

## **SUFFERING AND PROSPERITY**

### **ORIGINAL PERFECTION**

Wherever we look today we see SIN, SICKNESS and POVERTY.

The QUESTION which arises in our minds is this: IS ALL THIS THE WILL OF GOD? HAS THIS STATE ALWAYS PREVAILED?

The ANSWER to both these questions is an UNEQUIVOCAL NO!!!

To examine our subject we need to go back to GENESIS, for there we find the REASON as to WHY SIN, SICKNESS, SUFFERING and POVERTY are so universally present in this world.

### **ORIGINAL PERFECTION**

When we read the FIRST CHAPTER of GENESIS, we find GOD referring to all that HE HAD MADE as being “GOOD”.

SEVEN TIMES we read that all that GOD made was “GOOD”. See Gen One verses 4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25, 31.

In fact verse 31 reads, “GOD SAW ALL THAT HE HAD MADE, AND IT WAS VERY GOOD.”

Thus, before ADAM and EVE sinned, ABSOLUTE PERFECTION prevailed on the EARTH.

NATURE was NOT “RED IN TOOTH AND CLAW”, as so many believe today.

MAN did not have to struggle against NATURE and the ELEMENTS as he has to today. It was only after the FALL that GOD said to the WOMAN, “I WILL GREATLY MULTIPLY THY SORROW ...” Gen 3:16.

To the MAN HE said, “... CURSED IS THE GROUND FOR THY SAKE; IN SORROW SHALT THOU EAT OF IT ALL THE DAYS OF THY LIFE ... IN THE SWEAT OF THY FACE SHALT THOU EAT BREAD ...” Gen 3:17-19.

Paul speaks of the CREATION being set free from its bondage. He writes, “BECAUSE CREATION ITSELF WILL BE LIBERATED FROM ITS ENSLAVEMENT TO DECAY INTO THE GLORIOUS FREEDOM OF GOD’S CHILDREN.” Rom 8:21.

We see that as a result of man’s disobedience the entire CREATION became subject to DECAY.

In its practical outworking this disobedience or SIN, to call it by its proper name, resulted in the following:-

#### 1. **Sickness**

Man was now no longer able to partake of the TREE OF LIFE. This was to prevent man from LIVING FOREVER. Gen 3:22-24.

From what we have recorded in Genesis, it would seem as if the DELCINE in the PHYSICAL WELLBEING of man was not sudden, but rather gradual.

Slowly his life-span was curtailed. It is also possible, but we have no way of confirming it, that SICKNESS and DISEASE gradually took more and more effect on men.

2. **Suffering**

Suffering, as distinct from sickness, was not long in making an appearance. Not only did man now have to labour for his daily bread, it was not long before CAIN murdered his brother ABEL.

Man now began to be subject to all the heartaches which accompany his sinful state.

We will have much to say on the subject of suffering, suffice at this stage to quote two O.T. Scriptures to show that suffering is universal.

Prov 13:15 reads, "GOOD UNDERSTANDING GIVETH FAVOUR: BUT THE WAY OF TRANSGRESSORS IS HARD."

Psalms 34:19 reads, "MANY ARE THE AFFLICTIONS OF THE RIGHTEOUS: BUT THE LORD DELIVERETH HIM OUT OF THEM ALL."

There is promised deliverance for all those who will put their trust in the LORD.

When we remember that this PSALM refers to the sufferings of the LORD JESUS CHRIST upon the CROSS, let us not fall into the TRAP that the DELIVERANCE promised means that suffering and pain and travail can be avoided. It cannot.

## **THE TEACHING OF THE NEW TESTAMENT**

1. **The Lord Jesus Christ**

When we look at the LORD JESUS we see a very interesting fact.

HE was the ONE PERSON who CHOSE to come into this WORLD. We do not have that option.

HE could have come into this world into a POWERFUL and RICH family.

HE could have arranged to have been BORN in a PALACE. That, in fact, is where the WISE MEN sought HIM.

HE could have made certain that HE would enjoy EVERY PRIVILEGE that any man could ever wish for.

But what are the FACTS?

HE chose to be BORN IN A STABLE.

HE chose to be BORN a JEW, an unpopular subject RACE.

HE chose to be born into a family that was POOR.

There are those who would contend that JOSEPH was not POOR.

It is recorded that, when HIS parents took HIM to the TEMPLE to dedicate HIM that they "OFFERED A PAIR OF TURTLEDOVES, OR TWO YOUNG PIGEONS." Luke 2:24.

The LAW concerning this offering is to be found in Lev 12:1-8. Verse 8 reads, "BUT IF SHE CANNOT AFFORD A LAMB, THEN SHE SHALL TAKE TWO TURTLEDOVES OR TWO YOUNG PIGEONS ..."

Someone approached JESUS and said, "I WILL FOLLOW YOU WHEREVER YOU GO." JESUS answered him and said, "THE FOXES HAVE HOLES, AND

THE BIRDS OF THE AIR HAVE NESTS, BUT THE SON OF MAN HAS NOWHERE TO LAY HIS HEAD.” Matt 8:20; Luke 9:58.

These are not the words of a RICH MAN.

It is noteworthy that, far from welcoming the RICH YOUNG RULER, and encouraging him to make his WEALTH available for the MINISTRY JESUS was engaged in, JESUS told him to get rid of the RICHES which were holding him in a vice-like grip.

Sell all that you have and give the proceeds to the poor and then come and follow me and you will have riches in HEAVEN, said JESUS. Luke 18:18-23.

JESUS never said, “COME AND JOIN MY EVANGELISTIC TEAM AND WE WILL USE YOUR WEALTH AND YOU WILL RECEIVE 1000% RETURN ON YOUR INVESTMENT IN THIS WORLD.”

In fact, the LORD JESUS told several stories about RICH MEN, and in all of them, the ENDING of the RICH MAN is TRAGIC.

Let us look at these stories as they appear in the New Testament:

(1) **The Rich Farmer Luke 12:13-21**

JESUS told this story when somebody in the crowd cried out, “TEACHER, TELL MY BROTHER TO DIVIDE THE FAMILY INHERITANCE WITH ME.”

JESUS refused and told the story of a RICH FARMER who had a BUMPER CROP. He resolved to enlarge his barns, store his goods, and live a life of ease, there was only one drawback, and that was that the very day in which he made all these plans, was his last day for living.

JESUS said, “SO IS THE MAN WHO LAYS UP TREASURE FOR HIMSELF, AND IS NOT RICH TOWARD GOD.” Luke 12:21.

(2) **The Luxury-Loving Rich Man Luke 16:19-31**

Here was a man who was a SYBARITE. He indulged in every LUXURY imaginable. We read of him that “HE HABITUALLY DRESSED IN PURPLE AND FINE LINEN, GAILY LIVING IN SPLENDOUR EVERY DAY.” Luke 16:19.

When DEATH came he was UNPREPARED. His whole life centred on himself.

(3) **The Rich Young Ruler Luke 18:18-30**

He was different from the other two RICH MEN who showed no interest in spiritual things. He asked JESUS, “GOOD TEACHER, WHAT SHALL I DO TO OBTAIN ETERNAL LIFE?”

But when he heard the price he had to pay, he chose rather to remain wedded to his riches than to become a follower of JESUS CHRIST.

We need to remember that, while RICHES can be a terrible HINDRANCE in finding CHRIST, yet it need not be so in every instance.

Let us look at some RICH MEN in the N.T. who were followers of the LORD.

A) **Joseph of Arimathea Matt 27:57**

Here we read, “THERE CAME A RICH MAN FROM ARIMATHEA, NAMED JOSEPH, WHO HIMSELF HAD ALSO BECOME A DISCIPLE OF JESUS.”

We see JOSEPH coming to PILATE and asking for the body of JESUS. In the light of what had just happened, it is a display of real courage, for the others went and hid themselves for fear of the JEWS.

B) **Zaccheus Luke 19:2-10**

ZACCHEUS was a Tax-gatherer and, we are told “HE WAS RICH”. That he had a bad reputation amongst the people is apparent for they GRUMBLED, saying of JESUS, “HE HAS GONE TO BE THE GUEST OF A MAN WHO IS A SINNER.”

We have no record of what happened to CONVICT ZACCHEUS, but we have the record of his confession, “BEHOLD, LORD, HALF OF MY POSSESSIONS I WILL GIVE TO THE POOR, AND IF I HAVE DEFRAUDED ANYONE OF ANYTHING, I WILL GIVE BACK FOUR TIMES AS MUCH.”

What he proposed to do would have changed him from a rich man into a poor man. In fact, he did voluntarily what JESUS had asked the rich young RULER to do.

JESUS remarked, “TODAY SALVATION IS COME TO THIS HOUSE.”

We will see that RICHES are never to be used to SQUANDER on ourselves but must be used with a sense of STEWARDSHIP.

A. **THE TEACHING OF JESUS CONCERNING RICHES**

This examination of the teaching of JESUS will attempt to cover all that is recorded in the GOSPELS concerning our attitude to and possession of RICHES.

1. **The Sermon on the Mount Matt 6:19-22**

JESUS said, “DO NOT LAY UP FOR YOURSELVES TREASURES UPON 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 OR STEAL; FOR WHERE YOUR TREASURE IS, THERE WILL YOUR HEART BE ALSO.”

JESUS speaks of TREASURES IN HEAVEN FIVE TIMES in the Gospels.

This is contrasted with TREASURES ON EARTH.

HE is clear in HIS TEACHING. DO NOT LAY UP TREASURES ON EARTH ...LAY UP TREASURES IN HEAVEN.

HE does NOT SAY that we are not to LAY UP TREASURES, but instructs us as to WHERE we MUST LAY THEM UP.

The last verse gives the reason for HIS commands with reference to TREASURES or RICHES.

WHERE YOUR TREASURE IS THERE WILL YOUR HEART BE ALSO.

WE CANNOT DIVORCE OUR HEART FROM OUR TREASURE.

JESUS used similar words concerning our HEARTS being where our TREASURE is, in Luke 12:22-34.

It was after HE told the story of the RICH MAN who had an abundant harvest and intended building bigger BARNS, not realising that he would die the VERY NIGHT he formed the intention of doing so.

JESUS pointed out how GOD provided for all HIS CREATION, saying, "ALL THESE THINGS THE NATIONS OF THE WORLD EAGERLY SEEK; BUT YOUR FATHER KNOWS THAT YOU NEED THESE THINGS." Luke 12:30.

HE goes on to say, "SELL YOUR POSSESSIONS AND GIVE TO CHARITY; MAKE YOURSELVES PURSES WHICH DO NOT WEAR OUT, AN UNFAILING TREASURE IN HEAVEN, WHERE NO THIEF COMES NEAR, AND NO MOTH DESTROYS. FOR WHERE YOUR TREASURE IS, THERE WILL YOUR HEART BE ALSO." (12:33-34)

These words do not support the teaching that material prosperity is the WILL of GOD for the BELIEVER.

## 2. The Sermon on the Plain Luke 6:19-22

JESUS repeated HIS TEACHINGS as HE went from place to place. Here we read HIS words, "BLESSED YE POOR: FOR YOURS IS THE KINGDOM OF GOD. BLESSED ARE YE THAT HUNGER NOW: FOR YE SHALL BE FILLED."

MARY said in the MAGNIFICAT, "HE HATH FILLED THE HUNGRY WITH GOOD THINGS; AND THE RICH HE HATH SENT EMPTY AWAY." Luke 1:53

Quoting from the O.T. the LORD said in Luke 4:18, "THE SPIRIT OF THE LORD IS UPON ME, BECAUSE HE HAS ANOINTED ME TO PREACH THE GOSPEL TO THE POOR ..."

There is a recurring refrain with regard to the fact that the GOOD NEWS was to be preached to the POOR. Let us look at some cases:-

- 1 Answering JOHN'S disciples, the LORD JESUS said, "... THE POOR HAVE THE GOSPEL PREACHED UNTO THEM ..."  
(Also Luke 7:22)
- 2 In Luke 14:12-14, JESUS told the PHARISEES not to call, amongst others "THY RICH NEIGHBOURS" to a feast. HE said,

“WHEN THOU MAKEST A FEAST, CALL THE POOR, THE MAIMED, THE LAME, THE BLIND: AND THOU SHALT BE BLESSED; FOR THEY CANNOT RECOMPENSE THEE: FOR THOU SHALT BE RECOMPENSED AT THE RESURRECTION OF THE JUST.”

3. **Riches are Deceitful Matt 13:22; Mark 4:19; Luke 8:14**

Far from the LORD saying that RICHES are a MARK of GOD’S BLESSING, HE warns that they can cause the seed sown in our hearts (THE WORD OF GOD), to be stultified so that it produces no FRUIT. We read in Prov 28:20, “A FAITHFUL MAN WILL BE RICHLY BLESSED, BUT ONE EAGER TO GET RICH WILL NOT GO UNPUNISHED.”

4. **Hard for a Rich Man to enter the Kingdom of God Matt 19:23-24; Mark 10:23-25; Luke 18:24-25**

Let us look at the words of JESUS. HE said, “I TELL YOU THE TRUTH, IT IS HARD FOR A RICH MAN TO ENTER THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN. AGAIN I TELL YOU, IT IS EASIER FOR A CAMEL TO GO THROUGH THE EYE OF A NEEDLE THAN FOR A RICH MAN TO ENTER THE KINGDOM OF GOD.”

This statement was made just after the RICH YOUNG RULER turned away after JESUS told him to sell all, give to the poor and come and follow HIM.

The reaction of the disciples to JESUS’ statement was “WHO THEN CAN BE SAVED?” to which JESUS answered, “WHAT IS IMPOSSIBLE WITH MEN IS POSSIBLE WITH GOD.”

It is not a question of PARTIALITY on the part of GOD, rather it is a FACT that WHEN MEN trust in RICHES they cannot TRUST in GOD. Going back to Matt 6:24 we read these words of JESUS, “NO ONE CAN SERVE TWO MASTERS. 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 BOTH GOD AND MONEY.” See also Luke 16:13

The TRUTH of the matter is that it is not easy for man to be saved in any case. Being RICH only makes it more difficult to forsake all and put our trust in GOD.

5. **The Widow’s Mite Mark 12:41; Luke 21:1**

JESUS was in the TEMPLE area and “WATCHED THE CROWD PUTTING IN THEIR MONEY INTO THE TEMPLE TREASURY. MANY RICH PEOPLE THREW IN LARGE AMOUNTS. BUT A POOR WIDOW CAME AND PUT IN TWO VERY SMALL COPPER

COINS, WORTH ONLY A FRACTION OF A PENNY. CALLING HIS DISCIPLES TO HIM, JESUS SAID, 'I TELL YOU THE TRUTH, THIS POOR WIDOW HAS PUT MORE INTO THE TREASURY THAN ALL THE OTHERS. THEY GAVE OUT OF THEIR WEALTH; BUT SHE, OUT OF HER POVERTY, PUT IN EVERYTHING – ALL SHE HAD TO LIVE ON.'"

It is needful to remark on the fact that JESUS took pains to draw what had happened to the disciples' attention.

We see from this incident that it is not a question of HOW MUCH we give to GOD that matters, it is WHETHER OUR GIVING IS SACRIFICIAL OR NOT. If it is not a SACRIFICE, it is not TRUE GIVING.

6. **Woes Pronounced by Jesus Luke 6:24-25**

Let us see what the LORD says in this passage. We read, "WOE TO YOU WHO ARE RICH, FOR YOU HAVE ALREADY RECEIVED YOUR COMFORT. WOE TO YOU WHO ARE WELL FED NOW, FOR YOU WILL MOURN AND WEEP."

We need to make our choice as CHRISTIANS very clear. Do we want that which this world has to offer, or would we rather wait for our reward in the life to come?

7. **Guard against Greed Luke 12:15**

This warning to GUARD AGAINST GREED was given by JESUS to a person in the CROWD who called out to the LORD, "TEACHER, TELL MY BROTHER TO DIVIDE THE INHERITANCE WITH ME."

It was on this occasion that JESUS told the story of the RICH FARMER. Having told the story, JESUS remarked, "THIS IS HOW IT WILL BE WITH ANYONE WHO STORES UP THINGS FOR HIMSELF BUT IS NOT RICH TOWARD GOD."

8. **Warning not to Worry Luke 12:22-34**

After telling the story of the RICH AND FOOLISH FARMER, JESUS says to HIS disciples "DO NOT WORRY ABOUT YOUR LIFE, WHAT YOU WILL EAT; OR ABOUT YOUR BODY, WHAT YOU WILL WEAR."

HE speaks of GOD'S PROVISION for the RAVEN (an unclean BIRD), and HIS clothing of the GRASS OF THE FIELD.

"HOW MUCH MORE WILL HE CLOTHE YOU, O YOU OF LITTLE FAITH."

Much of our SOCIETY is geared to providing for the FUTURE when we do not KNOW what will transpire in the future.

One thing is CERTAIN, however, if we believe the WORD OF GOD, and that is the FACT that GOD will care for ALL THOSE who give HIM the PRE-EMINENCE in their lives.

DAVID says in Psalm 37:25-26, "I WAS YOUNG AND NOW I AM OLD, YET I HAVE NEVER SEEN THE RIGHTEOUS FORSAKEN OR THEIR CHILDREN BEGGING BREAD. THEY ARE ALWAYS GENEROUS AND LEND FREELY; THEIR CHILDREN WILL BE BLESSED."

9. **The Unrighteous Steward Luke 16:1-13**

JESUS tells this story, not to commend his actions, but to illustrate his shrewdness.

He had been dismissed because he had been wasting his master's possessions. To ensure a place for himself in the employment of another, he went and reduce the indebtedness of possible future employers, to his master.

This SHREWD ACTION is commended by his master. (Not the LORD.) Then JESUS says, "THE PEOPLE OF THIS WORLD ARE MORE SHREWD IN DEALING WITH THEIR OWN KIND THAN ARE THE PEOPLE OF LIGHT. I TELL YOU, USE WORLDLY WEALTH TO GAIN FRIENDS FOR YOURSELVES, SO THAT WHEN IT (THAT IS – MONEY) IS GONE YOU WILL BE WELCOMED INTO ETERNAL DWELLINGS." (THAT IS – BY THOSE FRIENDS YOU HAVE MADE.)" Luke 16:9

Someone has said that all we can take to heaven with us is – PEOPLE. MONEY thus invested is indeed MONEY WELL INVESTED as far as CHRISTIANS are concerned.

What JESUS says now cannot be argued away by CHRISTIANS who seek PROSPERITY for PROSPERITY'S SAKE.

HE says, "WHOEVER CAN BE TRUSTED WITH VERY LITTLE (MONEY or WEALTH) CAN ALSO BE TRUSTED WITH MUCH." WEALTH is TEMPORAL. USE it as a GOOD SERVANT OF GOD if you ever expect TRUE RICHES in ETERNITY.

JESUS ends by saying we can SERVE GOD or WEALTH. The CHOICE is ours. Like many TODAY, what the LORD had said was not palatable to some of the religious people of the day.

We read, "THE PHARISEES, WHO LOVED MONEY, HEARD ALL THIS AND WERE SNEERING AT JESUS." Luke 16:14

The words of JESUS concerning their attitude are clear, "WHAT IS HIGHLY VALUED AMONG MEN (WEALTH) IS DETESTABLE IN GOD'S SIGHT." v 15.



## **B. THE TEACHING OF JESUS CONCERNING SUFFERING**

The LORD JESUS made it clear that the LIFE OF THE BELIEVER was not going to be one of EASE.

In fact, the WILLINGNESS to SUFFER was to be one of the HALLMARKS of a TRUE FOLLOWER.

It has been said that, in the DAYS OF JESUS, if you were to meet a man carrying a CROSS, he would be GOING TO HIS DEATH.

The CROSS is used by the LORD as a means of RECOGNISING a TRUE FOLLOWER of HIS.

JESUS said, "HE WHO DOES NOT TAKE HIS CROSS AND FOLLOW AFTER ME IS NOT WORTHY OF ME. HE WHO HAS FOUND HIS LIFE SHALL LOSE IT, AND HE WHO HAS LOST HIS LIFE FOR MY SAKE SHALL FIND IT." Matt 10:38. (Also Luke 14:27)

After PETER'S GREAT CONFESSION concerning the person of CHRIST, we read, "FROM THAT TIME JESUS CHRIST BEGAN TO SHOW HIS DISCIPLES THAT HE MUST GO TO JERUSALEM, AND SUFFER MANY THINGS FROM THE ELDERS AND CHIEF PRIESTS AND SCRIBES, AND BE KILLED ..."

PETER said, "GOD FORBID." JESUS rebuked PETER and then continued, "IF ANY ONE WISHES TO COME AFTER ME, LET HIM DENY HIMSELF, AND TAKE UP HIS CROSS, AND FOLLOW ME ... FOR WHAT WILL A MAN BE PROFITED IF HE GAINS THE WHOLE WORLD, AND FORFEITS HIS SOUL? OR WHAT WILL A MAN GIVE IN EXCHANGE FOR HIS SOUL?" Matt 16:21-28; Mark 8:31-38.

In Luke 9:18-27, a passage dealing with this same incident, Luke records JESUS as saying, "IF ANY ONE WISHES TO COME AFTER ME, LET HIM DENY HIMSELF, AND TAKE UP HIS CROSS DAILY, AND FOLLOW ME."

### **James and John Matt 20:17-28; Mark 10:35-43**

Here again we have the record of the SUFFERINGS which the LORD was about to experience. JESUS said, "... THEY WILL CONDEMN HIM TO DEATH, AND WILL DELIVER HIM UP TO THE GENTILES TO MOCK AND SCOURGE AND CRUCIFY ..." Matt 20:18

JAMES and JOHN then requested the positions of EMINENCE in HIS KINGDOM. JESUS said, "YOU DO NOT KNOW WHAT YOU ARE ASKING FOR. ARE YOU ABLE TO DRINK THE CUP THAT I AM ABOUT TO DRINK?"

JAMES and JOHN answered, "WE ARE ABLE."

JESUS said, "MY CUP YOU SHALL DRINK."

It is interesting to note that, according to tradition, all the APOSTLES suffered MARTYRDOM, JOHN excepted. Even JOHN was exiled to PATMOS, and, again according to tradition, survived an attempt to MARTYR him.

## **The Beatitudes Matt 5:10-13**

JESUS speaks of HIS servants as being “BLESSED” if they endure PERSECUTION, if they are REVILED, if men say all KINDS OF EVIL against them FALSELY.

It is hard to understand how this can be reconciled with the EASY PASSAGE to HEAVEN proclaimed by some.

In JOHN 15:18-20 JESUS says “A SLAVE IS NOT GREATER THAN HIS MASTER. IF THEY PERSECUTED ME, THEY WILL ALSO PERSECUTE YOU; IF THEY KEPT MY WORD, THEY WILL KEEP YOURS ALSO.”

Then in John 16:33 JESUS says, “IN THE WORLD YOU HAVE TRIBULATION, BUT TAKE COURAGE; I HAVE OVERCOME THE WORLD.”

What we need to remember is that we, as CHRISTIANS, are living in a very HOSTILE world.

JESUS said, “BEHOLD, I SEND YOU OUT AS SHEEP IN THE MIDST OF WOLVES; ... BEWARE OF MEN; FOR THEY WILL DELIVER YOU UP TO THE COURTS, AND SCOURGE YOU IN THEIR SYNAGOGUES; AND YOU SHALL EVEN BE BROUGHT BEFORE GOVERNORS AND KINGS FOR MY SAKE ... YOU WILL BE HATED OF ALL ON ACCOUNT OF MY NAME.” Matt 10:16-23.

Do not fear those who can kill the body but are unable to kill the SOUL, says JESUS. (Matt 10:28.) Certainly these are not the words of one who is promising a life of comfort and ease.

## **THE EXPERIENCE OF THE EARLY CHURCH**

### **1. With regard to Prosperity**

It is a remarkable fact that, at its beginning, the CHURCH had little regard for the things of this world.

We read that, “ALL THAT BELIEVED WERE TOGETHER, AND HAD ALL THINGS COMMON; AND SOLD THEIR POSSESSIONS AND GOODS, AND PARTED THEM TO ALL, AS EVERY MAN HAD NEED.” Acts 2:44-45.

This concern for one another is reiterated in Acts 4:34. We read there, “NEITHER WAS THERE ANY AMONG THEM THAT LACKED: FOR AS MANY AS WERE POSSESSORS OF LANDS OR HOUSES SOLD THEM, AND BROUGHT THE PRICES OF THE THINGS THAT WERE SOLD, AND LAID THEM DOWN AT THE APOSTLES’ FEET: AND DISTRIBUTION WAS MADE UNTO EVERY MAN ACCORDING AS HE HAD NEED.”

One of those who did this was BARNABAS who “HAVING LAND, SOLD IT, AND BROUGHT THE MONEY, AND LAID IT AT THE APOSTLES’ FEET.” Acts 4:37.

It is in connection with this SELLING and GIVING that we find two people, ANANIAS and SAPPHIRA, selling a possession. They only gave part of what

they realised but pretended that they had given all. Thus their sin was not that they DID NOT GIVE ALL but because they PRACTISED DECEPTION. In Acts 5:1-11 we have the record of the JUDGEMENT that FELL on them for LYING to GOD, the HOLY SPIRIT.

We find that, in the REIGN of CLAUDIUS CAESAR, there was a GREAT FAMINE. Believers who were able, sent RELIEF to the brethren who lived in JUDEA. Acts 11:27-30.

The CHRISTIAN DOCTRINE concerning the believers' relationship to material wealth is more fully dealt with in the epistles.

## 2. **With regard to Suffering**

It was not long before the EARLY CHURCH began to understand that following the LORD JESUS CHRIST was going to involve them in much suffering. The record begins when Peter and John went up to the TEMPLE to PRAY. A man is healed by PETER who then preaches to the MULTITUDE. They were arrested by the TEMPLE GUARDS and were THREATENED and FORBIDDEN to preach in the NAME OF JESUS. Acts 3-4.

Not long after this, the apostles were preaching and healing the sick in SOLOMON'S PORCH.

They were thrown into the common prison (Acts 5:18), but, during the night were set free by an angel who said, "GO, STAND AND SPEAK IN THE TEMPLE TO THE PEOPLE ALL THE WORDS OF THIS LIFE." Acts 5:20. They were arrested and testified to the council. After GAMALIEL'S warning the apostles were BEATEN and departed "REJOICING THAT THEY WERE COUNTED WORTHY TO SUFFER SHAME FOR HIS NAME." Acts 5:41.

Not long after this it was the TURN of STEPHEN to arouse the WRATH of the opponents of CHRIST. He was DRAGGED outside the city and stoned to DEATH, PAUL being a witness and accomplice to this shameful deed. Acts 7:54.

This was the start of a GENERAL and INTENSE PERSECUTION of the BELIEVERS. SAUL (PAUL) made HAVOC of the CHURCH. Both MEN and WOMEN were dragged off to PRISON and the CHURCH was scattered. Acts 8:1-4.

Not content with the savage suppression of the CHURCH in JERUSALEM and JUDEA, SAUL, "BREATHING OUT THREATENINGS AND SLAUGHTER AGAINST THE DISCIPLES OF THE LORD", got AUTHORITY to go to DAMASCUS so that "IF HE FOUND ANY OF THIS WAY, WHETHER THEY WERE MEN OR WOMEN, HE MIGHT BRING THEM BOUND UNTO JERUSALEM." Acts 9:1-2.

It was on this journey that SAUL was struck down by the LORD HIMSELF. After asking SAUL why he was persecuting HIM, the LORD JESUS said to ANANIAS concerning SAUL, "HE IS A CHOSEN VESSEL UNTO ME ... I WILL SHOW HIM HOW GREAT THINGS HE MUST SUFFER FOR MY NAME SAKE." Acts 9:15-16.

The RECORD of the PERSECUTIONS endured by PAUL in the furtherance of the GOSPEL are recorded in the latter half of the book of ACTS. It is very evident that, with few exceptions, he faced HOSTILITY and PHYSICAL VIOLENCE in all the places where he sought to place a congregation of believers.

### **Paul's Sufferings**

1. As soon as he was CONVERTED, PAUL preached CHRIST in the SYNAGOGUES. The JEWS endeavoured to kill him and he only escaped by being let down the WALL in a BASKET. Acts 9:23.
2. At PISIDIAN ANTIOCH persecution was instigated against PAUL and he was expelled from the district. Acts 13:50.
3. There was an attempt to MISTREAT and STONE PAUL at ICONIUM. Acts 14:5. They had to FLEE.
4. At LYSTRA, where he and BARNABAS were initially welcomed as gods, PAUL was STONED and left for DEAD. Acts 14:19.
5. At PHILIPPI PAUL and SILAS were FLOGGED and IMPRISONED after PAUL had cast a DEMON out of a SLAVE-GIRL. Acts 16:19-34.
6. At THESSALONICA there was an uproar which resulted in the expulsion of PAUL and SILAS. Acts 17:10.
7. At CORINTH an attempt to cause trouble for PAUL was abortive due to the astuteness of GALLIO, the PROCUNUL. Acts 18:12.
8. At EPHESUS, after ministering there for TWO YEARS, there was an uproar formented by DEMETRIUS the SILVERSMITH. Again, PAUL had to make a hasty EXIT. Acts 19:23-20:1.
9. When on his way to JERUSALEM, AGABUS prophesied about the fact that PAUL would be arrested. We know now that that arrest endured for TWO YEARS before he was sent to ROME. The answer given to the disciples by PAUL when they were pleading for him not to proceed on his journey is noteworthy. He said, "WHAT ARE YOU DOING, WEEPING AND BREAKING MY HEART. FOR I AM READY NOT ONLY TO BE BOUND, BUT EVEN TO DIE AT JERUSALEM FOR THE NAME OF THE LORD JESUS." Acts 21:13. At the RIOT at the TEMPLE, while the JEWS were seeking to kill PAUL, only the intervention of a ROMAN COHORT stopped them beating PAUL. Acts 21:32. Later, some took a SOLEMN OATH to KILL the apostle, and were again foiled because the son of PAUL'S sister heard of the AMUSH they planned. Acts 23:16. After his arrival in ROME, PAUL has to endure HOUSE-ARREST for TWO YEARS. Acts 28:30. The BIBLE record ends there. Where there is disagreement today is as to whether PAUL was released after his trial before CAESAR, only to be arrested some years later to face a second trial with the verdict being GUILTY this time, or whether this was his only imprisonment and trial. Whatever the truth of the matter, it is a well established tradition that

PAUL was BEHEADED for his faith, dying in this manner and not by crucifixion because of his Roman CITIZENSHIP.

We need to remember that the record of the book of ACTS, like the GOSPELS, is SELECTIVE and not EXHAUSTIVE.

PAUL speaks in 2 Cor 11:23-28 of the sufferings he endured for the sake of the GOSPEL.

Is it any wonder then that, returning from his first missionary journey he “STRENGTHENED THE SOULS OF THE DISCIPLES, ENCOURAGING THEM TO CONTINUE IN THE FAITH, AND SAYING, ‘THROUGH MANY TRIBULATIONS WE MUST ENTER THE KINGDOM OF GOD.’” Acts 14:22.

Let us not deceive ourselves. The conditions of DISCIPLESHIP have not changed.

It is a LAODICEAN CHURCH that says, “I AM RICH, AND HAVE BECOME WEALTHY, AND HAVE NEED OF NOTHING”, NOT knowing that they are wretched and miserable and poor and blind and naked. Rev 3:17.

## **THE EPISTLES**

We will begin by looking at the letters of PAUL to TIMOTHY and TITUS.

## **PROSPERITY**

Firstly, we notice one of the conditions laid down by PAUL for ELDERSHIP. He is to be “FROM THE LOVE OF MONEY.” 1 Tim 3:3.

The REASON why CHRISTIANS, and ELDERS particularly who must set an example, should be FREE FROM THE LOVE OF MONEY is that GREED is IDOLATRY. Col 3:5.

We need to emphasise that the DAILY NEEDS of providing for our families is not the point at issue.

We ALL need MONEY. Without it we would not be able to live in this world. Thus, even the LORD had funds which were entrusted to JUDAS for safe-keeping, and he STOLE from those funds, being a THIEF. John 12:6.

PAUL says to TIMOTHY, “IF ANY ONE DOES NOT PROVIDE FOR HIS OWN, ESPECIALLY FOR THOSE OF HIS HOUSEHOLD, HE HAS DENIED THE FAITH, AND IS WORSE THAN AN UNBELIEVER.” 1 Tim 5:8.

Concerning REMUNERATION for those who are engaged in the work of the LORD, PAUL writes, “LET THE ELDERS WHO RULE WELL BE CONSIDERED WORTHY OF DOUBLE HONOUR, ESPECIALLY THOSE WHO WORK HARD AT PREACHING AND TEACHING. FOR THE SCRIPTURE SAYS, ‘YOU SHALL NOT MUZZLE THE OX WHILE HE IS THRESHING’, AND ‘THE LABOURER IS WORTHY OF HIS WAGES.’” 1 Tim 5:17-18.

The phrase “DOUBLE HONOUR” at least includes pecuniary remuneration for services. (Vincent)

(N.E.B. ... RECKONED WORTHY OF A DOUBLE STIPEND.)

(WILLIAMS ... CONSIDERED AS DESERVING TWICE THE SALARY THEY GET.)

Thus, we come back to the issue and that is GREED.

GOD does not DELIGHT in seeing HIS people STARVE. HE HATES it when THEY are GREEDY and constantly want more than they need.

PAUL then comes to the ISSUE which is of vital concern to us. That is the TEACHING that "GODLINESS IS A MEANS OF GAIN". (6:5)

Those who HOLD to this TEACHING are, the APOSTLE says, "MEN OF DEPRAVED MIND AND DEPRIVED OF THE TRUTH."

He says that we BROUGHT nothing into this world and we will take nothing out so we are to be content with FOOD and COVERING.

He then speaks of those who WANT TO GET RICH. v 9.

Now this refers not only to the RICH who want to get RICHER, but also to the POOR who are OBSESSED with getting RICH.

PAUL says, RICHES DARE NOT BE THE GOAL OF A CHRISTIAN'S LIFE. And then he elaborates as to the devastating effect of such illicit desires.

PAUL says "THE LOVE OF MONEY IS A ROOT OF ALL SORTS OF EVIL." It is NOT MONEY but the LOVE OF MONEY that is the ROOT OF EVIL.

To those who LONG FOR IT (v 10):-

- 1) FALL INTO TEMPTATION AND A SNARE.
- 2) FALL INTO MANY FOOLISH AND HARMFUL DESIRES.
- 3) THESE DESIRES PLUNGE THEM INTO RUIN AND DESTRUCTION.
- 4) SOME BY LONGING FOR MONEY HAVE WANDERED AWAY FROM THE FAITH.
- 5) THEY HAVE PIERCED THEMSELVES WITH MANY A PANG.
- 6) THEREFORE, FLEE FROM THESE THINGS, SAYS THE APOSTLE.

Vincent says, IT IS NOT THE POSSESSION OF RICHES, BUT THE LOVE OF THEM THAT LEADS MEN INTO TEMPTATION. It is a PASSION for RICHES that DESTROYS men. Our PASSION should be directed towards SERVING and PLEASING GOD.

Then, at the end of chapter 6 of First Timothy, we find PAUL saying the following to TIMOTHY, "INSTRUCT THOSE WHO ARE RICH IN THIS PRESENT WORLD NOT TO BE CONCEITED OR TO FIX THEIR HOPE ON THE UNCERTAINTY OF RICHES, BUT ON GOD, WHO RICHLY SUPPLIES US WITH ALL THINGS TO ENJOY. INSTRUCT THEM TO DO GOOD, TO BE RICH IN GOOD WORKS, TO BE GENEROUS AND READY TO SHARE, STORING UP FOR THEMSELVES THE TREASURE OF A GOOD FOUNDATION FOR THE FUTURE ..." (verses 17-19).

JAMES speaks of the fact that men, in the last days, have gathered great riches together, only to see them destroyed:-

1. He calls on the RICH to weep and howl because of the miseries which are going to come upon them. v 1

2. He says that their RICHES have ROTTED, their GOLD and SILVER has RUSTED and their garments have become MOTH-EATEN.  
We have seen in the past how men have lost great fortunes in the financial collapse before the great depression. Many erstwhile millionaires committed suicide when they realised that they were RUINED. There is no doubt that the world is headed for a massive monetary CRISIS. Already there are nations which are bankrupt and all the efforts being made to prop up their currencies will be in vain. Most, if not all, of the world's currencies will be in vain. Most, if not all, of the world's currencies will soon be of no value whatsoever. We are already seeing what INFLATION is doing to our monetary systems. How foolish then for us who are CHRISTIANS to trust in "UNCERTAIN RICHES" rather than in the LIVING GOD.
  
3. JAMES then says, "IT IS IN THE LAST DAYS THAT YOU HAVE STORED UP YOUR TREASURE." Indeed, there has never been a time when there has been such a proliferation of WEALTH and of the SUPER-WEALTHY. A perusal of the book "THE RICH AND THE SUPER-RICH" by Ferdinand Lundberg reveals some of the unlawful means by which some great financial empires have been established.
  
4. JAMES writes, "THE PAY OF THE LABOURERS WHO MOWED YOUR FIELDS, AND WHICH HAS BEEN WITHHELD BY YOU, CRIES OUT AGAINST YOU; AND THE OUTCRY OF THOSE WHO DID THE HARVESTING HAS REACHED THE EARS OF THE LORD OF HOSTS."
  
5. Not only have the poor been defrauded in the amassing of these UNLAWFUL RICHES, but the perpetrators of this gigantic FRAUD have "LIVED LUXURIOUSLY ON THE EARTH AND LED A LIFE OF WANTON PLEASURE." Small wonder then that JAMES warns that "THE JUDGE IS AT HAND." Now GOD does not want HIS people to be partakers with those who have enriched themselves at the expense of others.  
Peter warns of those who have "A HEART TRAINED IN GREED, ACCURSED CHILDREN; FORSAKING THE RIGHT WAY THEY HAVE GONE ASTRAY, HAVING FOLLOWED THE WAY OF BALAAM, THE SON OF BEOR, WHO LOVED THE WAGES OF UNRIGHTEOUSNESS ..." 2 Peter 2:15.  
We also would again remember that the CHURCH at LAODICEA had become so WORLDLY that they were BOASTING in the riches which they had amassed, rather than in the LORD JESUS CHRIST and were so far from HIM that they did not realise that they were really in a state of extreme impoverishment.  
The writer to the Hebrews commends those to whom he is writing for they "ACCEPTED JOYFULLY THE SEIZURE OF YOUR PROPERTY, KNOWING THAT YOU HAVE FOR YOURSELVES A BETTER POSSESSION AND AN ABIDING ONE." Heb 10:34.  
Perhaps most CHRISTIANS in the WEST are unaware of the fact that believers behind the IRON CURTAIN today suffer not only the loss of all their goods but even of their LIBERTY for CHRIST and the Gospel's sake.

We need to be like MOSES who “CONSIDERED THE REPROACH OF CHRIST GREATER RICHES THAN THE TREASURES OF EGYPT; FOR HE WAS LOOKING TO THE REWARD.” Heb 11:26.

He was no FOOL who said, “HE IS NO FOOL WHO GIVES THAT WHICH HE CANNOT KEEP TO GAIN THAT WHICH HE CANNOT LOSE.”