

## THE PROBLEM WITH THE PROSPERITY GOSPEL

**Yes, God wants to bless us, but not always in the ways we expect.**

**T**he exuberant worship and prosperity theology of the New Pentecostal Churches have attracted Africa's urban, upwardly mobile youth. According to Ghanaian seminary professor J. Kwabena Asamoah-Gyadu, in the NPCs, "health, success, and ever-soaring profits in business are coveted, cherished, and publicly flaunted as signs of God's favor. In this new type of Christianity, success and wealth are the only genuine marks of faith." This prosperity gospel resonates with a traditional African religious outlook that seeks to acquire spiritual power for personal gain, although it has left the poor and disenfranchised behind.



**Scripture:** Genesis 13:2; 14:14–15:6; Job 42:10–17; Psalm 73; Philippians 4:10–13

**Based on:** "Did Jesus Wear Designer Robes?" by J. Kwabena Asamoah-Gyadu, Christianity Today, November 2009



## Part 1 IDENTIFY THE CURRENT ISSUE

*Note to leader: Provide each person with the "Did Jesus Wear Designer Robes?" from CHRISTIANITY TODAY, included at the end of this study.*

The desire for blessing and control over life's circumstances is not uniquely African, and it explains the prosperity gospel's appeal worldwide. And the prosperity gospel itself is not completely wrong; like many heresies, some of its emphases are not so much wrong as they are out of balance with the whole teaching of Scripture. As the article points out, "Scripture consistently warns that the pursuit of worldly interests can lead us to neglect the deeper values of the kingdom of God." The gospel of Jesus Christ glorifies neither poverty nor prosperity, but offers deliverance, forgiveness, grace, and restoration, whatever our circumstances.

### Discussion Starters:

- [Q] Why do you think prosperity teaching so easily gains a foothold in Christianity?
- [Q] What has been your own experience with prosperity teaching?
- [Q] What responsibility do we have to our Christian brothers and sisters in other parts of the world, and how can we be helpful to them?

## Part 2 DISCOVER THE ETERNAL PRINCIPLES

### Teaching Point One: God is our shield and our very great reward.

Read Genesis 13:2; 14:14–15:6.

Prosperity teachers often point to the patriarch Abraham as the quintessential example of a faithful believer materially blessed by God. And he was indeed blessed. As Genesis 13:2 notes, "Abram [later Abraham] had become very wealthy in livestock and in silver and gold." But Abraham's focus was not on what he could get *from* God, but on what he could give to God. After the Lord gave him a great military victory, Abraham presented a tenth of the spoils to Melchizedek, a priest of God Most High. The great patriarch wanted to feather God's nest, not his own. He demonstrated by his actions and his petitions that he was God-focused, not self-focused.



**[Q]** Abraham was wealthy (13:2). What do we see in this passage of Abraham's attitude toward his wealth?

**[Q]** After rescuing Lot and his relatives, what do we observe of the patriarch's attitude toward God and people (14:17–24)?

**[Q]** God came to Abraham in a vision (15:1), and told him, "Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield, your very great reward." How is God our reward apart from material blessings?

Abraham "believed the Lord, and he credited it to him as righteousness" (15:6). The New Testament sees this as a prime Old Testament example of righteousness by faith (Rom. 4). Yes, Abraham would be blessed in this world, but the primary blessing is the relationship and right standing he had with God.

**Teaching Point Two: One sign of God's care for his people is his material provision for their needs.**

The righteous man Job faced one calamity after another, attacked by Satan with the Lord's permission (Job 1:1–2:10). Job had done nothing wrong to deserve such trouble, but his life was to become a testing ground for his faith in God. Would he trust and love the Lord despite the removal of his material blessings and earthly relationships? While Job's faith wobbled and his understanding tottered, the man from Uz held on desperately to God, who ultimately vindicated him. Life after death, indeed resurrection, is present in the Hebrew Scriptures, but it is a minor theme. So, like much of the Old Testament, the Book of Job depicts God's favor in decidedly this-worldly terms. And there's nothing wrong with that. Like Job, we can thank God and enjoy our blessings, in this world and the next.

Read Job 42:10–17.

**[Q]** After all his troubles, Job's fortunes and remaining relationships are restored (vv. 10–12). If you've ever experienced a significant financial loss, how did you respond to God during that time?

- If you regained it all, what was your response then? Why?

**[Q]** Job lost seven sons and three daughters (see chapter 1). God gives him the same number of each again (vv. 13–15), indicating a full restoration. The three new daughters are even named in the Scripture (highly unusual for the culture), indicating their value and worth. And yet Job's losses remain, in his heart if not in his personal ledger. Obviously new children can never replace the ones who died, but how do our losses deepen our appreciation for our gains?

**[Q]** Job's blessings extend for decades and for generations, and then they come to an end in this world (vv. 16–17)—and so with ours. How does this knowledge prepare you for heaven?

**Optional Activity:** *Ask group members to write down five material blessings and five relational blessings they have experienced and share them with the group. Discuss how these blessings are to be enjoyed but not clung to.*

### **Teaching Point Three: We cannot assume that our personal circumstances correlate to our relationship with God.**

Read Psalm 73.

Prosperity preaching has a long history. The Puritans believed that you can know whether God has chosen you for salvation by certain signs, such as obedience to God's commands. In extreme forms, some held that material prosperity is also a sign of God's election. This view is not all that different from the one espoused by the Old Testament writer Asaph. In Psalm 73, Asaph, a leader in one of David's Levitical choirs, describes his crisis of faith after considering "the prosperity of the wicked" (v. 3). His question is simple but profound: If this world's blessings come to those who love and obey God, what are suffering saints to make of the contented, carefree lives of scoffers? Asaph reminds us that what we see in this world is, at best, a partial accounting of the Lord's balance sheet, and that we must await the next life to see good fully rewarded and evil punished.

**[Q]** Asaph affirms at the outset that God is fair (v. 1). Why is this essential as we consider his ways? What gives us confidence in God's fairness?

**[Q]** Then Asaph confesses his envy toward the arrogant (vv. 2–3). Using the Hebrew poetic structure of parallelism, he likens his coveting of what the ungodly have to nearly slipping on a path and falling while climbing. What do these metaphors tell us about envy?

Looking at the wicked (vv. 4–12), Asaph is vexed by the blessings he sees in their lives: They are healthy, unworried, and proud. Unimpeded by God and ungrateful recipients of his blessings, they are violent, callous, conceited, malicious, boastful, arrogant, and covetous. Seeing their blessings, the people turn to the blasphemers. Adding insult to injury, the wicked even "increase in wealth." How like our day! It often seems as if the ungodly still "lay claim to heaven" and "take possession of the earth" (v. 9).



**[Q]** Most of us struggle with envy. How do you deal with that sin in your life?

Asaph, seeing the disparity between the lives of the wicked and his own, begins to despair, believing that his faithfulness brought no benefit. Such thoughts “plagued” and “punished” him, and he felt oppressed by them, though he kept silent about them. Then he enters the temple sanctuary and begins to see the bigger picture (vv. 13–17).

**[Q]** How does keeping our eyes on what others have weaken our faith, and how does looking at God strengthen it? How can we begin to do this?

**[Q]** Confessing his envy, Asaph compares and contrasts the final destinies of the righteous and the wicked (vv. 18–28). He even admits God’s presence here and now is irreplaceable, and that worldly blessings are not all they’re cracked up to be: “earth has nothing I desire besides you” (v. 25). Many believers see God’s judgment as an uncomfortable doctrine best avoided. Yet Asaph finds it strangely comforting. Why?

**Teaching Point Four: We can be content whether we have a lot or a little, because the Lord loves us either way.**

Read Philippians 4:10–13.

The Book of Philippians is a thank you letter from Paul the apostle to a beloved congregation for supporting him while he was a prisoner in Rome. While the natural inclination would be to distance themselves from someone who had encountered such trouble (and perhaps to doubt the God who allowed it to happen), the Philippians knew that even persecution can be a sign of God’s favor, and they faithfully stood with Paul when others didn’t. Paul is overjoyed, not with their gift, but with their faith, in good times and in bad.

**[Q]** Paul rejoices upon receiving their gift because it shows their concern (v. 10). When was the last time you allowed someone to help you? How did it make you feel? Why is admitting our need so hard in this culture?

**[Q]** How much would you pay for “the secret of being content”? Paul says contentment is available “through him who gives me strength” (v. 13). How do we tap into or appropriate God’s contentment-supplying strength? Share examples.

### Part 3 **APPLY YOUR FINDINGS**

The prosperity gospel, whether across the world or in our own hearts, is attractive because it taps into basic human drives for security, success, and happiness. And these goals are not wrong in themselves. As our heavenly Father, God indeed desires to bless his children, but he knows better than we do what we need—and what we don't need—and when.

While we may or may not need more stuff, we definitely need more of him, and he is happy to meet this basic need. God's presence is worth more than all the spoils this world can offer. All the wealth and relationships of this life have an expiration date, but our God will last forever, with eternal pleasures at his right hand (see Ps. 16:11). By God's sheer grace we get a foretaste of these pleasures in this life: material blessings (sometimes), his guidance, his presence, and his contentment. But we were designed for another world, and our ultimate joy will be consummated only there.

In the meantime, we must not expect God to fulfill every desire of our hearts now, or we will face constant disappointment. Instead, we ought to be about the business of joyfully meeting the needs of others, as Jesus did, knowing that ours will one day be fully met: "For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich" (2 Cor. 8:9).

#### **Action Points (to do on your own this week):**

- *Come up with a simple, achievable plan to meet the needs of someone else—whether at a food pantry, through helping an elderly neighbor with yard work, or some other ministry. And then be prepared to give a reason for your hope (1 Pet. 3:15).*
- *Paul does not rejoice in the Philippians' gift itself, because he has learned to be content "whatever the circumstances," whether in need or in plenty (Phil. 4:10–12a). Our contentment is not to be tied up in where we are (in or out of prison) or the stuff we have (gift or no gift). Look at your heart. Can you honestly say your contentment with life—and with God—is the same, whether you have much or little in this world? If not, why not?*

— *Stan Guthrie is author of* Missions in the Third Millennium: 21 Key Trends for the 21st Century. *A CT editor at large, he writes a column for* [BreakPoint.org](http://BreakPoint.org) *and blogs at* [stanguthrie.com](http://stanguthrie.com).



## RECOMMENDED RESOURCES

📖 Check out the following Bible studies at: [ChristianBibleStudies.com](http://ChristianBibleStudies.com)

📖 **Money Issues:** These six Bible studies can help you grow in your relationship to God and get practical, biblical perspectives on managing money, tithing, and generosity.

📖 **Money & the Christian:** Money can put us in bondage. God wants to free us from this bondage and help us put money in its proper place by considering it his rather than ours. This six-session course will challenge the way you see money.

📖 **Money Matters 101:** Few things are so dangerous to our spiritual lives as the insidious pull of earthly riches. How many of us hunger and thirst for righteousness as we do for comfort, power, and control? This is a complicated subject because the pull of money is so subtle. This 12-session course will help you face the hold that money has on us and find joy in amassing heavenly wealth instead.

📖 [www.generousgiving.org](http://www.generousgiving.org). Biblical perspectives on faithful stewardship.

📖 **Money Isn't God: So Why Is the Church Worshiping It?**, by John White (IVP, 1993). How materialism has infiltrated the church, and what to do about it.

📖 **Passing the Plate: Why American Christians Don't Give Away More Money**, by Christian Smith and Michael O. Emerson, with Patricia Snell (Oxford, 2008). A look at the data.

📖 **The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity** (Oxford, 2007). An upbeat analysis of the transformation of the church as its center of gravity moves from the West to Asia, Africa, and Latin America.

# DID JESUS WEAR DESIGNER ROBES?

The gospel preached in Africa's New Pentecostal Churches ends up leaving the poor more impoverished than ever.

By J. Kwabena Asamoah-Gyadu

The dramatic growth of non-Western Christianity across Africa is due largely to the flourishing New Pentecostal Churches. Why has the prosperity gospel, imported from the West and preached in these churches, found such fertile soil in Africa? In the second installment of the Global Conversation, Ghanaian seminary professor Kwabena Asamoah-Gyadu explains how these churches' peculiar emphases resonate with tribal religious backgrounds. Unfortunately, the prosperity gospel leaves behind the rural poor and other marginalized people who have little access to wealth and success. The gospel of Jesus Christ, on the other hand, glorifies neither poverty nor prosperity, but instead offers deliverance, forgiveness, grace, and restoration.

**F**OR THOUSANDS of believers in Ghana, Jericho Hour is the place to be if you are looking for a breakthrough. Founded in 1998, the prayer meeting—where, according to its slogan, “giant solutions await your giant problems”—is hosted by Archbishop Nicholas Duncan-Williams and his Action Chapel International in the Prayer Cathedral on Spintex Road in Accra. On Thursday mornings 3,000 people make their way to the cathedral, where they are encouraged to pray for breakthroughs in business dealings and employment, international travel, money to build houses and buy cars, help with finding a spouse or bearing a child, and, when experiencing setbacks, vengeance on those spiritually responsible.

Founded by Duncan-Williams in 1979 as Christian Action Faith Ministry International, the church was the first of a new stream of Pentecostal churches that have since flourished in Ghana and across Africa. Duncan-Williams's mentor was the late Nigerian Benson Idahosa, who, before he died in the late '90s, conferred upon himself the titles “Professor” and “Archbishop.” Duncan-Williams's own transition—from “Pastor” to “The Rev. Dr.” to “Bishop” and now “Archbishop”—reflects his growing influence, though these elevations must be understood as vivid examples of the blessings he promises to those who exercise faith.

Duncan-Williams's “blessings” are not just nominal. Though his 26-year marriage ended in 2005 (after American pastor T. D. Jakes tried to mediate much-publicized efforts at reconciliation), he married a prominent African American diplomat turned entrepreneur in 2008. Their lifestyle, including a home many describe as palatial, might not be exceptional in the United States, but in Ghana, lavish displays of wealth are usually the domain of politicians believed to achieve their material success by stealing from the public purse. Rumors about where the couple's wealth comes from are probably inevitable.

## THE MARKS OF FAITH

The New Pentecostal Churches (NPCs) of Africa emphasize prosperity of all kinds. Wealth, health, success, and ever-soaring profits in business are coveted, cherished, and publicly

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flaunted as signs of God's favor. In this new type of Christianity, success and wealth are the only genuine marks of faith.

Just as Christian movements elsewhere in the world have their favorite Scripture verses, the NPC movement finds support from selected passages. Prosperity preachers quote 3 John 2: "Dear friend, I pray that you may enjoy good health and that all may go well with you, even as your soul is getting along well." The wish for general well-being is interpreted to mean not only that God will give believers their basic needs but also that they will live in comfort and luxury. Abraham, who was rich in cattle, sheep, and gold (Gen. 13:2), is commonly cited, with special emphasis on his willingness to pay tithes to Melchizedek, a model for the "sowing of seed" that prosperity churches encourage. Since the apostle Paul tells us that the blessing of Abraham has come to the Gentiles (Gal. 3:14), why shouldn't Christians enjoy similar wealth and influence?

The prosperity movement also taps into deep roots in traditional African religions. The prayer vigils and healing camps are the Christian equivalent of traditional shrines where people go to have their destinies revealed and spiritual

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problems solved. The prosperity message resonates with African religious ideas because of the traditional belief in mystical causality. Tithes, like prayers, are ritual actions that are supposed to make things happen.

African traditions strongly believe in the existence of invisible forces, especially malevolent powers, and in the efficacy of ritual action to fight the forces of evil. When prosperity is lacking, African church leaders most commonly explain it by pointing to demonic forces, curses, and witchcraft rather than to an individual's sin. Churches offer "anointing for vengeance" to help dismantle spiritual traps set by envious family members and relations. Many charismatic church services include prayers of imprecation of sometimes alarming vengefulness. During one church service, after pronouncing curses on family members responsible for their "lack of progress in life," worshipers were asked to move their right leg forward, stamp the floor, and shout, "From today I step out of poverty in the name of Jesus."

Charismatic African Christians did not necessarily set out to create a contextualized "African Christianity." But the ritualized exchange of tithes and blessings is markedly similar to the orientation of traditional African religious sacrifices. The amounts that leaders demand can be very specific. In a high-energy revival at Ghana's Charismatic Evangelistic Ministry, one evangelist proclaimed that those who wanted to be blessed by God had to cough up US\$240. How did he arrive at that figure? "God is going to provide a 24-hour miracle in the lives of those with the ability to pay," he explained. Apparently the rate for these pre-Reformation-style indulgences was \$10 per

hour. I left the service wondering what would happen to the many Ghanaians who do not have that sort of money.

### LITTLE ROOM FOR THE POOR

On the whole, I take a positive view of charismatic Christianity, including aspects of its emphasis on prosperity. Pastor Mensa Otobil of Ghana's International Central Gospel Church, for example, exhorts people to do something about their impoverished circumstances. Some of them offer genuinely encouraging testimonies, like the member of Otobil's church who bought a new car using three months' savings when he stopped drinking. These churches have clearly contributed to the growth of non-Western Christianity with dynamic, expressive, and exuberant worship styles that appeal to upwardly mobile urban youth.

But precisely because of its emphasis on material wealth, charismatic Christianity in Africa has largely remained an urban phenomenon. Its message has little to offer the many young people who peddle gum, candies, bananas, peanuts, and fried pastries to eke out a living. For Africans, viable religion has always meant that which leads to power, strength, vitality, and abundance. But the NPCs aggressively pursue what can only be called North American levels of materialism; indeed, the prosperity move-

ment originated with the Word of Faith movement of North American televangelists like Kenneth and Gloria Copeland, Mike Murdock, and Kenneth Hagin.

It is not uncommon for pastors who want new vehicles to claim that God directed them to "sow" their old vehicle in the life of someone else, usually a church member. A few days after the divine direction is carried out, a more luxurious vehicle appears, and members proudly point to it as a sign of God's blessing on the pastor's life and ministry.

Just as these churches make little room for the poor, they also leave little room for theological wrestling with the cost of discipleship, failure, pain, and disappointment, all of which are the lot of millions in Africa. One Ghanaian church changed its name from "Calvary Road" to "Harvesters International" because, as a leading member explained to me, the word *Calvary* sounded too negative to members. Until recently, some charismatic Christians would not even celebrate Good Friday because they associated it with pain and suffering.

For those disenchanted with the staid, silent, and theologically orthodox Christianity of the historic mission churches, the prosperity gospel offers an attractive alternative: positives, possibilities, and success. To seek these things is not out of place. "The house of the Lord" has always been a place where people seek God's help with spiritual and material needs. The problem is a one-sided approach to religion that leaves the poor, the marginalized, and those who have not succeeded without any grounds for faith in God. What testimony can the poor and wretched of the earth offer? They can only assume that they lack the faith ascribed to Jabez, or that they are

cheating God by not faithfully tithing.

Where the gospel of success is not working, people look to supernatural interventions. In African thought, that which is primarily real is the spiritual, and the ubiquitous and competitive forces of globalization mean the field of demonic activity has widened considerably to include, for example, immigration and consular officers. Many Africans see international travel as a gateway to riches, and many prosperity preachers like Duncan-Williams have homes in the West and arrange for their children to be born in Western hospitals to secure dual citizenship.

NPC prophets specialize in praying for visas for supplicants. Not long ago, one appeared in the early morning at the Italian Embassy in Accra, preaching to applicants in the long queue, assuring them of God's

power to help them secure visas. He anointed each plastic envelope containing supporting documents with olive oil for what he called "favor in the eyes of the consular officer." It is not uncommon to hear pastors talk about receiving visions in which angels distribute Royal Dutch Airlines and British Airways tickets to people in their congregations. In some churches, prayers for international travel now rank second only to healing. And when the alternative is a dangerous sea voyage from Libya to Spain, why not?

### GRACE THROUGH SUFFERING

The gospel of Jesus Christ—with its promise of liberation, deliverance, forgiveness, grace, and restoration—can never be a gospel of poverty. But just as the Bible does not glorify poverty, neither does it glorify greed. Scripture consistently warns that the pursuit of worldly interests can lead us to neglect the deeper values of the kingdom of God. Yet this is exactly what happens in the biblical interpretations favored by prosperity teachers. While prosperity preachers invoke the blessing of Abraham that Paul refers to in Galatians 3:14 to justify prayers for material wealth, I have yet to hear one include the second half of the verse: "so that by faith we might receive the promise of the Spirit." The significance of Pentecost for Paul as a mighty act of God, in which the Holy Spirit brings the nations together through common witness, is overlooked.

To conclude, as preachers like Duncan-Williams do, that "Jesus wore designer robes"—since the Bible says his robe was seamless and that the soldiers at the foot of the cross gambled for it—is to read into Scripture what is simply not there. Even the donkey that Jesus rode into Jerusalem has been reinvented in sermons as the Cadillac or Mercedes-Benz

of the time. This is simply teachers sacralizing greed and covetousness. Jesus responded to this attitude when he told the company of his disciples, following the request of James and John for privileged places in the kingdom, that it was "not so with you" (Matt. 20:26).

High-profile divorces aside, one rarely hears stories of those whose efforts in life have failed despite paying tithes and offerings. The believers whose testimonies consist of grace to continue in marriages where one spouse is an alcoholic, or to grieve the loss of a loved one with God-given strength to cope, go unheard.

God's purpose in difficult situations is not always to take us *out* of them but to take us *through* them. In the words of the psalmist, "Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me" (Ps. 23:4); and, "My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever" (Ps. 73:26). Paul himself had a "thorn in the flesh" that was not taken away. He lived with it not by naming and claiming, but by grace.

"Bolstered up by what has happened to us and by the testimonies of others," Tom Smail writes in the book *Charismatic Renewal*, "we can easily come to see ourselves as living in a world of supernatural power that leads us from triumph to triumph, where the weak, desolate sufferer of Calvary has been left far behind, or at any rate [has] ceased to dominate the scene." The NPCs have changed the face of African Christianity for good in many ways. But they have some distance to travel before presenting a message that is truly representative of Jesus Christ and his Cross. In the words of Bernard of Clairvaux: "Jesus, thou joy of loving hearts / Thou fount of life, thou light of men; / From the best bliss that earth imparts, / We turn unfilled to thee again." ☩

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