you will have an entire family to lean on and houses all over the place to stay in.” It is in that sense that Jesus is referring. This is not Jesus saying to Peter, “Don’t worry, bro. Since you have followed me, I have a condo in Jerusalem, a split-level in suburban Bethany, a cabin in the mountains of Carmel and a summer beach house near Caesarea that are just waiting for you.” We know what Jesus had waiting for Peter: a cross. Because Peter followed Jesus, then Peter died hanging upside-down on a cross.

In addition to absolutely how silly it is to see that text as a promise of more health and wealth in this worldly life when Jesus says that persecutions are coming too. That begs the question: Have those who claimed the benefits paid the price? In other words, do proponents of the Prosperity Gospel claim the blessings of persecution like they claim the blessings of wealth? They name it and claim it: “By the Word of God, I claim suffering, beatings, imprisonment and homelessness for the gospel.” That is not what you hear in prosperity theology.

Then there is Psalm 103:2-3: “*Bless the LORD, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits, who forgives all your iniquity, who heals all your diseases.*” Is this general praise or a guaranteed promise? Certainly no biblical scholar would say that is a promise: “If you have cancer, you will be healed if you just trust God.”

I was praying with a sweet sister last week who had just received a very serious diagnosis. She has faith. She knows and is walking with God, but she knows she is not guaranteed healing from God in this life. Of course, in Heaven this is not a question. God should be praised because God is able to heal all her diseases. But God is also able to sustain and uphold her in the midst of sickness and disease. That God is worthy of praise.

Let's read together in James 5:10-18:

As an example of suffering and patience, brothers, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord. Behold, we consider those blessed who remained steadfast. You have heard of the steadfastness of Job, and you have seen the purpose of the Lord, how the Lord is compassionate and merciful. But above all, my brothers, do not swear, either by heaven or by earth or by any other oath, but let your "yes" be yes and your "no" be no, so that you may not fall under condemnation. Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray. Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing praise. Is anyone among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer of faith will save the one who is sick, and the Lord will raise him up. And if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven. Therefore, confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working. Elijah was a man with a nature like ours, and he prayed fervently that it might not rain, and for three years and six months it did not rain on the earth. Then he prayed again, and heaven gave rain, and the earth bore its fruit.

That is a key passage in Prosperity Gospel theology so let's camp out here for a few minutes and ask does faith guarantee prosperity? Does faith guarantee certain answers to prayer? Is that what this passage is teaching?

Let's look at the text in its context and we see that this passage is teaching several things. One thing is that faith is patient in suffering. If we go back up to James 5:7, we see the word "patience" mentioned twice. Then it's mentioned again in verse eight and ten where we pick up here. Then we see "endure" and "endurance" in verse 11.

He gives us three pictures of patience to encourage us in James 5:7-9. He says to be patient like a farmer waiting for the harvest. In an agricultural society, one lives dependent on God's provision and the weather. Too much rain can cause the crops to rot. Too little rain causes drought. Frost kills the crops, and on and on. You need patience.

Here's the picture: this illustration of the farmer reminds us that faith involves trust in God with what you cannot control. A farmer cannot determine when it rains or doesn't. James says, "When it comes to the Lord's coming or injustice around us—like a farmer—trust God with what you cannot control while honoring God with what you can control."

James mentions in verse nine that they were grumbling against one another. The picture is while you wait—while you endure trial—you will be tempted to sin, complain and speak evil against one another, but resist this. A judge is coming. You want to be found faithful with what you can control. That's a good word. When you are going through a trial, brother or sister, trust God with what you cannot control. There are many things you can't. Leave them in His hands. Don't try to manufacture the rain. Trust in a good God with cannot control. Then, honor God with what you can control. Like a farmer, trust that the harvest He brings in His time will be worth waiting for.

Then in verse ten, be patient like a prophet speaking the truth. The prophet reminds us that patience doesn't necessarily mean inactivity. A farmer doesn't sit back waiting for rain. In the middle of hardship—like a prophet—speak about the goodness, greatness, judgment and mercy of God.

Then like Job, hope in God's purpose. We've seen the purpose of the Lord in Job. What an understatement! Remember, this is where it took 42 chapters for the purpose of suffering in Job's life to be revealed. Do you remember what the end of his suffering was? "My ears had heard of You, but now my eyes have seen You."

Remember—brothers and sisters—when you're walking through suffering, it's not the end of the story. Be confident the end will reveal that the Lord is indeed compassionate and merciful. Even when you can't see it, be patient. Hope in God's purpose.

Faith is prayerful in sorrow. That's where we see prayer all over verses 13-18, and where James is reminding us that patience is not just sitting back doing nothing. It's not passive waiting. It's active waiting. It says to pray when you are hurting. Pray when you are happy. Pray with the elders (verse 14). It's what the elders and I were doing with this sister who had received this diagnosis last week. We were anointing her with oil and praying for her.

Pray with the church. According to verse 16, this kind of prayer for healing is not just for the elders but also for the church. Elders certainly play a special role—especially when someone can't gather together with the church so the elders go to them—but there is not some special power here reserved for the elders. The power is in God and available for the praying church. This is a good picture of care and prayer for one another that is intended to happen within the context of the church. When we're sick, we call on each other to pray with each other.

We confess our sins to each other. It's interesting that this is the only verse in the New Testament that commands believers to confess their sins to one another. That command is given in the context of praying for the healing of one another. Think for a second about the relationship between prayer and confession of sin in James. Clearly, the implication is if a person has sinned against a brother, he should confess sin to him.

Here's the deal: sin directly causes some sickness. We do have examples in the Bible. Take 1 Corinthians 11:30, for example, which talks about how taking the Lord's Supper in an unworthy manner can lead to weakness, sickness and even death. Sin can directly cause some sickness but not necessarily all.

At the same time, the whole of Scripture teaches sin indirectly causes all sickness, which are ultimately a result of the fall. The picture is that in dealing with sickness, we are always also dealing with sin in each other's lives. We are interceding on behalf of each other. We're crying out for God's grace and power in each other's lives.

We get to the example of Elisha, looking back at 1 Kings 17 and 18, we know that Elisha was praying directly according to the Word of the Lord. The Word of the Lord said, "There's going to be a drought," so Elisha proclaimed that. The Word of the Lord said, "I'm going to bring the rain," so Elisha prayed for that. He had a specific word from God that he was praying about; so when you are praying for somebody who is sick, do you have a specific word that God's going to do exactly this? Certainly not in the sense that Elisha did in 1 Kings 17 and 18.

How do we have power and prayer then like in James 5? Follow this: The secret to power and effectiveness in prayer is to make our wants God's wants. We say, "God, what do I know You want according to Your will and Word?" Then we ask for whatever we want. That's the whole picture and then some of what James 5 is talking about here.

The point is the Prosperity Gospel makes its money—quite literally—on ripping that text out of its context and interpreting texts through the lens of prosperity health and wealth, instead of seeing what those texts meant then and mean for all of time in light of their context.

In addition, the Prosperity Gospel ignores clear counter-examples in the Bible starting with the life and teachings of Jesus. Jesus, born in lowly Bethlehem, raised in despised Nazareth, and part of a pious but poor family that offered two doves because they couldn't offer a lamb. He didn't even have a roof over his head:

As they were going along the road, someone said to him, "I will follow you wherever you go." And Jesus said to him, "Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head." To another he said, "Follow me." But he said, "Lord, let me first go and bury my father." And Jesus said to him, "Leave the dead to bury their own dead. But as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God." Yet another said, "I will follow you, Lord, but let me first say farewell to those at my home." Jesus said to him, "No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God" (Luke 9:57–62).

Here's Luke 14:33: "So therefore, any one of you who does not renounce all that he has cannot be my disciple." We won't see those verses embroidered, framed or posted on refrigerators.

In Philippians 2:5, had Jesus laid claim to prosperity in this life, there would be no crucifixion, no atonement, no gospel and no hope for any of us:

Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross (Philippians 2:5–8).

This is clearly not the “health and wealth gospel.” It’s more like the “homeless and wounded gospel.”

Based on John 12:23-26, it’s clear that God may accomplish higher purposes in our death than in our life.

And Jesus answered them, “The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. Whoever loves his life loses it, and whoever hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life. If anyone serves me, he must follow me; and where I am, there will my servant be also. If anyone serves me, the Father will honor him” (John 12:23–26).

That goes completely against the grain of the Prosperity Gospel.

What about the life and teachings of Paul? As a result of following Christ, Paul lost everything. He describes his daily adversity, persecution for Christ and nearness to death in 2 Corinthians 4:7-12:

But we have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us. We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies. For we who live are always being given over to death for Jesus’ sake, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh. So death is at work in us, but life in you.

Two chapters later, Paul talks about troubles, hardships, distresses, beatings, imprisonments, riots, sleepless nights, hunger, the experience of nearly dying, being sorrowful and poor.

Read 2 Corinthians 11:23–28:

Are they servants of Christ? I am a better one—I am talking like a madman—with far greater labors, far more imprisonments, with countless beatings, and often near death. Five times I received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I was adrift at sea; on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers; in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in

hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure. And, apart from other things, there is the daily pressure on me of my anxiety for all the churches.

That does not sound like the “Prosperity Gospel.” That’s more like the “adversity gospel.”

I don’t believe in any of his dreams that Paul was hearing faint choruses of voices in his future saying, “Paul, you don’t have to live like this. Just trust God and live like a King’s kid.”

Paul knew God may accomplish higher purposes in our sickness than in our health. Think about 2 Corinthians 12:7-10 where Paul said:

So to keep me from becoming conceited because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to harass me, to keep me from becoming conceited. Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me. But he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong.

Ladies and gentlemen, we may pray for healing when we’re sick. That’s exactly what Paul did with his thorn in the flesh. But notice that he prayed three times, and when God chose not to heal him, he didn’t name it and claim it and demand that God heal him. Instead, he acknowledged God’s spiritual purpose in his adversity.

Today’s prosperity preachers bypass that and say the disease was from satan. Yes, but God was sovereign over it. Satan would never give anyone something to keep them from becoming conceited. God is the One Who is using this struggle for Paul’s good. It’s not satan but God Who refused to remove whatever it was despite Paul’s pleading.

If you have prayed for healing and have not received it, take heart. You are in good company.

Erastus remained at Corinth, and I left Trophimus, who was ill, at Miletus (2 Timothy 4:20).

I trust in the Lord that shortly I myself will come also. I have thought it necessary to send to you Epaphroditus my brother and fellow worker and fellow soldier, and your messenger and minister to my need, for he has been longing for you all and has been distressed because you heard that he was ill. Indeed he was ill, near to death. But God had mercy on him, and not only on him but on me also, lest I should have sorrow upon sorrow. I am the more eager to send him, therefore, that you may rejoice at seeing him again, and that I may be less anxious. So receive him in the Lord with all joy, and honor such men, for he nearly died for the work of Christ, risking his life to complete what was lacking in your service to me (Philippians 2:24–30).

No longer drink only water, but use a little wine for the sake of your stomach and your frequent ailments (1 Timothy 5:23).

In every instance, God is using all these things—even hard things—for His good purposes.

Randy Alcorn summarizes this well in Paul's life. He says:

When Paul was taken in chains from his filthy Roman dungeon and beheaded at the order of the opulent madman Nero, two representatives of humanity faced off, one of the best and one of the worst. One lived for prosperity on earth, the other didn't. One now lives in prosperity in heaven, the other doesn't. We remember both men for what they truly were, which is why we name our sons Paul and our dogs Nero.

Why Is the Prosperity Gospel So Dangerous?

I have 12 fast answers to that question.

12 Dangers of the Prosperity Gospel that I hope will help you see how the Prosperity Gospel is so serious.

One is that it perverts our understanding of wealth in this world.

Two things I ask of you; deny them not to me before I die: Remove far from me falsehood and lying; give me neither poverty nor riches; feed me with the food that is needful for me, lest I be full and deny you and say, "Who is the Lord?" or lest I be poor and steal and profane the name of my God (Proverbs 30:7–9).

We have to ask the question: Is wealth always a sign of God's approval? Material wealth, achievement, fame, victory, success—are these reliable indicators of God's reward or approval? If so, then God would be an evil god because history is full of financially successful madmen and wealthy, healthy despots. If wealth is a dependable sign of God's approval and lack of wealth shows His disapproval, then Jesus and Paul were on God's blacklist, and drug dealers and embezzlers are the apple of His eye.

Similarly, is poverty always a sign of God's disapproval? If so, what does that mean for Jesus, Paul, Lazarus in the story of the rich man? What does that mean for impoverished brothers and sisters around the world that we have right now living outside the gate of contemporary, western, Christian, prosperity and influence? Are we more righteous than they? The Prosperity Gospel perverts our understanding of wealth.

It disregards the purpose of wealth in God's Word. Does God give us more so that we can get more? Or does God give us more so that we can give more? The world says the former. God's Word says the latter. Which do we believe?

Second Corinthians 8:13-14 tells us why God makes us rich. It is so that we can live simply and give sacrificially not so we can have more stuff and live with more luxury:

For I do not mean that others should be eased and you burdened, but that as a matter of fairness your abundance at the present time should supply their need, so that their abundance may supply your need, that there may be fairness (2 Corinthians 8:13–14).

The point is this:

Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. Each one must give as he has decided in his heart, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. And God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that having all sufficiency in all things at all times, you may abound in every good work. As it is written, "He has distributed freely, he has given to the poor; his righteousness endures forever." He who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will supply and multiply your seed for sowing and increase the harvest of your righteousness. You will be enriched in every way to be generous in every way, which through us will produce thanksgiving to God. For the ministry of this service is not only supplying the needs of the saints but is also overflowing in many thanksgivings to God (2 Corinthians 9:6–12).

Third, the Prosperity Gospel minimizes the dangers of wealth. We almost always think of wealth as a blessing. Look at all we've been blessed with, right? In a sense, it is, but follow this: wealth is not just a blessing from the King, it is also a barrier to the Kingdom.

Jesus said in Mark 10:23, "*And Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, 'How difficult it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!'*" Did you hear what Jesus just said? He said, "Wealth can keep us out of Heaven." The Prosperity Gospel actually feeds the desire to be rich while Scripture warns us against the desire to be rich.

But those who desire to be rich fall into temptation, into a snare, into many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evils. It is through this craving that some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pangs (1 Timothy 6:9–10).

The Prosperity Gospel pours fuel on that deadly flame in every one of our hearts.

Fourth, the Prosperity Gospel ignores the clear shift in Scripture from the Old Testament to the New Testament. This means that most of prosperity teaching leans on the promises of God to His people in the Old Testament before Jesus. When we look at the commands of God in the Old Testament, we see an abundance of promises of material reward for spiritual obedience.

Even from the very beginning in the book of Genesis, God's promising Abraham land and descendants. He's building a people, the nation of Israel. "*When Abram was ninety-nine years old the LORD appeared to Abram and said to him, 'I am God Almighty; walk before me, and be blameless, that I may make my covenant between me and you, and may multiply you greatly'*" (Genesis 17:1–2).

It's interesting that when we get to the New Testament, we see the exact opposite. In the New Testament, we actually see a glaring lack of promises of material reward for spiritual obedience.

In the words of Craig Blomberg, the New Testament scholar, we read:

The New Testament carried forward the major principles of the Old Testament and intertestamental Judaism with one conspicuous omission: never was material wealth promised as a guaranteed reward for either spiritual obedience or simple hard work. Material reward for piety never reappears in Jesus' teaching, and is explicitly contradicted throughout.

We see the opposite. We see Christians losing their possessions as they follow Christ.

Another notable difference is regarding the place of worship. In the Old Testament, the Temple is a building. Solomon constructed it. The nations came to it, like the Queen of Sheba in 1 Kings 10:1-9, to behold God's glory:

Now when the queen of Sheba heard of the fame of Solomon concerning the name of the Lord, she came to test him with hard questions. She came to Jerusalem with a very great retinue, with camels bearing spices and very much gold and precious stones. And when she came to Solomon, she told him all that was on her mind. And Solomon answered all her questions; there was nothing hidden from the king that he could not explain to her. And when the queen of Sheba had seen all the wisdom of Solomon, the house that he had built, the food of his table, the seating of his officials, and the attendance of his servants, their clothing, his cupbearers, and his burnt offerings that he offered at the house of the Lord, there was no more breath in her. And she said to the king, "The report was true that I heard in my own land of your words and of your wisdom, but I did not believe the reports until I came and my own eyes had seen it. And behold, the half was not told me. Your wisdom and prosperity surpass the report that I heard. Happy are your men! Happy are your servants, who continually stand before you and hear your wisdom! Blessed be the Lord your God, who has delighted in you and set you on the throne of Israel! Because the Lord loved Israel forever, he has made you king, that you may execute justice and righteousness."

Much of giving in the Old Testament made worship life possible, in the tabernacle first, then in the temple at this building.

When we get to the New Testament, that's not what we see. In the New Testament, we see the temple as body—you and me. "*Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God*" (1 Corinthians 6:19)? In the New Testament, we are not told to construct elaborate places of worship anymore. We are the place of worship.

This leads to one more major shift regarding the purpose of blessing. In the Old Testament, God blesses His people with wealth so that the nations might come and see God's glory in that place.

Likewise, when a foreigner, who is not of your people Israel, comes from a far country for your name's sake (for they shall hear of your great name and your mighty hand, and of your outstretched arm), when he comes and prays toward this house, hear in heaven your dwelling place and do according to all for which the foreigner calls to you, in order that all the peoples of the earth may know your

name and fear you, as do your people Israel, and that they may know that this house that I have built is called by your name (1 Kings 8:41–43).

In the New Testament, God blesses His people with wealth so that God's people might go and tell of God's glory. That's the great commission, not "come and see" but rather "go and tell." Wealth is for the going and the telling. This is huge.

And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age" (Matthew 28:18–20).

All this to say, the Prosperity Gospel totally ignores these massive shifts from the Old Testament to the New Testament when it comes to wealth and physical blessing.

Fifth, the Prosperity Gospel commends selfish luxury over selfless generosity. It trains people to prioritize blessings for themselves. It explicitly encourages people to indulge in pleasures while Jesus explicitly warns against that.

It says in Mark 4:18-19, *"And others are the ones sown among thorns. They are those who hear the word, but the cares of the world and the deceitfulness of riches and the desires for other things enter in and choke the word, and it proves unfruitful."*

Prosperity teaching explicitly encourages people to indulge in pleasures while it implicitly leads people to ignore the poor while Scripture commands us to care for the poor.

I cannot describe the anger I felt recently in Brazil when I saw a massive temple-like building in Sao Paolo, constructed with millions and millions of dollars, preying on the poor in the community around it all in the name of Christ.

Prosperity teaching commends selfish luxury over selfless generosity.

But Paul teaches, *"Only, they asked us to remember the poor, the very thing I was eager to do"* (Galatians 2:10).

Sixth, and in this way, **it appeals to the desires of the flesh instead of calling people to deny the flesh** which is what the fundamental call to follow Christ involves.

And he said to all, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will save it" (Luke 9:23–24).

So therefore, any one of you who does not renounce all that he has cannot be my disciple (Luke 14:33).

Seventh, prosperity teaching encourages people to waste their lives on things that do not last.

Jesus specifically says not to do this in Matthew 6:19-21:

Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal, but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

Jesus says, “Don’t put your heart here in the things of this world.” This is exactly where prosperity teaching directs people’s hearts.

Eighth, prosperity teaching exalts God’s gifts—the things we receive from God—above God’s glory which is the treasure we have in God. This is huge.

In John 6, Jesus feeds over 5,000 people with five loaves of bread and two fish. The crowds say, “Give us more bread. Do another miracle. Give us something to eat.” “*Jesus said to them, ‘I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst’*” (John 6:35). And what do they say? They say, “We don’t want You. We want more bread. We want more gifts.” What happens when Jesus doesn’t give them what they want in the end of John 6? All the people leave.

We do realize this is the essence of idolatry. Idolatry is exalting gifts above the giver. That’s exactly what prosperity teaching promotes—idolatry.

Another way to put it is the ninth danger of the Prosperity Gospel—don’t miss it. We’re hitting now at the heart of the gospel. The fraudulent imitation of the gospel deceives here. **The Prosperity Gospel abuses God by making Him a means to an end.**

Come to God and get _____ (you fill in the blank). Come to God and get health, healing, wealth or prosperity. All of that is blasphemous. We come to God to get God. The whole point of the gospel is to reconcile sinners to God not to give sinners all they want in this world and use God toward those ends.

Instead of trusting God for our needs, the Prosperity Gospel teaches that we use God for our wants. We need forgiveness from God. We need restoration to God. Far more than we need to get rid of any cancer in our bodies, may we be free of the deadly cancer of sin in our souls. The true gospel makes that possible.

The Prosperity Gospel ignores that need and says we really need health and wealth. That desire, as we’ve seen, launches people into ruin and destruction forever.

I rejoiced in the Lord greatly that now at length you have revived your concern for me. You were indeed concerned for me, but you had no opportunity. Not that I am speaking of being in need, for I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content. I know how to be brought low, and I know how to abound. In any and every circumstance, I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger,

abundance and need. I can do all things through him who strengthens me
(Philippians 4:10–13).

And my God will supply every need of yours according to his riches in glory in
Christ Jesus (Philippians 4:19).

Do you see how important, how eternally deadly, and how practically insignificant the Prosperity Gospel is?

Think about prayer. Instead of God-centered intercession, prayer becomes man-centered coercion—manipulating God for our own needs.

Hear James 4:3: “*You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions.*”

Here’s the tenth danger: such prosperity teaching subtly infuses all of Christianity. We may say we don’t believe this, don’t believe God is a means to an end and don’t want to waste our lives on things that don’t last, but look at our pocket books. Look at the way we spend our money in our lives, families and church. Prosperity teaching is not so outside of us—of me. It’s inside of us—and inside me—more than we would like to admit. It is evident in how little we give. It is evident in how much we own.

The eleventh danger is it overlooks the design of suffering according to God’s Word. The Bible clearly teaches that Christians may suffer despite their righteousness. Job is the prime example. The story is told in such a way that it’s clear Job was blameless as can be, yet he suffered terribly.

There was a man in the land of Uz whose name was Job, and that man was
blameless and upright, one who feared God and turned away from evil (Job 1:1).

Christians may also suffer because of their righteousness. Righteousness, faith and following Christ will actually lead to later suffering in this world.

That is the reality for every Malay person that we’re praying for tonight. In coming to Christ, they will experience more suffering.

This is the point Jesus makes in John 15:18-20:

If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you. If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you. Remember the word that I said to you: “A servant is not greater than his master.” If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you. If they kept my word, they will also keep yours.

During His time on earth, Jesus was perfectly righteous. Did He suffer? The world hated Him, constantly bombarded and accused Him, and eventually, killed and crucified Him because of His

righteousness. That's why Paul said, "*Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted*" (2 Timothy 3:12).

Mark it down. A materialistic world does not look with favor upon true followers of Jesus.

Finally, prosperity teaching fails to acknowledge the necessity of suffering. The necessity of suffering is something we will never hear in prosperity teaching. Suffering is necessary and good in this world.

You ask, "What do you mean suffering is necessary?" Think about Jesus. Was Jesus' suffering optional or necessary for our salvation? It was necessary, right? He had to suffer and die so that we could be saved from our sins. Now we—who are His followers, united to Him by faith—live for the spread the gospel in a world of sin. As long as we are living for the spread of the gospel, suffering in this sinful world will be inevitable.

In Matthew 10, Jesus said, "If they treat me like this, they'll treat you like this."

It is enough for the disciple to be like his teacher, and the servant like his master. If they have called the master of the house Beelzebul, how much more will they malign those of his household (Matthew 10:25).

That's why Paul said to new believers in Acts 14:22:

Strengthening the souls of the disciples, encouraging them to continue in the faith, and saying that through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God.

Romans 8:16-18 talks about it as well:

The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs—heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him. For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us.

Peter says in 1 Peter 4:12-14:

Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed. If you are insulted for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you.

The clear teaching of Scripture is that the road to glory with Christ for all those who are in Christ inevitably involves suffering. Prosperity teaching is the total opposite. Prosperity teaching says, "You follow, trust, and have faith in God, you don't have to worry about suffering."

Don't miss the danger here. The Prosperity Gospel goes completely against the grain of God's Word. It undercuts the core of God's gospel.

How Should We Respond to the Prosperity Gospel?

As we respond to the Prosperity Gospel, **first, we must proclaim the gospel as the answer to people's greatest need.**

Remember this story in Matthew 9:1-8?

And getting into a boat he crossed over and came to his own city. And behold, some people brought to him a paralytic, lying on a bed. And when Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, "Take heart, my son; your sins are forgiven." And behold, some of the scribes said to themselves, "This man is blaspheming." But Jesus, knowing their thoughts, said, "Why do you think evil in your hearts? For which is easier, to say, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Rise and walk'? But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins"—he then said to the paralytic—"Rise, pick up your bed and go home." And he rose and went home. When the crowds saw it, they were afraid, and they glorified God, who had given such authority to men.

Do you know this is the only time in the entire Gospel of Matthew where Jesus forgives a specific individual? See this: it happens to a man who didn't even ask for forgiveness. He was paralyzed. His friends brought him to Jesus for healing. We don't hear anything about a request for forgiveness.

I actually put myself in this guy's shoes—or on this guy's mat—and I tried to imagine what's going through his mind when the first thing Jesus said to him was, "Son, your sins are forgiven." I would probably be thinking, "Okay. That's great, but I'm not sure that was what I was looking for."

There—I think—is the key to the story, because it's not what anybody was looking for. I don't know for sure, but it seems like this guy and his friends were hoping that Jesus would heal his paralysis. We know for sure that is what some of the scribes were thinking Jesus would do. But he astounds everybody when He says, "Son, you have a much deeper issue than paralysis."

This story shows us Jesus has authority over sin. Jesus' authority is not just over suffering. Jesus' authority penetrates to the root of all suffering, which is sin.

All of our physical and spiritual struggles, suffering and pain, they all go back to sin ultimately—separation from our Creator. All suffering goes back to sin, specifically in your life. We've talked about that. Sometimes when we disobey or turn from God, we experience the results of that—even discipline from God—out of His love for us.

We also generally experience suffering as a result of sin in the world. It's Job-like suffering—suffering that's not related to sin in our lives.

The point of Matthew 9 is that Jesus came to deal with the root of it all. When we look at the context of Matthew 8-9, we see disease, demons and disaster. Jesus goes right to the root here and deals with sin.

This shows our ultimate need is never physical. Our ultimate need is always spiritual. No matter what kind of suffering we are experiencing, our ultimate need is always spiritual. Whatever happens in our lives—even in the midst of intense, physical suffering—our ultimate need is still spiritual.

We look at Matthew 9 and see the good news of the Kingdom. That good news is ultimately not that Jesus will heal us of all our sicknesses. We don't go to Sub-Saharan Africa and say, "Trust in Christ and all your HIV-Aids will be gone." That's not true. We don't go in to America and say, "Trust in Christ and all your cancer will be gone." That's not true and we know it's not.

The good news of the Kingdom is not that Jesus will heal us of all our diseases right now, but that Jesus will forgive us of all our sins forever. That's what we need most. More than we need to be healed of cancer, we need to be forgiven of sin. More than we need a tumor removed, we need sin forgotten. When that happens—when our sins are forgiven and we are reconciled to God—then the root is severed.

This means forgiveness is God's greatest gift because it meets our greatest need. That is the central message of Christianity. God will forgive your sins through Jesus. There's no better news in the world than that.

The gospel is definitively not to trust in Jesus and health will come our way. Don't buy and don't sell that. It's not the good news. The good news is so much greater than that. Trust in Jesus and you'll be made right with God. That's what we need to hear and spread. No matter what we've done against God—no matter how dirty, stained or sinful our past or present is—God is gracious and through faith in Christ, He will forgive us, wipe away all our sins and never, ever count them against us.

"For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23). That's our problem. Jesus is the answer.

"For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 6:23).

"For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life" (John 3:16). Proclaim that gospel as the answer to people's greatest need.

Secondly in responding to the Prosperity Gospel, **we need to show the gospel in the way we use our possessions.**

We want you to know, brothers, about the grace of God that has been given among the churches of Macedonia, for in a severe test of affliction, their abundance of joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part. For they gave according to their means, as I can testify, and beyond their means, of their own accord, begging us earnestly for the favor of taking part in the relief of the saints—and this, not as we expected, but they gave themselves first to the Lord and then by the will of God to us. Accordingly, we urged Titus that as he had started, so he should complete among you this act of grace. But as you excel in everything—in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in all

earnestness, and in our love for you—see that you excel in this act of grace also. I say this not as a command, but to prove by the earnestness of others that your love also is genuine. 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 by his poverty might become rich (2 Corinthians 8:1–9).

The point is this:

Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. Each one must give as he has decided in his heart, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. And God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that having all sufficiency in all things at all times, you may abound in every good work. As it is written, “He has distributed freely, he has given to the poor; his righteousness endures forever.” He who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will supply and multiply your seed for sowing and increase the harvest of your righteousness. You will be enriched in every way to be generous in every way, which through us will produce thanksgiving to God. For the ministry of this service is not only supplying the needs of the saints but is also overflowing in many thanksgivings to God. By their approval of this service, they will glorify God because of your submission that comes from your confession of the gospel of Christ, and the generosity of your contribution for them and for all others, while they long for you and pray for you, because of the surpassing grace of God upon you. Thanks be to God for his inexpressible gift (2 Corinthians 9:6–15)!

I will mention these truths quickly.

We give out of an abundance of grace. We give out of the overflow of what God gives to us. We give willingly. We give generously. The whole picture in chapter eight and nine is how God gives enough for us and excess for others. We identify our “enough” and we give away our “excess.”

We give cheerfully and gladly. We are not forced by God to give. We are freed by God to give.

I was preaching this last week on giving and I was reminded in the Old Testament—I was actually reading in my personal Bible reading a couple of weeks ago—in Exodus when the people were taking up offerings for the tabernacle. They got to a point where all those who were working on the tabernacle said, “Moses, tell the people to stop bringing because they are bringing too much stuff.” So Moses had to make an announcement: “Stop bringing offerings.” That’ll be the day in the church when we say, “No more. You’re giving too much money.”

We give as a demonstration of the gospel. This is so different than prosperity teaching. The Prosperity Gospel beckons us to get. The true gospel beckons us to give.

We sacrifice our rights for others. We spend our resources on others. We give as a demonstration of the gospel. We give to promote thanksgiving to God. Giving unites the people of God. Giving exalts the goodness of God.

Read through 1 Timothy 6:3-10. It's a great passage.

If anyone teaches a different doctrine and does not agree with the sound words of our Lord Jesus Christ and the teaching that accords with godliness, he is puffed up with conceit and understands nothing. He has an unhealthy craving for controversy and for quarrels about words, which produce envy, dissension, slander, evil suspicions, and constant friction among people who are depraved in mind and deprived of the truth, imagining that godliness is a means of gain. But godliness with contentment is great gain, for we brought nothing into the world, and we cannot take anything out of the world. But if we have food and clothing, with these we will be content. But those who desire to be rich fall into temptation, into a snare, into many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evils. It is through this craving that some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pangs.

How do we defend our lives in the church, as well as others, from Prosperity Gospel? We do it with the true gospel and lives that reflect the true gospel in the way we use our possessions.

This text teaches the path to great gain and to be content with having necessities. Paul says, "If we have food and clothing, be content."

Be cautious with acquiring excess. Those who desire more, fall into temptation; a snare and many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. We will take none of it with us. Paul says in 1 Timothy 6 that we brought nothing into the world and will take nothing out of it. There are no U-Hauls behind hearses.

Be cautious with excess because if you are not, your excess will take contentment from you. The more you accumulate—the more you seek after pleasure in your excess things—the more your senses are dulled to satisfaction in God alone. Stay away from excess. You will miss God's purpose for you. Use your excess for the purpose of God. Use your excess to share the gospel and make His love known in a world of urgent spiritual and physical need. That's why He's given us such grace.

Paul talks about the path to total ruin which he describes as love of money and desire for riches. Just the desire for money leads to a life of self-destruction and self-mutilation—being caught in a snare with senseless and harmful desires. That's where seeking after riches takes us.

What if you are already rich? The plan for rich people, according to 1 Timothy 6:17-19, is:

As for the rich in this present age, charge them not to be haughty, nor to set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches, but on God, who richly provides us with everything to enjoy. They are to do good, to be rich in good works, to be generous and ready to share, thus storing up treasure for themselves as a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of that which is truly life.

We need to flee self-confidence and not be haughty. Possessions produce pride. We think, “No, they don’t.” But in thinking that, we show they do. We begin to put our confidence in ourselves and our stuff instead of in God. The danger is we become blind to it. We don’t even realize it. We think, “I’m secure because I have stuff.” We say, “My security isn’t my stuff,” but take that stuff away and we start to realize how much emphasis we put in it.

We need to flee self-centeredness. Rather the uncertainty of riches, we need to put our hope in God and focus on Him. He gives good things for our enjoyment. Verse 17 says that God gives all kinds of good things for our enjoyment and to use them for others’ enjoyment. We should be rich in good deeds, willing to share and give, give, and give.

That’s the biblical anecdote to materialism: give extravagantly, and in the process, invest good things in our and others’ eternity, storing up for ourselves treasures in Heaven.

Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal, but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. The eye is the lamp of the body. So, if your eye is healthy, your whole body will be full of light, but if your eye is bad, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light in you is darkness, how great is the darkness! No one can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money (Matthew 6:19–24).

Plainly put, the true gospel compels us to live simply and give sacrificially. That kind of life looks radically different than the life produced by the Prosperity Gospel.

Let’s ask the question: Do our lives, yours and mine—specifically our use of possessions—look like we believe the true gospel or the Prosperity Gospel? That’s a question we all need to ask.

The third way to respond to the Prosperity Gospel is to worship God as the end, not a means to an end.

O God, you are my God; earnestly I seek you; my soul thirsts for you; my flesh faints for you, as in a dry and weary land where there is no water. So I have looked upon you in the sanctuary, beholding your power and glory. Because your steadfast love is better than life, my lips will praise you. So I will bless you as long as I live; in your name I will lift up my hands. My soul will be satisfied as with fat and rich food, and my mouth will praise you with joyful lips, when I remember you upon my bed, and meditate on you in the watches of the night; for you have been my help, and in the shadow of your wings I will sing for joy. My soul clings to you; your right hand upholds me (Psalm 63:1–8).

We are designed to seek God as a consuming addiction in our lives, not a convenient addition to our lives. He is Who we want. We look through Psalm 63 and we see Christianity’s obsession

with Christ and its relationship with God. It's like a consuming addiction to God. There's so much to this but in Secret Church 19, we will dive into this big-time.

We are created to find ultimate satisfaction in God, over and above His gifts. *"One thing have I asked of the Lord, that will I seek after: that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to gaze upon the beauty of the Lord and to inquire in his temple"* (Psalm 27:4).

Then, fourthly, trust God in the middle of suffering.

I have no idea what I was thinking putting all these texts from Job here as if we could run through a quick theology of suffering at 11:50 P.M., or 1:00 A.M. on the east coast. We did do a previous Secret Church on suffering so I would point you there and will just do an overview.

Now there was a day when his sons and daughters were eating and drinking wine in their oldest brother's house, and there came a messenger to Job and said, "The oxen were plowing and the donkeys feeding beside them, and the Sabeans fell upon them and took them and struck down the servants with the edge of the sword, and I alone have escaped to tell you." While he was yet speaking, there came another and said, "The fire of God fell from heaven and burned up the sheep and the servants and consumed them, and I alone have escaped to tell you." While he was yet speaking, there came another and said, "The Chaldeans formed three groups and made a raid on the camels and took them and struck down the servants with the edge of the sword, and I alone have escaped to tell you." While he was yet speaking, there came another and said, "Your sons and daughters were eating and drinking wine in their oldest brother's house, and behold, a great wind came across the wilderness and struck the four corners of the house, and it fell upon the young people, and they are dead, and I alone have escaped to tell you." Then Job arose and tore his robe and his head and fell on the ground and worshiped. And he said, "Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked shall I return. The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord." In all this Job did not sin or charge God with wrong (Job 1:13–22).

If we're going to deny and refuse the Prosperity Gospel and hold fast to the true gospel, then our hold on that true gospel will be tested in the middle of suffering. That is why I want to exhort you to trust God in the middle of suffering. This isn't just theoretical or theological. I realize that some—likely many—of you are there right now, in this room and other places, and are walking through suffering. Truth be told, some of you might be thinking, "I wouldn't mind some prosperity coming my way in the form of healing, relief, health or help in the middle of this trial or that struggle."

I think about good friends of ours who are here tonight in this room. I had the opportunity to see and hug them as soon as I got here—the Beans: Carla, Joanna, Daniel and David. This is a bitter-sweet Secret Church because one of my closest friends—particularly over the years I pastored at Brook Hills—was Jonathon Bean. If you've been a part of Secret Church before, you know he has been an instrumental

part of Secret Church. He has often times been the one sharing about persecution and suffering. He has often times led that portion of the night.

Even focusing tonight on Malaysia, I was reminded that I first went to Malaysia on a trip with Jonathon as he was leading us to focus on the unreached and persecuted there.

Jonathon struggled for years with a brain tumor. His condition started to worsen over the summer. Back in August, I was flying back into the country and heard he wasn't doing well, so I got off the plane in Atlanta and switched the flight and went over to Birmingham instead of going up to northern Virginia. I went up to his house and saw Carla and the kids. I was able to sit by Jonathon's bedside and talk with him for about three hours. He whispered most of the time. It took a lot of energy for him to have a conversation, but we reminisced, laughed, cried, prayed and talked about Scripture, family and missions.

There was one point when I had to step out so the palliative care people could talk with him and he could sign some papers, basically giving them a release to do whatever they needed to do. I came back in while they were setting up a bed for him in his room, and he just looked at me and whispered, "David, God is good."

He told me that he had called his kids in the room earlier in the day—they are 14, 12 and nine—to explain to them what it means to bring in hospice for their dad. He looked at his kids—who were crying with him—and he told them, "God is good." A few weeks after that, Jonathon went to be with the Lord.

Carla and kids, I really miss your dad. I know you do too.

I'm guessing a lot of people in this room have gone through a variety of things over the past year. Maybe you're going through something right now, all kinds of suffering. I would like to exhort you with Jonathon Bean's words: "God is good."

Those aren't just Jonathon's words. They are Job's words. When he heard about all his possessions being destroyed and all his kids dying, he arose and tore his robe. Then his head fell on the ground, worshiped and said, "Naked I came from my mother's womb. Naked shall I return. The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away. Blessed be the name of the Lord."

The rest of this good, hard, raw and helpful Bible book shows us that God uses suffering in all kinds of ways to refine our faith.

For God speaks in one way, and in two, though man does not perceive it. In a dream, in a vision of the night, when deep sleep falls on men, while they slumber on their beds, then he opens the ears of men and terrifies them with warnings, that he may turn man aside from his deed and conceal pride from a man; he keeps back his soul from the pit, his life from perishing by the sword (Job 33:14–18).

Behold, God does all these things, twice, three times, with a man, to bring back [a man's] soul from the pit, that he may be lighted with the light of life (Job 33:30).

God uses suffering to reveal His glory.

Behold, in this you are not right. I will answer you, for God is greater than man. Why do you contend against him, saying, "He will answer none of man's words"? (Job 33:12–13).

The book of Job shows us how God reveals His glory in creation.

Behold, God is exalted in his power; who is a teacher like him? Who has prescribed for him his way, or who can say, "You have done wrong"? Remember to extol his work, of which men have sung. All mankind has looked on it; man beholds it from afar. Behold, God is great, and we know him not; the number of his years is unsearchable. For he draws up the drops of water; they distill his mist in rain, which the skies pour down and drop on mankind abundantly. Can anyone understand the spreading of the clouds, the thunderings of his pavilion? Behold, he scatters his lightning about him and covers the roots of the sea. For by these he judges peoples; he gives food in abundance. He covers his hands with the lightning and commands it to strike the mark. Its crashing declares his presence; the cattle also declare that he rises (Job 36:22–33).

God reveals His glory through His Word.

In a dream, in a vision of the night, when deep sleep falls on men, while they slumber on their beds, then he opens the ears of men and terrifies them with warnings, that he may turn man aside from his deed and conceal pride from a man (Job 33:15–16).

It also shows us how God reveals His glory in our pain.

Man is also rebuked with pain on his bed and with continual strife in his bones, so that his life loathes bread, and his appetite the choicest food. His flesh is so wasted away that it cannot be seen, and his bones that were not seen stick out. His soul draws near the pit, and his life to those who bring death. If there be for him an angel, a mediator, one of the thousand, to declare to man what is right for him, and he is merciful to him, and says, "Deliver him from going down into the pit; I have found a ransom; let his flesh become fresh with youth; let him return to the days of his youthful vigor"; then man prays to God, and he accepts him; he sees his face with a shout of joy, and he restores to man his righteousness (Job 33:19–26).

"God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pains: it is His megaphone to rouse a deaf world" (C.S. Lewis).

God reveals His power and His justice.

Therefore, hear me, you men of understanding: far be it from God that he should do wickedness, and from the Almighty that he should do wrong. For according to the work of a man he will repay him, and according to his ways he will make it befall him. Of a truth, God will not do wickedly, and the Almighty will not pervert justice (Job 34:10–12).

God reveals His goodness and His mercy.

He delivers the afflicted by their affliction and opens their ear by adversity. He also allured you out of distress into a broad place where there was no cramping, and what was set on your table was full of fatness (Job 36:15–16).

God is good. God uses suffering to teach us to rely on Him.

Who gave him charge over the earth, and who laid on him the whole world? If he should set his heart to it and gather to himself his spirit and his breath, all flesh would perish together, and man would return to dust (Job 34:13–15).

God uses suffering to bring us to repent of and renounce all sin in our lives—to hate sin all the more that’s at the root of all suffering in the world.

But you are full of the judgment on the wicked; judgment and justice seize you. Beware lest wrath entice you into scoffing and let not the greatness of the ransom turn you aside. Will your cry for help avail to keep you from distress, or all the force of your strength? Do not long for the night, when peoples vanish in their place. Take care; do not turn to iniquity, for this you have chosen rather than affliction (Job 36:17–21).

God uses suffering to lead us—and others—to the reward that is found in Him alone.

I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you (Job 42:5).

I rejoiced in the Lord greatly that now at length you have revived your concern for me. You were indeed concerned for me, but you had no opportunity. Not that I am speaking of being in need, for I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content. I know how to be brought low, and I know how to abound. In any and every circumstance, I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need. I can do all things through him who strengthens me (Philippians 4:10–13).

That’s Job’s conclusion: “I’ve heard of You. Now my eyes see You.” Mark it down that the God Who is sufficient in life proves more than sufficient in death.

I wasn’t in Birmingham when Jonathon went to be with the Lord, but quickly heard the story about how he was surrounded by Carla, their kids, family, friends and brothers and sisters in Christ. One of those friends called me immediately after and told me they were gathered around his bed praying, reading the Word and singing. They could tell things were getting close and they sang “Because He Lives.” They got to that last verse, singing in English and Spanish:

And then one day, I'll cross the river
I'll fight life's final war with pain
And then, as death gives way to victory
I'll see the lights of glory and I'll know He reigns

They sung that last chorus and Jonathon took his last breath.

All glory be to God when health and wealth fail you in this world. God will never, ever fail you.
He will lead you to a reward that is not of this world; that is far beyond this world.

Proclaim that gospel. Don't proclaim or believe a gospel that promises prosperity in this life. That is not from God. It's a fraudulent imitation of the gospel that deceives millions and millions of people right now.

Proclaim the true gospel. Live the true gospel. Give your possessions. Embrace trials and even suffering. Point to God. The God Who is love is better than life itself. Call people to be satisfied in Him forever.

Let's pray.

God, I praise You for the eternal reward that's found in the true gospel. God, we pray together right now for all kinds of people all around the world who are being sold a counterfeit gospel that seeks health and wealth in this world. God, we pray that You would take the blinders off. Help people to see that You are better than all the best things this life has to offer that take our very breath away. As long as we have You, we have everything our souls need. To live is Christ. To die is gain. You are gain, O God. When everything is gone, we will have gain in You.

We pray for the spread of that gospel. We pray that You would help us not to be suddenly taken in by the Prosperity Gospel. Help us not to live like we believe the Prosperity Gospel. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.

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All Scriptures quoted directly from the English Standard Version unless otherwise noted.

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