

LET THE  
NATIONS  
BE GLAD!

THE SUPREMACY  
OF GOD  
IN MISSIONS

THIRD EDITION

JOHN PIPER

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## Preface to the Third Edition

**M**y passion is to see people, churches, mission agencies, and social ministries become God-centered, Christ-exalting, Spirit-powered, soul-satisfied, Bible-saturated, missions-mobilizing, soul-winning, and justice-pursuing. The supremacy of God in all things for the joy of all peoples through Jesus Christ is the central, driving, all-unifying commitment of my life.

This vision is as clear and firm in my heart in 2010 as when this book was first published in 1993 and revised in 2003. In fact, this vision has been deeply solidified in the intervening years by the completion of another book relating to world missions, *What Jesus Demands from the World*.<sup>1</sup> What drove that book was Jesus' command in the Great Commission: "Teach them to observe all that I have commanded you" (Matt. 28:20). That book is my effort to sum up from the four Gospels what Jesus meant by "all I have commanded you." It is a handbook for discipling the nations in obedience to that part of the Great Commission.

So the vision has not faded. And I am thankful that God has been merciful to use *Let the Nations Be Glad!* to make himself more central in missions and more satisfying in the hearts of those who give their lives for the sake of his name.

I am thankful to Baker Publishing Group again for the privilege of partnering with them in an expanded and refined third edition. If I were to guess why this book continues to be useful it would be because it is mainly biblical reflection rather than methodological application. Meth-

1. John Piper, *What Jesus Demands from the World* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books, 2006).

ods change. But worship, prayer, suffering, unreached peoples, the gospel, faith, heaven, and hell remain.

John Stott has sounded the note I love to hear and echo:

The highest of missionary motives is neither obedience to the Great Commission (important as that is), nor love for sinners who are alienated and perishing (strong as that incentive is, especially when we contemplate the wrath of God . . .), but rather zeal—burning and passionate zeal—for the glory of Jesus Christ. . . . Only one imperialism is Christian . . . and that is concerned for His Imperial Majesty Jesus Christ, and for the glory of his empire.<sup>2</sup>

He said this in relation to Romans 1:5. There the apostle Paul sums up his calling as a missionary: “[I am called] to bring about the obedience of faith *for the sake of his name* among all the nations.” Notice: “For the sake of his name!” Stott exults again in this great Pauline passion:

We should be “jealous” . . . for the honour of his name—troubled when it remains unknown, hurt when it is ignored, indignant when it is blasphemed. And all the time anxious and determined that it shall be given the honor and glory which are due to it.<sup>3</sup>

O for the day when more pastors and scholars and missionaries would not just say that but feel it as the driving force of their lives!

The apostle John applies this Christ-exalting passion to all missionaries when he says, “They have gone out for the sake of the name” (3 John 7). My friend and comrade in the Greatest Cause for over thirty years, Tom Steller, wrote an afterword for this book based on that text in 3 John. I have dedicated this book to Tom with deep affection.

As we get closer and closer to the finish line together, we want to give our lives to creating, sending, and sustaining world Christians who live and die “for the sake of the name.” Increasingly, what burns inside us is the question, *Where do such God-centered, Christ-exalting, missions-driven people come from?* We believe they come from God-besotted, Christ-addicted, Bible-breathing homes and churches and schools and ministries. That is what this book aims to nurture.

There is a God-enthralled, Christ-treasuring, all-enduring love that pursues the fullness of God in the soul and in the service of Jesus. It is

2. John Stott, *Romans: God's Good News for the World* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1994), 53.

3. *Ibid.*

not absorbed in anthropology or methodology or even theology—it is absorbed in God. It cries out with the psalmist, “Let the peoples praise you, O God; let all the peoples praise you! Let the nations be glad and sing for joy. . . . Sing praises to our King, sing praises! For God is the King of all the earth” (Pss. 67:3–4; 47:6–7).

There is a distinct God-magnifying, Christ-exalting mindset. It is relentless in bringing God forward again and again. It is spring-loaded to make much of the Triune God in anthropology and methodology and theology. It cannot make peace with God-ignoring, God-neglecting planning or preaching or puttering around.

Such God-entranced people are what we need. For example, even after all these years, I am still happy to say that *Let the Nations Be Glad!* is like a little skiff riding on the wake of the massive undertaking of Patrick Johnstone and Jason Mandryk and their team in publishing *Operation World*. Would that every Christian used this book to know the nations and pray.

I look at this great, church-wakening, mission-advancing book, and I ask, “What kind of mindset unleashes such a book?” Listen.

All the earth-shaking awesome forces unleashed on the world are released by the Lord Jesus Christ. He reigns today. He is in the control room of the universe. He is the only Ultimate Cause; all the sins of man and machinations of Satan ultimately have to enhance the glory and kingdom of our Saviour. This is true of our world today—in wars, famines, earthquakes, or the evil that apparently has the ascendancy. All God’s actions are just and loving. We have become too enemy-conscious, and can over-do the spiritual warfare aspect of intercession. We need to be more God-conscious, so that we can laugh the laugh of faith knowing that we have power over all the power of the enemy (Luke 10:19). He has already lost control because of Calvary where the Lamb was slain. What confidence and rest of heart this gives us as we face a world in turmoil and such spiritual need.<sup>4</sup>

There it is. Where are the teachers and preachers and mission executives and seminary presidents who talk like that? Their number is increasing. I want to be one. I want to breathe any little spark of Godward zeal I can into the reader’s soul. Feel free to ransack this book for wherever you feel that breath. It doesn’t have to be read straight through.

Let it be clear: This book is not just for missionaries. It is for pastors who (like me) want to connect their fragile, momentary, local labors to

4. Patrick Johnstone, *Operation World* (Kent, England: STL, 1987), 21. The regularly updated online version is at <http://www.operationworld.org/>.

God's invincible, eternal, global purposes. It's for laypeople who want a bigger motivation for being world Christians than they get from statistics. It's for college and seminary classes on the theology of missions that really want to be *theological* as well as anthropological, methodological, and technological. And it's for leaders who need the flickering wick of their vocation fanned into flame again with a focus on the supremacy of God in all things.

Tom Steller and I love Jesus Christ, we love the church, and we love missionaries. Our united prayer and commitment, from the home base of a missions-mobilizing local church, and the newly founded Bethlehem College and Seminary, is that God will be merciful to us and make our labors fruitful for Christ's "Imperial Majesty." May he raise up generations of world Christians who are willing to lay down their lives to make the nations glad in the glory of God through Jesus Christ.

## Introduction to the Third Edition

### *New Realities in World Christianity and Twelve Appeals to Prosperity Preachers*

Missions is not the ultimate goal of the church. Worship is. Missions exists because worship doesn't. Worship is ultimate, not missions, because God is ultimate, not man. When this age is over, and the countless millions of the redeemed fall on their faces before the throne of God, missions will be no more. It is a temporary necessity. But worship abides forever.

So worship is the fuel and goal of missions. That has been the signature thesis of this book since its first edition in 1993. With all the change in the world, *that* has not changed. Worship has always been and will always be the ultimate purpose of God in the universe. It has always been the fire that fuels our passion to reach peoples who do not worship the true God through Jesus Christ. That's where we're headed in chapter 1.

But before we go there a new situation in world Christianity commands our attention. Lamin Sanneh, professor of history and world Christianity at Yale University, uses the word "breathtaking" to describe the new situation.

Among the many breathtaking developments in the post-World War II and the subsequent colonial eras, few are more striking than the worldwide Christian resurgence. With unflagging momentum, Christianity has become, or is fast becoming, the principal religion of the peoples of the world. Primal societies that once stood well outside the main orbit of the faith have become major centers of Christian impact, while Europe and North America, once

considered the religion's heartland, are in noticeable recession. We seem to be in the middle of massive cultural shifts and realignments whose implications are only now beginning to become clear.<sup>1</sup>

Europe and America are not the center of gravity in world Christianity any longer. The center is shifting south and east. The churches of Latin America, Africa, and Asia are experiencing phenomenal growth and are becoming the great sending churches.

### Introducing the Global South

Philip Jenkins, professor of history and religious studies at Pennsylvania State University, has clarified this development perhaps more than anyone. The new terminology that has been introduced into our vocabulary is the term "Global South," a reference to the astonishing growth of the Christian church in Africa, Latin America, and Asia while the formerly dominant centers of Christian influence in Europe are weakening. For example:

- At the beginning of the twentieth century, Europeans dominated the world church, with approximately 70.6 percent of the world's Christian population. By 1938, on the eve of World War II, the apparent European domination of Protestantism and Catholicism remained strong. Yet by the end of the twentieth century, the European percentage of world Christianity had shrunk to 28 percent of the total; Latin America and Africa combined provided 43 percent of the world's Christians.<sup>2</sup>
- In 1900, Africa had 10 million Christians representing about 10 percent of the population; by 2000, this figure had grown to 360 million, representing about half the population. Quantitatively, this may well be the largest shift in religious affiliation that has ever occurred, anywhere.<sup>3</sup>
- The number of African Christians is growing at around 2.36 percent annually, which would lead us to project a doubling of the continent's Christian population in less than thirty years.<sup>4</sup>

1. Lamin Sanneh, *Disciples of All Nations: Pillars of World Christianity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), xix.

2. Dana L. Robert, "Shifting Southward; Global Christianity Since 1945," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 24, no. 2 (April 2000): 50.

3. Philip Jenkins, "Believing in the Global South," *First Things* 168 (December 2006): 13.

4. *Ibid.*, 12.

- By 2050, Christianity will be chiefly the religion of Africa and the African diaspora. By then, there will be about three billion Christians in the world, and the population of those who will be white and non-Latino will be between one-fifth and one-sixth the total.<sup>5</sup>
- At the 1998 Lambeth Conference, the highest consultative body of the Anglican Communion, 224 of the 735 bishops were from Africa, compared with only 139 from the United Kingdom and Europe. Anglicans in Nigeria report 17 million baptized members, compared with 2.8 million in the United States.<sup>6</sup>

### The New Shape of World Christianity

Mark Noll has an even more striking way of drawing our attention to the new realities of the Global South.

- “Active Christian adherence has become stronger in Africa than in Europe.”
- “The number of practicing Christians in China may be approaching the number in the United States.”
- “Live bodies in church are far more numerous in Kenya than in Canada.”
- “More believers worship together in church Sunday by Sunday in Nagaland than in Norway.”
- “More Christian workers from Brazil are active in cross cultural ministry outside their homelands than from Britain or from Canada.”
- “Last Sunday . . . more Christian believers attended church in China than in all of so-called ‘Christian Europe.’”<sup>7</sup>
- “This past Sunday more Anglicans attended church in each of Kenya, South Africa, Tanzania, and Uganda than did Anglicans in Britain and Canada and Episcopalians in the United States combined.”
- Last Sunday “more Presbyterians were in church in Ghana than in Scotland.”<sup>8</sup>

5. Ibid.

6. Robert, “Shifting Southward,” 53.

7. Mark Noll, *The New Shape of World Christianity: How American Experience Reflects Global Faith* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Academic, 2009), 10.

8. Ibid., 20.

- “This past week in Great Britain, at least fifteen thousand Christian foreign missionaries were hard at work evangelizing the locals. Most of these missionaries are from Africa and Asia.”<sup>9</sup>

“In a word,” Noll says, “the Christian church has experienced a larger geographical redistribution in the last fifty years than in any comparable period in its history, with the exception of the very earliest years of church history.”<sup>10</sup>

### The Day of Western Missionaries Is Not Over

This is a cause for Christians to rejoice in the sovereign grace of God. But the news is not all good. For example, one of the effects of this kind of news is to make many Christians in the West think that the day of sending missionaries from our churches is past. This is tragic. Presumably, what we should do now is support missions from the Global South. My way of putting that would be: Let them shed *their* blood. We will just send *money*.

Many have embraced the uninformed notion that it is always more efficient and culturally effective to support local churches and ministries of the Global South to do the work of missions rather than to pay tens of thousands of dollars each year to send Western missionaries.

I am not opposed to partnering with indigenous missions of the Global South. There are many reputable churches and agencies that make that possible. But it is uninformed to assume that local churches or nearby missionaries can always reach a people better than Western missionaries.

It is uninformed, first of all, because in pioneer missionary situations there *are* no local churches to do the work. That’s the *meaning* of an unreached people.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, there is no assurance that a nearby missionary will be more effective than you in learning the new language and crossing the culture teaching the truth. This is especially true if there are old tribal hostilities to be overcome locally. Such a strategy may sometimes be best, and other times not.

The day of Western missions is not over. There are many ways to partner with believers around the world besides simply sending money. There are, as I write in 2009, according to the Joshua Project, 6,645 unreached people groups in the world out of a total of 16,309 ethno-linguistic peoples. And of

9. *Ibid.*, 21.

10. *Ibid.*

11. See chapter 5 for an extended discussion of the biblical understanding of “unreached peoples.”

these 6,645, Joshua Project lists 1,540 of these as unengaged. You can find out the ever-changing, current statistics by checking [www.JoshuaProject.net](http://www.JoshuaProject.net).

## The Global South and the Prosperity Gospel

Another ambiguity in the present magnificent expansion of Christianity is that not all the forms of this faith are based on what the apostle Paul calls “sound doctrine” (Titus 1:9; 2:1). Michael Horton makes this sobering observation:

Celebration of the much-advertised expansion of Christianity in the two-thirds world (most notably in recent years in Philip Jenkins’s *The Next Christendom*) should at least be tempered by the fact that the prosperity gospel is the most explosive version of this phenomenon.<sup>12</sup>

The prosperity gospel is the most sweeping movement within the continent of Africa.<sup>13</sup>

What I mean by “the prosperity gospel” is a teaching that emphasizes God’s aim to make believers healthy and wealthy in this life, while it overlooks or minimizes the dangers of wealth, the biblical call to a wartime mindset, and the necessity and purposes of suffering.

The prosperity gospel would be represented by one leading African prosperity preacher who says, “Many are ignorant of the fact that God has already made provision for his children to be wealthy here on earth. When I say wealthy, I mean very, very rich. . . . Break loose! It is not a sin to desire to be wealthy.”<sup>14</sup>

I am deeply concerned when a preacher encourages a crowd to give \$200 to “open themselves to the blessing” in a culture where a schoolteacher earns \$150 a month. Yet more than 300 people come forward to receive the speaker’s oil and “within minutes, the church nets tax-free \$60,000.”<sup>15</sup>

The extent of the teaching in Africa is remarkable. In a 2006 survey, Pew asked participants if God would “grant material prosperity to all believers

12. Michael Horton, *Christless Christianity: The Alternative Gospel of the American Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 45.

13. Quotation from Bonnie Dolan, founder and director of Zambia’s Center for Christian missions. *Ibid.*, 25.

14. Isaac Phiri and Joe Maxwell, “Gospel Riches,” *Christianity Today* 51, no. 7 (July 2007): 23.

15. *Ibid.*

who have enough faith.” Eighty-five percent of Kenyan Pentecostals, 90 percent of South African Pentecostals, and 95 percent of Nigerian Pentecostals said yes.<sup>16</sup>

“The worst brand of African prosperity teaching is, perhaps unsurprisingly, an American export.”<sup>17</sup> Television has become Africa’s religious classroom. “People turn it on and assume that TBN is American Christianity, and Americans know everything, so why not listen to it?”<sup>18</sup> And of course prosperity teaching is not unique to America and Africa. It has its Latino and Asian forms and can be found throughout the Global South from Seoul to São Paulo.<sup>19</sup>

### What Shall We Say about the Prosperity Gospel?

The first thing we should say about the prosperity gospel is that wealthy Westerners are probably as guilty of its excesses as are the poor in the Global South. The difference is that the poor *don’t* have wealth and want it, while the rich have it, expect to keep it, and get angry if God takes it. Both have their hearts set on prosperity. It’s just more subtle in the West because we can take prosperity for granted. This is why I spend more time calling our church to live differently than I do calling the Global South to think differently.<sup>20</sup> I am more responsible for the sins at home.

### Prosperity Is Relative and the Paths to It Diverse

But this is a book about global missions. And what we think about money and possessions is profoundly important in the way we do missions and the way we disciple converts. So I would like to provide a biblical response to the prosperity gospel. As I point out some of its weaknesses, I aim to keep in mind my own sins, and I hope to remember that it is not a monolithic movement and that “prosperity” is a relative term.

16. *Ibid.*, 24.

17. *Ibid.*

18. *Ibid.*, 25.

19. Arlene Sanchez Walsh, “First Church of Prosperidad,” *Christianity Today* 51, no. 7 (July 2007): 26–27; Ondina E. González and Justo L. González, *Christianity in Latin America: A History* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

20. For example, see the chapter on “Money: The Currency of Christian Hedonism” in John Piper, *Desiring God: Meditations of a Christian Hedonist* (Sisters, Ore.: Multnomah, 2003); and the chapter on “Living to Prove He Is More Precious than Life” in John Piper, *Don’t Waste Your Life* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books, 2003).

Prosperity in one part of the world would mean a roof over your head, nourishing food on the table a couple times a day, and clean drinking water. “Currently, about 315 million sub-Saharan Africans live on less than a dollar a day.”<sup>21</sup> And what we would call a modest lifestyle in America (with a home, a car, electricity, refrigeration, indoor plumbing, clean drinking water, central heating, a computer, a phone, several changes of clothes, and unheard of choices in groceries) would be wildly opulent in most of the world. This is one reason why criticisms of the prosperity preachers must be nuanced and cautious.

Another caution for critics is that there are different ways to think about how Christianity brings prosperity. Few would disagree that a gospel-driven movement of honesty, hard work, patience, generosity, perseverance, and love for excellence would over time lift a culture from the dysfunction of corruption and bring more stable and prosperous times. If that is what the prosperity preachers were saying, there would be little controversy.<sup>22</sup>

But given the lavish way that prosperity preachers often live, even by Western standards—flying in personal jets, living in palatial homes with eight bathrooms, and staying overnight in \$5,000 suites—and given the way they clothe the eternal gospel of Christ in the garments of worldliness, it seems wise to provide a measured biblical response. I will put this response in the form of twelve appeals. I am not eager to vilify but to redeem and transform.

## Twelve Appeals to Prosperity Preachers

### 1. *Don't preach a gospel that puts unnecessary obstacles in the way of people getting into heaven.*

Jesus said, “How difficult it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!” His disciples were astonished, as many in the “prosperity” movement should be. So Jesus went on to raise their astonishment even higher by saying, “It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God.” They responded in disbelief: “Then who can be saved?” Jesus says, “With

21. Phiri and Maxwell, “Gospel Riches,” 27.

22. For example, Wayne Grudem has developed a series of lectures titled “50 Factors Within Nations that Determine Their Wealth or Poverty.” The point of these lectures is that biblical faithfulness leads a culture in general away from poverty and toward prosperity. <http://www.christianessentialsbc.com/messages/>.

man it is impossible, but not with God. For all things are possible with God” (Mark 10:23–27).

This means that their astonishment was warranted. A camel can’t go through the eye of a needle. This is not a metaphor for something requiring great effort or humble sacrifice. It can’t be done. We know this because Jesus said, *Impossible!* That was his word, not ours. “With man it is impossible.” The point is that the heart-change required is something man can’t do for himself. God must do it—“. . . but [it is] not [impossible] with God.”

We can’t make ourselves stop treasuring money above Christ. But God can. That is good news. And that should be part of the message that prosperity preachers herald before they entice people to become more camel-like. Why would a preacher want to preach a gospel that encourages the desire to be rich and thus confirms people in their natural unfitness for the kingdom of God?

### 2. *Don’t preach a gospel that kindles suicidal desires in people.*

The apostle Paul warned against the *desire* to be rich. And by implication, he warned against preachers who stir up the desire to be rich instead of helping people get rid of it. He warned, “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 Tim. 6:9–10).

These are very serious words, but they don’t seem to find an echo in the preaching of the prosperity gospel. It is not wrong for the poor to want measures of prosperity so that they have what they need and can be generous and can devote time and energy to Christ-exalting tasks other than scraping to get by. It is not wrong to seek Christ for help in this quest. He cares about our needs (Matt. 6:33).

But we all—poor and rich—are constantly in danger of setting our affections (1 John 2:15–16) and our hope (1 Tim. 6:17) on riches rather than Christ. This “desire to be rich” is so strong and so suicidal that Paul uses the strongest language to warn us. My appeal is that prosperity preachers would do the same.

### 3. *Don’t preach a gospel that encourages vulnerability to moth and rust.*

Jesus warns against the effort to lay up treasures on earth; that is, he tells us to be *givers*, not *keepers*. “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” (Matt. 6:19–20).

Yes, we all keep something. Jesus assumes that. He does not expect, except in extreme cases, that our giving will mean we will no longer be able to give. There may be a time when we will give our life for someone and thus no longer be able to give any more. But ordinarily Jesus expects us to live in a way that there is an ongoing pattern of work and earning and simple living and continual giving.

But given the built-in tendency toward greed in all of us, Jesus feels the need to warn against “laying up treasures on earth.” It looks like gain, but it leads only to loss (“moth and rust destroy and thieves break in and steal”). My appeal is that Jesus’ warning find a strong echo in the mouths of prosperity preachers.

#### *4. Don’t preach a gospel that makes good work a means of getting rich.*

Getting rich is not what work is for. Paul said we should not steal. The alternative was hard work with our own hands. But the main purpose was not merely to hoard or even to *have*. The purpose was “to have *in order to give*.”

“Let the thief no longer steal, but rather let him labor, doing honest work with his own hands, *so that he may have something to share* with anyone in need” (Eph. 4:28). This is not a justification for *being* rich in order to give more. It is a call to make more and keep less so you can give more. There is no reason why a person who prospers more and more in his business should increase the lavishness of his lifestyle indefinitely. Paul would say, Cap your expenditures and give the rest away.

I can’t determine your “cap.” But in all the texts we are looking at in this chapter, there is an impulse toward simplicity and lavish generosity, not lavish possessions. When Jesus said, “Sell your possessions, and give to the needy” (Luke 12:33), he seemed to imply not that the disciples were wealthy and could give from their overflow. It seems they had so few liquid assets that they had to sell something in order to have something to give.

Why would preachers want to encourage people to think that they should possess wealth in order to be a lavish giver? Why not encourage them to keep their lives more simple and be an even more lavish giver? Would that not add to their generosity a strong testimony that Christ, and not possessions, is their treasure?

**5. *Don't preach a gospel that promotes less faith in God's promise and diminishes the glory of God's help.***

The reason the writer to the Hebrews tells us to be content with what we have is that the opposite implies less faith in the promises of God. He says, "Keep your life free from love of money, and be content with what you have, for he has said, 'I will never leave you nor forsake you.' So we can confidently say, 'The Lord is my helper; I will not fear; what can man do to me?'" (Heb. 13:5–6).

On the one hand, we may trust in the Lord to be our helper. He will provide and protect. And in that sense there is a measure of prosperity he will give us. "Your heavenly Father knows that you need them all" (Matt. 6:32). But, on the other hand, when it says, "Keep your life free from love of money, and be content with what you have" *because* God promises never to leave us, it must mean that we can easily move from trusting God for our *needs* to using God for our *wants*.

The line between "God help me," and "God make me rich," is real, and the writer to the Hebrews doesn't want us to cross it. Preachers should help their people to remember and recognize this line rather than speaking as though it weren't there.

**6. *Don't preach a gospel that contributes to people being choked to death.***

Jesus warns that the word of God, the gospel, which is meant to give us life, can be choked to death by riches. He says it is like a seed that grows up among thorns: "They are those who hear, but as they go on their way they are choked by the . . . riches . . . of life, and their fruit does not mature" (Luke 8:14).

Prosperity preachers should warn their hearers that there is a kind of financial prosperity that can choke them to death. Why would we want to encourage people to pursue the very thing that Jesus warns can make them fruitless?

**7. *Don't preach a gospel that takes the seasoning out of the salt and puts the light under a basket.***

What is it about Christians that makes them the salt of the earth and the light of the world? It is not wealth. The desire for wealth and the pursuit of wealth tastes and looks just like the world. Desiring to be rich makes us *like* the world, not different. At the very point where we should taste different,

we have the same bland covetousness that the world has. In that case, we don't offer the world anything different from what it already believes in.

The great tragedy of prosperity preaching is that a person does not have to be spiritually awakened in order to embrace it; one needs only to be greedy. Getting rich in the name of Jesus is not the salt of the earth or the light of the world. In this, the world simply sees a reflection of itself. And if they are "converted" to this, they have not been truly converted but only put a new name on an old life.

The context of Jesus' saying shows us what the salt and light are. They are the joyful willingness to suffer for Christ. Here is what Jesus said,

Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. *Rejoice* and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you. You are the salt of the earth. . . . You are the light of the world.

Matthew 5:11–14

What will make the world *taste* the salt and *see* the light of Christ in us is not that we love wealth the same way they do. Rather, it will be the willingness and the ability of Christians to love others through suffering, all the while rejoicing because their reward is in heaven with Jesus. "*Rejoice* and be glad [in hardship] . . . You are the salt of the earth." The saltiness is the taste of joy in hardship. This is *unusual* life that the world can taste as different.

Such life is inexplicable on human terms. It is supernatural. But to attract people with promises of prosperity is simply natural. It is not the message of Jesus. It is not what he died to achieve.

### ***8. Don't preach a gospel that conceals the necessity of suffering in the Christian life.***

Missing from most prosperity preaching is the fact that the New Testament emphasizes the necessity of suffering far more than it does the notion of material prosperity.

Jesus said, "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" (John 15:20). Or again he said, "If they have called the master of the house Beelzebul, how much more *will they malign* those of his household" (Matt. 10:25).

Paul reminded the new believers on his missionary journeys, "through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God" (Acts 14:22). And

he told the believers in Rome that their sufferings were a necessary part of the path to eternal inheritance.

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.

Romans 8:16–18

Peter too said that suffering is the normal pathway to God’s eternal blessing.

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.

1 Peter 4:12–14

Suffering is the normal cost of godliness. “Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted” (2 Tim. 3:12). I am aware that these words on suffering move back and forth between a more general suffering as part of the fall (Rom. 8:18–25) and specific suffering owing to human hostilities. But I will argue later in chapter 3 that when it comes to God’s purposes in our suffering there is no substantial difference.<sup>23</sup>

Prosperity preachers should include in their messages significant teaching about what Jesus and the apostles said about the necessity of suffering. It must come, Paul said (Acts 14:22), and we do young disciples a disservice not to tell them that early. Jesus even said it before conversion so that prospective believers would count the cost: “So therefore, any one of you who does not renounce all that he has cannot be my disciple” (Luke 14:33).

### ***9. Don’t preach a gospel that obscures the God-ordained purposes of suffering in the Christian life.***

The New Testament not only makes clear that suffering is necessary for followers of Christ, it is also at pains to explain why this is the case and

23. See pp. 108–25.

what God's purposes in it are. These purposes are crucial for believers to know. God has revealed them to help us understand why we suffer and to bring us through like gold through fire.

Later, in the chapter on suffering, I will unfold these purposes.<sup>24</sup> So here I will only name them and say to the prosperity preachers: *Include the great biblical teachings in your messages.* New believers need to know why God ordains for them to suffer.

1. Suffering deepens faith and holiness.
2. Suffering makes your cup increase.
3. Suffering is the price of making others bold.
4. Suffering fills up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions.
5. Suffering enforces the missionary command to go.
6. The supremacy of Christ is manifest in suffering.

**10. *Don't preach a gospel that ignores the shift from a come-see religion in the Old Testament to a go-tell religion in the New Testament.***

A fundamental change happened with the coming of Christ into the world. Until that time, God had focused his redemptive work on Israel with occasional works among the nations. Paul said, "In past generations [God] allowed all the nations to walk in their own ways" (Acts 14:16). He called them "times of ignorance." "The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent" (Acts 17:30). Now the focus has shifted from Israel to the nations. Jesus said, "The kingdom of God will be taken away from you [Israel] and given to a people producing its fruits [followers of the Messiah]" (Matt. 21:43). A hardening has come upon Israel until the full number of the nations comes in (Rom. 11:25).

One of the main differences between these two eras is that in the Old Testament, God glorified himself largely by blessing Israel so that the nations could see and know that the Lord is God. "May [the LORD] maintain the cause of . . . his people Israel, as each day requires, *that all the peoples of the earth may know that the LORD is God; there is no other*" (1 Kings 8:59–60). Israel was not yet sent on a "Great Commission" to gather the nations; rather, she was glorified so that the nations would see her greatness and come to her.

24. See pp. 108–25.

So when Solomon built the temple of the Lord it was spectacularly lavish with overlaid gold.

The inner sanctuary was twenty cubits long, twenty cubits wide, and twenty cubits high, and he overlaid it with *pure gold*. He also overlaid an altar of cedar. And Solomon overlaid the inside of the house with *pure gold*, and he drew chains of *gold* across, in front of the inner sanctuary, and overlaid it with *gold*. *And he overlaid the whole house with gold*, until all the house was finished. Also the whole altar that belonged to the inner sanctuary he overlaid with *gold*.

1 Kings 6:20–22

And when he furnished it, the gold was again just as abundant.

So Solomon made all the vessels that were in the house of the LORD: the *golden* altar, the *golden* table for the bread of the Presence, the lampstands of *pure gold*, five on the south side and five on the north, before the inner sanctuary; the flowers, the lamps, and the tongs, of *gold*; the cups, snuffers, basins, dishes for incense, and fire pans, of *pure gold*; and the sockets of *gold*, for the doors of the innermost part of the house.

1 Kings 7:48–50

It took Solomon seven years to build the house of the Lord. Then he took thirteen years to build his own house (1 Kings 6:38–7:1). It too was lavish with gold and costly stones (1 Kings 7, 10).

Then, when all was built, the point of this opulence is seen in 1 Kings 10 as the queen of Sheba, representing the Gentile nations, comes to see the glory of the house of God and of Solomon. When she saw it, “there was no more breath in her” (1 Kings 10:5). She said, “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” (1 Kings 10:9).

In other words, the pattern in the Old Testament is *a come-see religion*. There is a geographic center of the people of God. There is a physical temple, an earthly king, a political regime, an ethnic identity, an army to fight God’s earthly battles, and a band of priests to make animal sacrifices for sins.

With the coming of Christ all of this changed. There is no geographic center for Christianity (John 4:20–24); Jesus has replaced the temple, the priests, and the sacrifices (John 2:19; Heb. 9:25–26); there is no Chris-

tian political regime because Christ's kingdom is not of this world (John 18:36); and we do not fight earthly battles with chariots and horses or bombs and bullets, but spiritual ones with the word and the Spirit (Eph. 6:12–18; 2 Cor. 10:3–5).

All of this supports the great change in mission. The New Testament does not present a come-see religion, but a go-tell religion. “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’” (Matt. 28:18–20).

The implications of this are huge for the way we live and the way we think about money and lifestyle. One of the main implications is that we are “sojourners and exiles” (1 Peter 2:11) on the earth. We do not use this world as though it were our primary home. “Our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ” (Phil. 3:20).

This leads to a wartime lifestyle. That means we don't amass wealth to show the world how rich our God can make us. We work hard and seek a wartime austerity for the cause of spreading the gospel to the ends of the earth. We maximize giving to the war effort, not comforts at home. We raise our children with a view to helping them embrace the suffering that it will cost to finish the mission.

So if a prosperity preacher asks me about all the promises of wealth for faithful people in the Old Testament, my response is: Read your New Testament carefully and see if you see the same emphasis. You won't find it. And the reason is that things have dramatically changed.

“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” (1 Tim. 6:7–8). Why? Because the call to Christ is a call to “share in suffering as a good soldier of Christ Jesus” (2 Tim. 2:3). The emphasis of the New Testament is not riches to lure us in to sin, but sacrifice to carry us out.

One providential confirmation that God intended this distinction between a come-see orientation in the Old Testament and a go-tell orientation in the New Testament is the difference between the language of the Old Testament and the language of the New. Hebrew, the language of the Old Testament, was shared by no other peoples of the ancient world. It was unique to Israel. This is an astonishing contrast with Greek, the language of the New Testament, which was the trade language of the Roman world. So the very languages of the Old and New Testaments signal the difference

in mission. Hebrew was not well-suited for missions to the ancient world. Greek was ideally suited for missions to the Roman world.

**11. *Don't preach a gospel that minimizes the sin of making godliness a means of gain.***

The apostle Paul set us an example by how vigilant he was not to give the impression that he was in the ministry for money. He said that ministers of the world have a right to make a living from the ministry. But then to show us the danger in that he refuses to fully use that right.

It is written in the Law of Moses, "You shall not muzzle an ox when it treads out the grain." . . . It was written for our sake, because the plowman should plow in hope and the thresher thresh in hope of sharing in the crop. If we have sown spiritual things among you, is it too much if we reap material things from you? If others share this rightful claim on you, do not we even more? Nevertheless, we have not made use of this right, but we endure anything rather than put an obstacle in the way of the gospel of Christ."

1 Corinthians 9:9–12

In other words, he renounced a legitimate right in order not to give anyone the impression that money was the motivation of his ministry. He did not want the money of his converts: "We never came with words of flattery, as you know, nor with a pretext for greed—God is witness" (1 Thess. 2:5).

He preferred to work with his hands rather than give the impression that he was peddling the gospel: "I coveted no one's silver or gold or apparel. You yourselves know that these hands ministered to my necessities and to those who were with me. In all things I have shown you that by working hard in this way we must help the weak and remember the words of the Lord Jesus, how he himself said, 'It is more blessed to give than to receive'" (Acts 20:33–35).

He knew that there were peddlers of God's word who thought "godliness is a means of gain" (1 Tim. 6:5–6). But he refused to do anything that would put him in that category: "We are not, like so many, *peddlers of God's word*, but as men of sincerity, as commissioned by God, in the sight of God we speak in Christ" (2 Cor. 2:17).

Too many prosperity preachers not only give the impression that they "peddle God's word" and make "godliness a means of gain" but actually develop a bogus theology to justify their extravagant displays of wealth. Paul did just the opposite.

**12. *Don't preach a gospel that obscures the biblical truth that God himself is the greatest treasure.***

My biggest concern about the effects of the prosperity movement is that it diminishes Christ by making him less central and less satisfying than his gifts. Christ is not magnified most by being the giver of wealth. He is magnified most by satisfying the soul of those who sacrifice to love others in the ministry of the gospel.

When we commend Christ as the one who makes us rich, we glorify riches, and Christ becomes a means to the end of what we really want—namely, health, wealth, and prosperity. But when we commend Christ as the one who satisfies our soul forever—even when there is no health, wealth, and prosperity—then Christ is magnified as more precious than all those gifts.

We see this in Philippians 1:20–21. Paul says, “It is my eager expectation and hope that . . . Christ will be honored in my body, whether by life or by death. For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain.” Honoring Christ happens when we treasure him so much that dying is *gain*. Because dying means “to depart and be with Christ” (Phil. 1:23).

This is the missing note in prosperity preaching. The New Testament aims at the glory of Christ, not the glory of his gifts. To make that clear, it puts the entire Christian life under the banner of joyful self-denial. “If anyone would come after me, let him *deny himself* and take up his cross and follow me” (Mark 8:34). “I have been crucified with Christ” (Gal. 2:20).

But even though self-denial is a hard road that leads to life (Matt. 7:14), it is the most joyful of all roads. “The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which a man found and covered up. Then *in his joy* he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field” (Matt. 13:44). Jesus says that finding Christ as our treasure makes all other possessions *joyfully* dispensable. “*In his joy* he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field.”

I do not want prosperity preachers to stop calling people to maximum joy. On the contrary, I appeal to them to stop encouraging people to seek their joy in material things. The joy Christ offers is so great and so durable that it enables us to lose prosperity and still rejoice. “You joyfully accepted the plundering of your property, *since you knew that you yourselves had a better possession and an abiding one*” (Heb. 10:34). The grace to be joyful in the loss of prosperity—that is the miracle prosperity preachers should seek. That would be the salt of the earth and the light of the world. That would magnify Christ as supremely valuable.

## Jesus Will Build His Church

God is sovereign over the world and over the mission of his church. All authority belongs to him in heaven and on earth (Matt. 28:18). The new configuration of world Christianity is his doing. He is building his church (Matt. 16:18). Both its blessings and its blemishes are under his sovereign sway. The gospel of the kingdom *will* be preached as a testimony to all the unreached peoples of the world (Matt. 24:14). The Lord of the harvest will see to it that the workers are sent and that the harvest is gathered in (Matt. 9:38). The good shepherd has other sheep outside the fold and he *must* bring them also. They will listen to his voice and there will be one flock and one shepherd (John 10:16).

The fundamental task of world missions remains the same—as it has for two thousand years. The aim is still captured in the words of Psalm 67:4: “Let the nations be glad and sing for joy.” The gladness of the nations through faith in Christ for the glory of God—that is the great aim of missions. Declaring his glory—the glory of grace in the saving death and resurrection of Jesus—is the great task among all the unreached peoples of the world. “Declare his glory among the nations, his marvelous works among all the peoples!” (Ps. 96:3).

God is infinitely passionate for his glory and for its praise among the nations. He has been, is now, and always will be supreme in missions, until the Lord Jesus himself returns and brings history as we know it to a close. The price of finishing this mission will be much sacrifice and many lives (Col. 1:24; Rev. 6:11). The fuel of that sacrifice will not be the love of money or a passion for prosperity; it will be a love for Christ and a passion for his glory. May the Lord purify his church. May he refine like gold the growing faith of the Global South. And may he remember mercy and grant Europe and America a great awakening for the glory of his name and the gladness of the nations.