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The Ideal Life, Jesus, and Prosperity Theology

by Andrew G. Wildsmith

Abstract: *The article examines the Bible's description of the ideal life (both Israelite and Canaanite), and then compares it with ideal life in traditional Africa, modern Western ideals, and also with the Prosperity Theology version of the ideal life. It then evaluates these in the light of Jesus' experience of the elements of the ideal and successful life, and with the traditional Christian perceptions of heaven. It concludes with several implications for Africa today.*

Introduction

Let us paint the picture of two Africas. The one shown often by the world media is of a poor rural farmer (or his children) struggling to survive civil war or drought. The other, practically unseen in the West, is the successful urban businessman struggling through traffic in his SUV to reach the peace of his massive house in the exclusive housing estate. A remarkable number of materially successful Africans have come from humble beginnings in the village. The question the farmer asks is, "How can I become as successful as my brother in Nairobi?" One answer that is becoming all too commonly heard is, "Name it and claim it!"

The Prosperity "Gospel" is widely, though unevenly, spread across Africa. It has infiltrated more or less deeply into African society and the African Church.¹ Its influence and presence in the Church ranges from barely perceptible to completely overwhelming. Prosperity Theology extends far beyond its charismatic and Pentecostal roots to affect, to one degree or another, many people in many congregations of most denominations.² It is important to sympathetically assess the degree to which Prosperity thinking has affected an individual or group lest we falsely accuse people or inadvertently dampen legitimate desires for a better life. No one wants to condemn the rural farmer to a life of unending poverty and struggle. But if all the farmers become wealthy businessmen, who will grow the food they eat? In other words, is the ideal answer to poverty found in the Prosperity Gospel?

The Ideals of the Successful Life in The Old Testament

Deuteronomy 28:7-13 illustrates several elements of the ideal and successful life in the Old Testament. "The LORD will grant that the enemies who rise up against you will be defeated before you. They will come at you from one direction but flee from you in seven. The LORD will send a blessing

¹ For a similar analysis see Deji Ayegboyin's comments in "BWA Leader Outlines Problem with Prosperity Gospel". <http://www.ethicsdaily.com/bwa-leader-outlines-problem-with-prosperity-gospel-cms-20899-printer>, accessed 2014.01.30 at 10:00 PM.

² For a brief history of the roots of this gospel in Africa see Femi Bitrus Adeleye, *Preachers of a Different Gospel*, Nairobi: Hippo Books, 2011, pp. 29-39.

on your barns and on everything you put your hand to. The LORD your God will bless you in the land he is giving you. The LORD will establish you as his holy people, as he promised you on oath, if you keep the commands of the LORD your God and walk in his ways. Then all the peoples on earth will see that you are called by the name of the LORD, and they will fear you. The LORD will grant you abundant prosperity - in the fruit of your womb, the young of your livestock and the crops of your ground - in the land he swore to your forefathers to give you. The LORD will open the heavens, the storehouse of his bounty, to send rain on your land in season and to bless all the work of your hands. You will lend to many nations but will borrow from none. The LORD will make you the head, not the tail. If you pay attention to the commands of the LORD your God that I give you this day and carefully follow them, you will always be at the top, never at the bottom."³

To the extent that the nation obeyed the terms of the covenant, they would receive these national, not individual, blessings. But to the extent that Israel violated the terms of the covenant then the covenant curses would come into effect. "Do not turn aside from any of the commands I give you today, to the right or to the left, following other gods and serving them. However, if you do not obey the LORD your God and do not carefully follow all his commands and decrees I am giving you today, all these curses will come upon you and overtake you:" (Deut. 28:14-15). The list of curses (Deut. 28:16-68) is far longer than the list of blessings and ends in slavery and exile from the Promised Land. In other words, they would need another Exodus.

The Elements of the Ideal Life:

1. *Good Health* This is a universal ideal amongst human beings. What good health looks like, how it is maintained, how to regain it once it is lost, and how important it is compared to other things varies across cultures and amongst individuals. Good health is usually linked to long life, as the following example illustrates. David sent a message to Nabal beginning with the conventional greeting, "*Long life to you! Good health to you and your household! And good health to all that is yours!*" (1 Sam. 25:6). Other Biblical passages that reflect good health as an ideal include Jeremiah 33:6-9 and Proverbs 3:8.

2. *Wealth* Relatively few people strive for poverty whereas a great many strive for wealth. In the OT ideal (never achieved), everyone would enjoy some level of personal prosperity. This is described as each man having his own vine, fig tree and cistern of water as in 2 Kings 18:31-32, "This is what the king of Assyria says: Make peace with me and come out to me. Then every one of

³ The book of Proverbs contains many sayings that illustrate the same elements of the ideal life (e.g. 3:1-2, 8, 9-10; 11:24-28; 12:11-12; 21:5-6; 4:20-22; 4:10; 12:28; 10:27; 3:21-26; 19:23; 2:6-8,11; 3:27-33; 17:6; 13:22; 14:26; 20:7). Ecclesiastes shows their limitations because even these good things cannot provide ultimate satisfaction, and trying to elevate them to that status results in vanity or meaninglessness (e.g. Eccles. 2:1-11; 3:12-14; 4:4; 5:8-20; 6:3-6; 7:1-2, 11-12; 9:11-12).

you will eat from his own vine and fig tree and drink water from his own cistern, until I come and take you to a land like your own, a land of grain and new wine, a land of bread and vineyards, a land of olive trees and honey. Choose life and not death!”

Prosperity is also defined as having many children (especially male heirs), many animals, such as sheep, goats and cattle, and abundant harvests of grapes to make wine, grain for bread, figs, honey and olives. The picture is not one of everyone having the wealth of Solomon, but of everyone having plenty of the ordinary necessities of life and being able to enjoy these in safety.

3. Status Status in the OT was both national and individual. The following passage, often misused by the Prosperity preachers, is a national promise for Israel as a whole. It is not a promise that applied to every individual equally. “The LORD will make you the head, not the tail. If you pay attention to the commands of the LORD your God that I give you this day and carefully follow them, you will always be at the top, never at the bottom.” (Deut. 28:13) Many books and passages mention individual status or in other words, honour. For example, “He who pursues righteousness and love finds life, prosperity and honour.” (Prov. 21:21) Giving an OT king the honour and respect he deserved included bowing down to him. “When Mephibosheth son of Jonathan, the son of Saul, came to David, he bowed down to pay him honour.” (2 Sam. 9:6) Wealth affected status, but it was not the sole criteria for high social status.

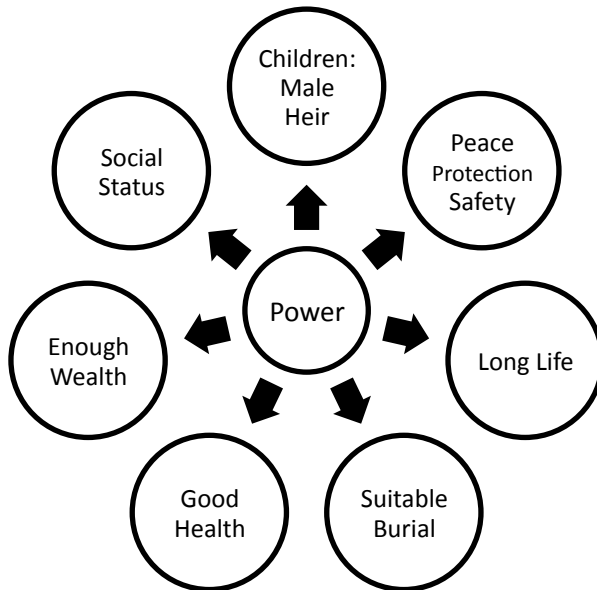
4. Children, Especially Male Heirs Abraham’s greatest concern in Genesis 15 was not the other elements of the ideal life – he already had most of them – it was the lack of a male heir. The first time that faith/belief is credited as righteousness is found in Abraham’s response to God’s promise that he would have many descendants (15:6). Although having many children, especially males, is linked to wealth and status, for an Old Testament man or family to be without a male heir is a greater tragedy than to be without wealth and status. “There was a man all alone; he had neither son nor brother. There was no end to his toil, yet his eyes were not content with his wealth. ‘For whom am I toiling,’ he asked, ‘and why am I depriving myself of enjoyment?’ This too is meaningless - a miserable business!” Eccles. 4:8

5. Protection (Peace and Safety) The Israelites, like most nations and tribes, looked for protection from and defeat of their enemies so they could live in peace and safety. Peace is the ideal situation for both nations and individuals, and is directly tied to prosperity. “He will judge between many peoples and will settle disputes for strong nations far and wide. They will beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation will not take up sword against nation, nor will they train for war anymore. Every man will sit under his own vine and under his own fig tree, and no one will make them afraid, for the LORD Almighty has spoken” (Micah 4:3-4).

6. Long Life in the Promised Land Long life and long life in the Promised Land are linked ideals in both versions of the fifth commandment (Ex. 20:12; Deut. 5:16). These are main themes in Deuteronomy also. “Keep his decrees and commands, which I am giving you today, so that it may go well with you and your children after you and that you may live long in the land the LORD your God gives you for all time” (Dt. 4:40 see also 11:9; 25:15; 30:18; 32:47).

7. A Suitable Burial Burial at home, with proper respect, and after a long life was very important in the Old Testament. King Shallum (Jehoahaz) of Judah would be buried in exile - “He will never return. He will die in the place where they have led him captive; he will not see this land again” (Jer. 22:11b-12). And to be without proper burial was a horrifying punishment. Jeremiah predicts of sinful King Jehoiakim that, “He will have the burial of a donkey - dragged away and thrown outside the gates of Jerusalem” (Jer. 22:19). Proper burial was so important that the Preacher of Ecclesiastes could say, “A man may have a hundred children and live many years; yet no matter how long he lives, if he cannot enjoy his prosperity and does not receive proper burial, I say that a stillborn child is better off than he” (Eccles. 6:3).

The relationship amongst these elements can be pictured as follows, with “power” at the centre because human beings could not achieve these ideals without the aid of some form of power.



8. Power The ultimate source of the elements of the ideal life was Yahweh, the LORD, the Creator of Heaven and Earth. Success in attaining the ideal life was not primarily dependent on hard work, luck, or natural law. The road to

success was travelled by means of God's spiritual power. Ultimately God gave the ideal life as a result of trusting obedience. True covenant obedience was predicated upon faith and trust in Yahweh, but that faith had to be expressed through obedience to the Law. The only legitimate way to obtain these ordinary elements of the ideal life in OT times was to live a sincere and godly life by obeying the terms of the covenant made at Sinai.

A Counterfeit Route to the Ideal Life through Canaanite Magic

For the ancient Israelite, the alternative path to obtaining these ideals of the successful life was through magical means in the form of Canaanite fertility cults. The worship of Baal and other Canaanite gods was designed to achieve these elements of the ideal life. Israel's failure to completely impose God's "final judgement" on the Canaanites opened up this counterfeit route to the pursuit of the elements of the ideal life. But this route was illegitimate and dangerous, and following it was a sign of disloyalty to Yahweh. The usual result was not that the Israelites completely stopped worshipping Yahweh, it was that they added the worship of the Canaanite gods to that of Yahweh. This resulted in the Israelites treating Yahweh in the same way as they treated the Canaanite gods. Yahweh became only one of the sources of power to obtain the ideal life. But there are no other gods besides Yahweh so placing him at the same level as the Canaanite gods was disloyal.

The Israelites served God faithfully under the strong leadership of Joshua and the elders who entered Canaan with him. But after that generation of leaders died (the ones who had seen God's provision and miracles in the desert), the people turned to the idols worshipped by their Canaanite neighbours (Judges 2:7-10). Eventually God said, "Because this nation has violated the covenant that I laid down for their forefathers and has not listened to me, I will no longer drive out before them any of the nations Joshua left when he died. I will use them to test Israel and see whether they will keep the way of the LORD and walk in it as their forefathers did" (Judges 2:20-22). Canaanite religion was very immoral. The following description is adapted mainly from Eugene Merrill's research.⁴

The first sin of Israel following Joshua was inter-marriage with the native populace. The Law strongly condemned inter-marriage with pagans. Inter-marriage with Canaanites led to the worship of Baal and Asherim at the "sacred trees or poles" or "groves". This worship involved the most wicked kind of sexual immorality.

Fertility cults were a common feature of religion in the ancient Near East, but in Canaan they were very important. Fertility cults were based on the idea that the gods themselves were originally created when the powers of the

⁴ Eugene H. Merrill, *An Historical Survey of the Old Testament*. Nutley, New Jersey: The Craig Press, 1966, pp. 169-170.

universe had sex. The Canaanites believed that everything living comes into being in the same way. They believed that plants, animals, and men came about only when the gods had sex with one another. They also believed that the gods must be persuaded to have sex with one another so that they would produce plant and animal life. To encourage the gods to have sex, the priests and priestesses of the fertility cult would practice "imitative magic." That is, the priests and priestesses would have sex with each other, and perhaps with the Canaanite worshippers, in an effort to cause the gods to follow their example. This is called "sacred" or "religious" prostitution.⁵ If the gods could be persuaded to have sex there was every prospect for a successful crop. Crop failures and other agricultural disasters happened because the gods were angry for some reason. This Canaanite religious prostitution was carried out either in a temple or in the shelter of green trees or groves that looked green and fertile. One goddess associated with reproduction was known as Asherah, which means "grove". The plural of Asherah is Asherim.

It will be helpful to review a bit about the Canaanite gods. The high god was called El, though we do not know very much about him. He seems to have been most important in early Canaanite theology. Baal, his son, gradually displaced him, though El continued to exist as "father god".⁶ One of Baal's wives was Asherah, a goddess of fertility mentioned above. Baal was the god who was most directly involved with mankind. The name means simply "lord" or "master" and was probably only a title at first. Later on it came to be a proper name. The name "Baal" was also applied to many deities or many manifestations of the same god.⁷ For example, there was a Baal at Peor in Moab (Num. 25:3), a Baal-berith (Jud. 9:4), a Baal-perazim (2 Sam. 5:20) and a Baal-zebul (2 Kgs. 1:3) in addition to many others.

According to some scholars, Baal died and resurrected every year, having achieved victory over Mot, the god of death.⁸ His resurrection was celebrated every fall at the beginning of the new year. This was also when "the former rains" (October to April, the main rainy season) were due to begin. The

⁵ See the link with the Canaanite gods' sexual activity at the high places בָּמֹתָם (*bāmōtām*, "their high places") in the note on Numbers 33:52 in R. B. Allen, "Numbers" *Expositor's Bible Commentary, Revised*, Vol. 2, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012, 434.

⁶ See also Mark J. Boda, "Judges", *EBC, Revised*, Vol. 2, commentary on Judges 2:13 where Baal is mentioned as the son of Dagon. Baal was considered a storm god and could be identified with the storm god Hadad, Michael A. Grisanti, "Deuteronomy", *EBC, Revised*, Vol. 2, note on Deut. 33:26, pp. 811.

⁷ See also Daniel I. Block, *The Gods of the Nations*, 2nd edition, Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2000, pp. 50-51 for these aspects of Baal.

⁸ See John H. Walton, Victor H. Matthews, Mark W. Chavalas, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: Old Testament*, Downers Grove: IVP, 2000, p. 246; and the discussion on Baal, "A Seasonal Myth?" in A.H.W. Curtis, "Canaanite Gods and Religion" in Bill T. Arnold, H.G.M. Williamson, eds., *Dictionary of the Old Testament Historical Books*, Leicester: IVP, 2005, p. 137.

resurrection of Baal announced the end of the dry, hot unproductive summer when Mot was in control. The first rainfall of the year signalled the beginning of the life-giving season of planting. If rain did not come the Canaanites believed that Baal could not escape from the underworld because Mot was strong enough to keep him there. Perhaps Elijah refers to this myth when he taunts the prophets of Baal about Baal's absence at Mount Carmel. These "prophets" probably believed that the drought was caused by Baal's detention in the world of the dead. The rain came when Elijah prayed to Yahweh. This proved that it was Yahweh and not Baal who provided rain and all good things (1 Kings 18). The sexual union of Baal with his sister-wife, Anath or Astarte, was thought to be the cause of the rain and therefore the fertility of the soil. Therefore the New Year's festival was a time of immorality. The priests and priestesses, and perhaps the people as well, had sex with one another in order to encourage Baal to mate with his wives.

This is what was happening when Israel went after other gods and engaged in "prostitution." This was not only spiritual adultery, but also actual, physical adultery. "It was this religious background which explains the monstrous enormity of Israel's transgression in going after other gods and forsaking Yahweh."⁹ This was "the sin of the Amorites" which had reached its full measure. This was the kind of religion that God wanted wiped out by Israel. This was the religion that caused a process we could call "Canaanitization" (the process of the Israelites becoming like the Canaanites). Following Canaanite religion in order to achieve the elements of the ideal life entailed turning from faith in God to trust in magical powers and practices.

The Ideal Life In Traditional Africa

At this point, we could venture into a discussion of traditional African views of the Supreme God, his relationship with the God of the Bible, and as the ultimate source of the good things of life. African theologians have come to different conclusions about these issues, usually also striving to correct disrespectful attitudes towards Africans, African cultures and African religions on the part of 19th and 20th century missionaries and colonial powers alike.¹⁰

⁹ Merrill, *An Historical Survey of the Old Testament*, p. 170.

¹⁰ See for example, John S. Mbiti, *Concepts of God in Africa*, Second Edition, Nairobi: Acton, 2012, and *Bible and Theology in African Christianity*, Nairobi: Oxford University Press, 1986, who insists on the necessity and usefulness of the African worldview as well as the Bible in African Christianity; Samuel G. Kibicho, *God and Revelation in An African Context*, Nairobi: Acton, 2006, who equates the ATR Supreme Being with the Christian God; Samuel W. Kunhiyop, *African Christian Theology*, Nairobi: HippoBooks, 2012, says, "At most, the beliefs and practices of African Traditional Religion convey only a faint and incomplete understanding of who God is." p. 44. James Nkansah-Obrempong, "Theological Heresy" in *Africa Bible Commentary*, Nairobi: WordAlive, 2006, p. 1579, states that one common heresy is, "the elevation of African traditional religion as equivalent to OT faith".

Upon reflection, it seems unwise for an outsider, even one who has lived long in Africa, to tread where insiders have lived and breathed all their lives. But I am convinced that when we come to faith in Christ, God accepts us as we are, with our worldview, our culture, and our relationships (both function and dysfunctional). And God does not leave us where he finds us - he takes us with our worldview, culture, and relationships to where he wants them to be.¹¹ The written guidebook for this journey is the Bible in our own mother tongue, not someone else's language, culture or form of Christianity. That being said, my focus here is on the narrower topic of where many African Christians look for power to help them achieve the ideal life when serious problems arise.

Many of the everyday problems that church members bring to the pastor are about the difficulty they have in achieving the good things of life, the ideal life. For many people in Africa having an ideal life means that they have wealth, good health, male children to inherit their property, a respected position in the community (or "status"), and a long and peaceful life ending in a normal death and a suitable burial.¹² Both Christians and non-Christians often share the desire to achieve these good things – things that closely echo the OT ideals of the good life.

The following African proverbs, mostly from G. Barra, *1000 Kikuyu Proverbs*, and Patrick Ibekwe, *Wit and Wisdom of Africa*, illustrate the importance of these elements of the ideal and successful life.¹³

1. *Health* "Health has no price." - Swahili, (Ibekwe, p. 87). "*Muici ndathiragwo ni mari hindi*. The thief cannot keep fit, because his stools contain undigested food. The proverb means that a thief, who eats his food in a hurry and with the fear of being caught, cannot enjoy good health." (Barra, p. 58, no. 470). This

¹¹ Readers may recognize the kinship with one of Andrew Walls' abiding biblically-based themes here. See Andrew F. Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History*, Maryknoll/Edinburgh: Orbis Books/T&T Clark, 1996, pp. 7 ff. See also Laurenti Magesa, *What Is Not Sacred: African Spirituality*, Nairobi: Acton, 2014, p. 9.

¹² These ideals are inspired by Marguerite G. Kraft, *Understanding Spiritual Power: A Forgotten Dimension of Cross-Cultural Mission and Ministry*, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1995, pp. 14-19 where she discusses spiritual power and felt needs in six categories: (1) perpetuity needs, (2) prosperity needs, (3) health needs, (4) security needs, (5) restitution needs, and (6) power needs. The specific elements of this ideal life were developed as a result of my field research in Andrew Wildsmith, *Pastoral Issues In The Annang, Ibibio And Igbo Sections Of The Qua Iboe Church Of Nigeria*, an unpublished PhD thesis, University of Edinburgh, December 1998.

¹³ G. Barra, *1,000 Kikuyu Proverbs*, 2nd edition, Nairobi: Kenya Literature Bureau, 1960. Patrick Ibekwe, *Wit and Wisdom of Africa: Proverbs from Africa and the Caribbean*, Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 1998. See also S.S. Farsi, *Swahili Sayings from Zanzibar, vol. 1: Proverbs*, Nairobi: Kenya Literature Bureau, 1958.

indicates that good health is worth more than illegally obtained wealth. Along with good health goes protection from illness caused by evil spiritual powers.¹⁴

2. *Wealth* "A fool owned many cows: they [i.e. the people] never called him fool." Tswana, (Ibekwe, p. 200). "*Muthinio ni kuona aruga muthinio ni wagi*. He who is troubled by having (property) is better off than he who is troubled by poverty." (Barra, p. 68, no. 560). Wealth is better than poverty, in spite of the troubles that accompany it.

3. *Status* "As one's rank, so they give seat". - Igbo, (Ibekwe, p. 157). "*Kurua, kugurana na kuriha thiri gutiiragwo*. Nobody feels sorry for being circumcised, for having bought his wife and for having paid his debts." (Barra, p. 42, no. 336). Circumcision as a sign of adulthood, marriage and being a lender rather than a borrower are signs of higher social status and honour.

4. *Children and Male Heir* "Children are more than wealth". - Ugandan, (Ibekwe, p. 24). "Children are not a cause for rejoicing in themselves; it is the man who is buried by his children that has had children". - Yoruba, (Ibekwe, p. 24). "*Muthuri utari kahaii niwe wiriragira ngururu*. The married man who has no son goes himself to scare away the birds from his harvest." (Barra, p. 70, no. 575). "*Mutumia angikura atari mwana ndangiona mutahiri maai*. The woman that gets old without bearing a child, will have nobody to draw water for her, i.e. will have nobody to help her." (Barra, p. 71, no. 586). These proverbs illustrate one reason why children, especially males, are so valued and loved. To die without a male heir to carry on the family line is a terrible disaster. Sons are a form of personal immortality as well as an important sign of social status.

5. *Protection: Peaceful Relationships* "It is better to build bridges than walls". - Swahili, (Ibekwe, p. 141). "*Mugathi uri gutwika nducokaga muigana*. A broken necklace cannot be made whole again. A broken friendship may be soldered, but will never be sound." (Barra, p. 54, no. 432). Good relationships are very important, not least because they can never be fully restored after being broken. Protection, peace and safety lie in having good relationships with one's family and the community, both of which have spiritual inhabitants as well as physical ones. Obviously this contributes to living a long life.

6. *Long Life* "Cry for life, don't cry for money". - Tshi, (Ibekwe, p. 114). A long life is better than wealth. "*Nyamu nguru ndihatagwo maai*. An old ox is not refused water." (Barra, p. 92, no. 754). Old age is honoured and valued because death is feared and the longer one can put it off shows how successful one is. Part of having a long and peaceful life means protection from physical dangers, such as careless drivers, and good relationships with one's family, neighbours and colleagues at work and with the spiritual world.

¹⁴ The great importance of health and confirmation that it is more than physical can be found in Chima Fredrick Mbieri, "Health and Healing in Igbo Worldview: Significance and Missiological Implications" in *Sedos Bulletin* Vol. 46, No. 1/2- January-February 2014, pp. 24-31, esp. pp. 24-25, 30.

7. *Suitable Burial* "Kunako matanga, kumekufa mtu. Where there is a formal mourning, has died a person." (S.S. Farsi, *Swahili Sayings From Zanzibar*, 1958, p.18, no. 56). If we let "formal mourning" stand for all the various ceremonies surrounding death in various cultures, we see that they certify the social status of the deceased. "A person" refers to a person of notable standing in the community.

From a Christian point of view, these elements of the ideal life in Africa are obviously closely aligned with the Biblical picture of the ideal life previously described. And these elements are good, *except* when people regard them as more important than obedience to God. When any of these good things becomes so important that someone leaves God's will to get them, then it has become an idol to that person. It ceases to be good and becomes a stumbling block that prevents that person from becoming more Christ-like.

8. *Power* As a result of my reading and research, it seems that when something blocks the normal prospect of achieving the elements of the ideal life, then significant numbers of African believers feel a need for spiritual power to aid in the achievement of whatever element of the ideal life is missing. For example, ill health that goes on too long is likely to be suspected of having a spiritual cause or component. If prayer to God, use of modern and traditional medicine, and consulting a Christian prophet-healer (often attached to a charismatic church) don't work then the sick person or his family are faced with the choice of whether or not to step outside the ecclesiastically approved power sources and consult the diviner. If this last step is reluctantly taken, it is taken with a guilty conscience, and without the intention of leaving Christianity as a whole, but the pressing felt need for healing to restore good health is too powerful to ignore for some believers.¹⁵

When stepping outside the usual and approved boundaries in the search for aspects of the ideal life, believers usually step into the world of magic. A magical approach to power seeks to manipulate or channel power to achieve one's desired end. "Magic may be thought of as a self-help program whereby a person employs means to manipulate supernatural agencies to served desired goals."¹⁶ When Christians seek spiritual power from practitioners of traditional African religions, they are engaging in the attempted manipulation of supernatural powers. Whether or not magic "works" is not the point. It is not the reality or unreality of magical practices that is the issue. The issue is loyalty to the true God. When Christians seek help from other powers when they should be seeking help from God, they betray Christ just as Judas did. By rejecting a magical approach, and by rejecting reliance on other powers in

¹⁵ For a similar line of thought see Andrew Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History*, pp. 99, 117. See also Magesa, *What Is Not Sacred?*, pp. 15 ff.

¹⁶ Philip M. Steyne, *Gods of Power*, Columbia, SC: Impact International Foundation, 1990, p. 108.

favour of trusting God to deliver whatever quantity of the elements of the ideal life he wills, African Christians can live faithfully for Christ in this fallen world.

A Counterfeit Route to the Ideal Life: A Western Secular Worldview

If the traditional African perceptions of the ideal life have striking similarities to Old Testament ideas of the ideal life, the modern Western worldview has some striking differences. As mentioned above, all human beings treasure good health. In Western societies, health care consumes vast amounts of money that includes research for developing new drugs and medical technologies, etc. The focus on “good” health in lifestyle, diets, exercise programs and in many other areas seems to totally consume some people. The same excessive attitude drives the need to accumulate wealth and the products, especially luxury products, that wealth can buy. As a popular advertising slogan says, “There are some things that money can’t buy. For everything else, there’s Mastercard.” It is no accident that Prosperity Theology arose in the USA. Status and wealth are clearly linked in the West. And status is linked with individual fame, or infamy. Professional sports figures, entertainment celebrities, and politicians are a few of the classes of people to whom status is ascribed whether they are famous or infamous. Individualism has such a chokehold on modern Western thinking that significant numbers of people regard children and male heirs as a comparatively low priority. Many of the Westerners with this attitude avoid having children at all so that both partners can maximize their earnings.

Protection, peace and safety in the West are a high priority and have both individual and corporate aspects. Individuals are expected to protect themselves with insurance coverage, through crime avoidance and prevention efforts, but also to rely on the police and the military to handle the active resistance to criminals. There are wide variations of this individual/corporate balance in different cultures. For example, in the US, many citizens regard it as their duty to protect themselves and deter criminal activity against them by owning and using firearms. As in many cultures, both long life and a suitable burial are cherished, the former being closely connected with good health.

Christians, both inside and outside Africa, may unconsciously and unintentionally mix magical thinking with the exercise of true faith. For example, some, perhaps many, otherwise mature Western evangelical Christians unconsciously expect God to love them more and make their lives more comfortable when they are regularly engaged in personal devotions. They don’t perceive of this as magical thinking, but it is. Personal devotions are good and ought to be performed sincerely and regularly, but God’s love for us is not based on them and our performance of personal devotions is not directly related to the degree of comfort we experience in life. African believers too may fall into magical ways of thinking when approaching God. Keeping one’s Bible under the pillow or on the bedside table at night as protection against the dangers of the night is one example.

A Counterfeit Route to the Ideal Life through Prosperity Theology

“These are days when the gospel has come to be viewed as a short cut to the good things of life - a good car or a bigger house.”¹⁷ The American import known as Prosperity Theology or the Health and Wealth Gospel is no stranger to us. Various secular condemnations and theological evaluations based on Scripture have been published in numerous newspaper articles, journals and books. My purpose is not to go over ground already covered. Nor is my purpose to hinder anyone from achieving a higher standard of living. I will limit my discussion to an attempt to describe this very popular phenomenon in terms of its view of the ideal life before evaluating that view according to Jesus’ experience of the ideal life.

Although we need to keep in mind that any description of Prosperity Theology and its relationship to the ideals of the successful life must be only a slice out of one part of the wide spectrum of beliefs and practices associated with this movement, I intend to describe ideas from fully fledged prosperity gospel thinking. Many Christians who accept only parts of the health and wealth gospel and reject others are not represented here. I refer only to those committed to all of its major beliefs and practices.

For such “true believers”, only good health is acceptable. Illness and suffering are signs of sin or a lack of faith. Only ever-increasing extreme wealth is acceptable - anything less is at best a sign of a long way to go, or at worst, evidence of sin or lack of faith. Poverty is not only undesirable, but also a curse and a sin. Serious proponents of prosperity thinking seek ever-increasing social status. This is reflected in the titles used for the religious specialists who preach this different gospel. Any ecclesiastical and academic titles less than Bishop, Prophet, etc and PhD are mere stepping stones to the higher prizes. Although this title fever is not limited to prosperity theology practitioners (and is indeed a serious problem for many Christian leaders around the globe), it is rare, if not impossible, to find a true prosperity preacher in Africa who is immune to the condition.

While my impression of African prosperity thinking in regard to the desire for children, especially sons, is that this remains an important element in the ideal life, I think it can easily be accompanied by an increase in individualism as well. The family remains an important institution for prosperity gospel proponents, but it seems individualism in the form of an increased focus on the self and its welfare is also on the rise. This may be an inevitable result of the commitment to what has been called “the gospel of greed”. Similarly, it seems that peaceful relationships with people in the phenomenal world and with the inhabitants of the spiritual world continue to be valued, yet valued not only for community harmony, but also as a means to individual success.

¹⁷ Adeleye, *Preachers of a Different Gospel*, pp. 6-7.

Prosperity theology assumes people should have a long life, but takes this idea beyond reason sometimes. Adeleye has heard of a song based on this gospel that asserts, "I shall not die".¹⁸ When death is not denied, it is essentially ignored.¹⁹ And since death is either denied or ignored, when they die practitioners of prosperity theology must be buried according to whatever community customs are strongest amongst the relatives concerned. The prosperity gospel has no place for death, just as it has no place for suffering.

Prosperity theology in its fully-fledged form operates as a type of superficially Christianized magic. When Christians hope to enjoy the ideal life on this earth, they may try to achieve it by magical means, rather than by God's means. Magic is the use of power through incantations, rites and charms in order to control human actions or natural events. The magician believes that if he performs the magic properly then the desired result will automatically be attained. Magical prayers try to force God into a positive response. If we try to be very obedient to God's ways, to pray and fast regularly, and to preach the Gospel in order to persuade God to give us the ideal life, then we are trying to manipulate God into doing what we want. That is a magical approach to prayer. Prayer is supposed to be an effort to conform our desires to God's desires. Magic is an effort to conform God's desires to our desires. The God who experienced Jesus' righteousness is not going to be impressed with our attempts to appear righteous for selfish reasons.²⁰

Many people do not even consider that they might be selfish when they pray for the ideal life. Many do not realise the difference between a magical, manipulative approach to prayer and true supplication. True supplication prays from the depths of the heart ("*Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me*"), but is willing to be conformed to the will of God in order to build God's Kingdom ("*yet not my will, but yours be done*"). People need to understand true spiritual power. A person may be a true Christian, yet have a magical idea of spiritual power. A person may be a true Christian, and act like one most of the time, but when one element of the ideal life, such as getting a male heir, becomes a very strong desire, he may return to traditional ways of solving the problem. Sometimes these traditional ways may break the rules of the church or they may violate his conscience. He finds himself believing he has to act in a way that is not Christian in order to achieve the ideal life.

¹⁸ Adeleye, *Preachers of a Different Gospel*, p. 3.

¹⁹ See Kate Bowler, *Blessed: A History of the American Prosperity Gospel*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013, pp. 172-177.

²⁰ For additional examples of magical thinking among Christians see John S. Mbiti, *New Testament Eschatology in an African Background*, London: Oxford University Press, 1971, pp. 113, 120-123; and David Tuesday Adamo, "African Cultural Hermeneutics" in R. S. Sugirthajah, ed. *Vernacular Hermeneutics*. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999.

Jesus and the Ideal Life

Many African Christians share all or part of the traditional African views of power and the elements of the ideal life. Most people in Africa would find it difficult to be poor, to be sick, to be without the respect and position (status) they think they deserve. For most Christian men in Africa it would be hard to be without a wife and male heir, and to have all their church superiors so angry with them that they are trying to kill them. It would be tragic to die a bad death at a young age and to be buried far from home in a borrowed grave without any funeral. Yet Jesus was poor, was not generally recognised as the Messiah and the Son of God, was not married and so had no male heir. He died a bad death, the death of a criminal, at a young age at the hands of his own people, and was buried far from home in a borrowed grave without any funeral.

The Bible does not tell us about Jesus being sick, but it does say that, "we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathise with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are - yet was without sin" (Heb. 4:15). Jesus shares our humanity, was made like us in every way, and "because he himself suffered when he was tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted" (Heb. 2:14,17,18). Jesus did not live the ideal life as described in the Bible or Africa. It is not that he lacked power or faith to achieve the good elements of the ideal life. Jesus' love for the Father and for us, his neighbours, enabled him to put the will of God, the Kingdom of God, and the salvation of the world before his own normally legitimate human needs as expressed in the elements of the ideal and successful life.

What could be better than the Prosperity Gospel's version of the ideal and successful life? Hebrews 12:2 reminds us: "Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God." Just as the Prosperity Gospel denies or ignores death, so too it undervalues the reason for Jesus' life, ministry, death, resurrection, ascension to heaven and promised return to establish the new heavens and the new earth, a new garden of Eden that can never be lost. The Prosperity Gospel is a different gospel because it under-emphasizes the reason for Jesus' first coming, it misunderstands the true nature of faith, it has a mistaken view of the true nature of this fallen world, and it ignores our destiny as believers. Its version of the ideal life falls far short of Biblical reality.

The Ideal Life in Heaven (New Heavens and New Earth, Rev. 21:1)²¹

Whatever the details of one's eschatology, when all the events of the end times are completed there will be a new heavens and a new earth, like a restored Eden, the garden of God. And God's people from every tribe and

²¹ See also Isaiah 65:17; 66:22; 2 Peter 3:13.

nation and language will have resurrection bodies, spiritual bodies that have put on immortality. It is only then that we will enjoy perfect, unending health. But even more, we will see God face to face, something that is impossible in these imperfect, fallen bodies bound for decay. Only then will we be immortal and sin-free, and only then capable of seeing the fully glorified God. Wealth too will be transposed into what it was always meant to be. Gold will be so common that it is used to pave heaven's streets. Believers will come of age and inherit their full social status as sons and daughters of God.

There will be no concerns about singleness, marriage and a male heir for we will enjoy closeness beyond anything experienced in our current families or marriages. These good things foreshadow the ultimate experience of what it means to be part of God's true family as brothers and sisters in Christ. The perfect peaceful relationships amongst humans, angels and the Trinity that we long for in this imperfect, fallen world will be fulfilled in a way we cannot now comprehend. We will be *Home* in a way that surpasses any warm and secure feelings we might have now when we return from a time away. The new heavens and the new earth, the restored Garden of Eden where we can walk and talk with God is our real home. There we will experience eternal life that we can only express now in negative terms - no pain, no death, no sorrow.

When we compare Jesus' life and teaching with that envisioned by the health and wealth gospel, we see the latter's poverty and unnecessarily limited perspective. When we compare the promises of the prosperity preachers with the vision of the new heavens and the new earth, we see how unreal, truncated and skewed the prosperity vision is.

It is this new heavens and new earth that God is working towards and that he has invited human beings to enter. God is not satisfied with the partial gospel of the prosperity preachers. God is not limited to making his people comfortable in a fallen creation - which is the best the prosperity gospel can do. God's will is not simply that we avoid being poor and that we avoid suffering as individuals. God's will is that poverty, suffering and sin be banished, just as evil beings are banished to the lake of fire. We do not seek the Kingdom of God and his righteousness (Mt. 6:33) in order to receive overflowing material wealth. We seek it because when the Kingdom of God is fully established on earth as it is in heaven, our lives will not be simply comfortable in the midst of others' suffering in a fallen world. Instead we will live perfectly righteous lives in the presence of our Creator without any trace of sin, suffering and poverty existing anywhere. At that point God's will in fact be done on earth as it already is done in heaven.

The Implications for Africa

African traditional worldviews, exactly like all other worldviews, are in need of transformation. As Mugambi said, "All cultures need the Gospel and are

judged by it."²² Not everything in African cultures is headed in the wrong direction, just as not everything in other cultures is headed in the wrong direction. But, like all societies, African societies need transformation to become all God wants them to be. The elements of the ideal life we have been discussing are similar in both ancient Hebrew culture and in traditional African culture. But one of the deviant forms of Western culture, Prosperity Theology, has a very twisted approach to the elements of the ideal and successful life.

African Christianity would benefit by maintaining its more Biblically sound and holistic approach to its view of the ideal life rather than adopting the flawed one found in Prosperity Theology. In particular a Biblical tension must be sustained between this life (the main concern of OT Israel, ATR and modern prosperity preachers), and eternity (the ultimate goal of God as expressed in the whole story of redemption from Genesis to Revelation). This tension is essential to the Church's mission. John Mbiti links the purpose and mission of the church to eschatology. "This purpose of mission is the purpose of the church's own being and existence. This purpose is linked to the eschatological fulfilment of God's ultimate purpose in creation and salvation."²³ But this necessary tension between the present and the future can easily be lost as Mbiti noted long ago. Speaking of an imbalance in the perception of the relationship of this world to the next Mbiti asserts, "The Christian Gospel is intensely eschatological, and if the interpretation or presentation of Eschatology is distorted, so would the Gospel itself also become distorted".²⁴ More recently, Nigerian scholar Matthew Michael adds,

In fact, one can readily say that the Christian message becomes meaningless without a right emphasis on its eschatological vision or description of the persons and events of the next world. The message of the Christian faith ends in the book of Revelation with a graphic description of the world of the future whereby all the wrongs of the present world are made right and the dawning of a new world order without death, sickness, poverty, and all the other ills that have continually battered the pride of human attainments and advancement. Consequently, the message of the Christian Bible closes with a message of hope.²⁵

The new heavens and the new earth are not a consolation prize offered to compensate believers for simply enduring life in this fallen world. The restored Eden is not an afterthought but our destiny as forgiven human beings, according to God's eternal plan. At best, Prosperity Theology halts our journey

²² Jesse N.K. Mugambi, *Christianity and African Culture*, Nairobi: Acton Publishers, 2002, p. 2.

²³ Mbiti, *Bible and Theology in African Christianity*, p. 191.

²⁴ Mbiti, *New Testament Eschatology in an African Background*, p. 61. Mbiti's sentiment can be applauded, but the direction his discussion takes is contentious. See Richard J. Gehman, *Doing African Christian Theology*, Nairobi: Evangel, 1987, pp. 54-60.

²⁵ Matthew Michael, *Christian Theology and African Traditions*, Cambridge: The Lutterworth Press, 2013, p. 209.

towards perfection by stubbornly trying to sell its pale version of the ideal life - a version that is doomed to perish when we leave this world. At its worst the Health and Wealth “gospel” is a counterfeit gospel that “is therefore nothing less than seduction into a delusion”.²⁶ Like Canaanite Religion and modern Western secularism, Prosperity Theology is far too small and impoverished to survive an encounter with the truth of the Scriptural vision of the new heavens and the new earth.

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²⁶ Adeleye, *Preachers of a Different Gospel*, p. 101.

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