

GOOD, BAD, OR INDIFFERENT?
WEALTH ACCORDING TO THE OLD TESTAMENT by V. Philips Long

I. Introduction

Years ago I heard it said that wealth is a blessing according to the Old Testament but a curse according to the New. This idea has struck me as insufficiently attentive to the continuity between the testaments. In what follows I shall explore briefly the subject of wealth according to the OT, in the hope of suggesting a more balanced view of the biblical testimony.

In this effort, I would like to adopt a two-pronged approach analogous to the procedures of modern archaeologists. One prong is the surface survey; the other is the in-depth excavation of a limited area. In the former, the archaeologist travels quickly over the terrain simply collecting what can be found on the surface. In the latter, s/he sinks a trench into a particular piece of ground with the hope of extrapolating from that one sample some general features of the larger site.

We begin with a surface survey of the biblical landscape, noting four prominent features (from among others, of course). We then shall sink a trench in the area of the OT that offers the most practical *personal* instruction¹ on our topic—namely, the wisdom book of Proverbs.

II. Surface survey

The first thing we notice as we begin travelling the biblical landscape is that it offers little refuge to those who advocate asceticism, for...

A. Material things and the material world are good!

From the very beginning, the created world, the material world, is seen as a gift of God to his human creatures, and as such, is good, even very good! Six times in Genesis 1 alone, the world that God creates is pronounced “good,” culminating in the summary of v. 31: “God saw all that he had made, and it was very good.”² The Bible nowhere denigrates the material world as somehow unworthy, nor the physical body and its needs as somehow evil. As one writer has observed,

God created the human body, and therefore it has valid creaturely needs; moreover, it possesses a vast capacity for enjoying sensations and for achievements with the use of material things. The Bible seems to take for granted and to approve the building of houses, the herding of cattle, the making of musical instruments, etc.—all of which make use of the material elements of the creation.³

¹ Issues of corporate social justice are addressed more directly in other places of the OT (e.g., the legal and prophetic materials), although the more individualistic instruction of the wisdom books also carries implications in these spheres.

² Unless otherwise indicated, all scripture quotations are from the NIV.

³ C. J. Vos, “Riches,” in *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley et al., 4 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 4:186.

The material world, then, was created good, and to be enjoyed. But no sooner do we note this first feature of the OT landscape, than we are confronted with a second, more sombre one:

B. Sin distorts the good and disrupts relationships—with God, with others, and with things.

I have always been intrigued by the “tree of the knowledge of good and evil” (Gen 2:9, 17) and the test that it represented for Adam and Eve. God forbade the first couple to eat of the tree, but why? Did he simply want to keep them in the dark, cognitively ignorant of evil? This was surely the Serpent’s spin on the tree (Gen 3:5). We must remember, however, that the Serpent, the Father of Lies, is hardly the best guide for our interpretation. Leaving aside exegetical intricacies at this point, let me say that the tree in question might well be called the tree of “moral autonomy,”⁴ representing the right to *choose* what would count as good and evil. Only God has that right, and the first couple’s arrogation of that divine prerogative had disastrous consequences. Tension and dysfunction were introduced into the relationship between humans and God, between humans and humans, and also into humanity’s relationship with its environment, the material world: “Cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat of it all the days of your life. It will produce thorns and thistles for you, and you will eat the plants of the field” (Gen 3:17-18).

So the world that was created good, even very good, became a fallen world.

And...

C. In a fallen world, even blessings can become snares.

This feature is perhaps nowhere more poignantly illustrated than in the life of King Solomon. When asked by God in 1 Kings 3 what he would like God to do for him, Solomon unselfishly asked for wisdom to rule well. Pleased that Solomon had not asked for long life or wealth or the death of his enemies, God promised to bless him also with riches and honour (3:10-14). Given these bountiful blessings, we are surprised to find, as the story progresses, that Solomon gradually became greedy and proud and ultimately turned his back on the Source of his initial blessing (11:1-9). Even Solomon, with all his wisdom, allowed himself to be ensnared by his very blessings.⁵ In a fallen world, becoming rich and famous is not necessarily safe.

A fourth and final point that our surface survey of the biblical landscape encounters is this:

⁴ Favouring this view is, e.g., V. P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 1-17*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 165-66, q.v. for further discussion.

⁵ For an insightful reading of the Solomon narrative, see I. W. Provan, *1 and 2 Kings*, NIBC (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1995), 23-102.

D. What we have, we have from God and hold in trust.

The Bible does not endorse personal property in an absolute or permanent sense. Instead, it clearly declares that “the earth is the LORD’s and all that is in it, the world, and those who live in it” (Ps 24:1). The property rights of God’s people must be understood within the larger frame of *his* ultimate ownership. This dynamic comes to expression in numerous ways in the OT. In Leviticus 25:39-41, for instance, we read:

If one of your countrymen becomes poor among you and sells himself to you, do not make him work as a slave. He is to be treated as a hired worker or a temporary resident among you; he is to work for you until the Year of Jubilee. Then he and his children are to be released, and he will go back to his own clan and to the property of his forefathers.

The point of this and similar regulations seems to have been to establish safeguards against a system in which those who fell into poverty would never get a second chance, or those who succeeded would never need to look back. In other words, failure was not to be fatal, and success was not to be final. The system itself was designed not to discourage industry and effort, nor to encourage folly, but to limit the tendency for the rich to get richer and the poor to get poorer.⁶

III. Excavation: Proverbs

The book of Proverbs has much to say about how wealth is to be gained, viewed, and handled. As we dig into the text, one of the first things we discover is that...

A. Having money proves nothing.

Wealth cannot simply be assumed either to prove or to disprove the Lord’s blessing. Of course, ...

1. Wealth can be the Lord's blessing.

Proverbs 10:22 states: “The blessing of the LORD brings wealth, and he adds no trouble to it.” And Prov 13:21-22 adds: “Misfortune pursues the sinner, but prosperity is the reward of the righteous. A good man leaves an inheritance for his children’s children, but a sinner’s wealth is stored up for the righteous.”⁷

How are such proverbs to be understood? Does a “good man” invariably leave an inheritance for his children’s children? Perhaps we should consider the character of proverbs. I used to think of proverbs as “general truths,” until a student who had lived and worked in Mexico challenged me with the thought that some proverbs, such as the ones that link industry and prosperity, do not prove even generally true in some contexts. I now believe that a proverb is best understood not as a general truth, nor as a promise, and certainly not as an absolute prediction, but simply as *a wise saying about a particular*

⁶ See, e.g., Ron Sider’s discussion of the Year of Jubilee and the Sabbatical Year in *Just Generosity: A Vision for Overcoming Poverty in America* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999), 61-70.

⁷ Cf. also Prov 3:16; 8:12-21 (both of which view wisdom as bringing “riches and honour, enduring wealth and prosperity”); cf. Eccl 5:19 (contrast 6:2).

*slice of life.*⁸ For instance, it is always wise to work honestly and well, but doing so does not guarantee any particular outcome. Life is complex, consisting of multiple “slices” that intersect in innumerable ways, and so no single proverb tells the whole tale. Having wealth may well result from the Lord’s blessing, but there are counter-balancing proverbs that insist that...

2. *Wealth does not prove the Lord's blessing.*

Proverbs 11:16 suggests that wealth may as easily indicate ruthless treatment of others. If we glance elsewhere in the OT, we discover that prosperity may as easily characterize the wicked as the righteous:

But as for me, my feet had almost slipped; I had nearly lost my foothold. For I envied the arrogant when I saw the prosperity of the wicked. ... This is what the wicked are like — always carefree, they increase in wealth. —Psalm 73:2-3,12

Wealth, prosperity, and abundance—all good things in themselves—tell us nothing of the character of those who have them. God’s blessing may yield wealth, but so may human ruthlessness, wickedness, or any number of other human vices.⁹ Wealth, as such, is value neutral. In essence, then, ...

3. *The first step in gaining wealth, as in gaining wisdom, must be fear of the of Lord.*

Proverbs 10:2 states: “Ill-gotten treasures are of no value.” This verse forms part of a five verse chiasm that points to the essence of wisdom about wealth.¹⁰ Verses 1 and 5 frame the structure and contrast the wise son and the foolish son. Inside this frame, vv. 2 and 4 focus on treasures and wealth. Verse 2 stresses the worthlessness of wrongly acquired wealth and the great value of righteousness, while its counterpart in v. 4 condemns laziness and commends diligence. The focal centre of the unit, v. 3, stresses the absolute centrality of the Lord in the satisfaction of human needs. Implied in this chiasmic structure—where the emphasis falls on the central element—is the idea that the fear of the Lord is fundamental to a right perspective on wealth.

The book of Proverbs has much to say on the intrinsic value of industry, honesty, and fairness in the acquisition of wealth, but the first step in gaining things, as in gaining wisdom, must be a proper reverence for and understanding of the Lord, and of our ultimate dependence on him.

Yet even when well earned, riches are not necessarily an unmixed blessing. In fact, ...

⁸ On the topic generally, see T. A. Hildebrandt, “Proverb,” in *Cracking Old Testament Codes: A Guide to the Literary Genres of the Old Testament*, ed. D. Brent Sandy and Ronald L. Giese, Jr. (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1995), 233-54.

⁹ E.g., dishonesty (Prov 13:11); oppression of the poor (22:16); charging of exorbitant interest (28:8).

¹⁰ I would recommend looking at these five verses in the Bible to discover the A-B-X-A¹-B¹ structure of their content.

B. Having money poses dangers.

1. Wealth can divert attention from God.

According to the book of Proverbs, having money is as fraught with danger as not having it:

Two things I ask of you, O LORD; do not refuse me before I die: Keep falsehood and lies far from me; give me neither poverty nor riches, but give me only my daily bread. Otherwise, I may have too much and disown you and say, ‘Who is the LORD?’ Or I may become poor and steal, and so dishonor the name of my God. —Prov 30:7-9

One reason that wealth has the power to divert attention from God is that...

2. Wealth promises what it can't deliver.

The allure of wealth is the illusion of security. But the book of Proverbs will have none of that: “Wealth is worthless in the day of wrath, but righteousness delivers from death” (11:4); “Whoever trusts in his riches will fall, but the righteous will thrive like a green leaf” (11:28); “Cast but a glance at riches, and they are gone, for they will surely sprout wings and fly off to the sky like an eagle” (23:5). How absurd to trust in, much less to take pride in wealth. As John Foster so strikingly puts it: “The pride of dying rich raises the loudest laugh in hell.”¹¹

C. Having money imposes obligations.

Matthew Henry writes, “There is a burden of care in getting riches; fear in keeping them; temptation in using them; guilt in abusing them; sorrow in losing them; and a burden of account at last to be given concerning them.” So if having money imposes obligations, what are some of these according to the book of Proverbs? The primary obligation is simply to be generous.

1. Generosity is required by God.

Why? Because “he who oppresses the poor shows contempt for their Maker, but whoever is kind to the needy honors God” (14:31). Generously sharing with those in need is an essential aspect of honouring God, for “rich and poor have this in common: The LORD is the Maker of them all” (22:2). Even “if your enemy is hungry, give him food to eat; if he is thirsty, give him water to drink” (25:21). And let your generosity be genuine, for “like clouds and wind without rain is a man who boasts of gifts he does not give” (25:14).

With the requirement of generosity comes also the encouragement that...

2. Generosity is rewarded by God.

¹¹ Unless otherwise indicated, This and other quotations accompanying this essay are drawn from T. Edwards, *The New Dictionary of Thoughts* (n.p.: Standard Book Company, 1969).

Recalling what we said earlier about proverbs being neither outright promises nor absolute predictions, we may nevertheless be encouraged by wise sayings such as 22:9, “a generous man will himself be blessed, for he shares his food with the poor,” and 28:27, “he who gives to the poor will lack nothing, but he who closes his eyes to them receives many curses.” How often it is observed in life that “One man gives freely, yet gains even more; another withholds unduly, but comes to poverty. A generous man will prosper; he who refreshes others will himself be refreshed” (11:24-25).

Our excavation of Proverbs has found that having money *proves nothing, poses dangers, and imposes obligations*. Finally, we are reminded that...

D. Having money must never be first priority.

1. Many things are more important than money.

The fear of the Lord is more important (15:16); a prudent spouse is more important (19:14); a good name is more important (22:1); integrity is more important (28:6). The list could continue. The point is not that wealth is worthless, but that the acquisition of wealth should never take center-stage in our thinking. Instead, ...

2. Wealth should be a by-product of higher ambitions.

What are some of these higher ambitions? Humility and the fear of the Lord (22:4) might head the list, along with faithfulness (28:20) and even moderation in our work-life (23:4). Placing wealth too high on the list of one’s life-goals is neither wise nor safe.

IV. Conclusion

What, in the end, is the Old Testament’s verdict on the issue of wealth—good, bad, or indifferent? The answer, it seems, is “good, bad, *and* indifferent.” Both our surface survey and our limited excavations in the book of Proverbs suggest that wealth is *good* for what it can provide, *bad* if given too much importance or not conjoined with generosity, and *indifferent* in that it offers neither security nor a validation of right standing with God.

In sum, as Charles Simmons once said, “there is no security against the perils of wealth except in becoming rich toward God.”