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Provision & Wealth Overview

Note: "Overview" articles are full-length explorations of major topics in the theology of work. If you're interested in a specific aspect of the topic, the table of contents can help you jump there quickly. Most sections of overview articles are also on the website as brief resources in their own right.

INTRODUCTION

God intends for everyone to thrive economically. He wants us to find provision (basic needs) for our daily life. He also desires for us to enjoy the wealth (abundance) of his generosity. Furthermore, God's world has ample resources to provide all we need. However, in the fallen world we inhabit, many people do not experience God's abundant provision. Others find their needs are met, but only at great cost (emotional, physical, relational, environmental, moral or spiritual) to themselves and those around them. Then there are still other people who attain significant economic wealth, but this is gained through harming others or themselves. Whatever situation we find ourselves in economically, questions and concerns about God's intent and role in provision and wealth weigh heavily on almost every Christian's mind. Such matters are to the fore in the lives of rich and poor; employer, employee and job seeker; student, parent and retiree; homeowner, tenant and homeless person.

Fortunately, this concern for the economic is matched by the priority it is given in Scripture. Indeed, provision and wealth are far from peripheral issues in the Bible. They occupy a large share of both the Old and New Testaments, and are prominent in the Gospels.

So what does God's word have to say to us? In this article we will explore:

- God's original intentions for us regarding provision and wealth
- The impact living in a fallen world has had on our capacity to experience provision and wealth
- God's response in redeeming the economic sphere, and our role in this
- What we can reasonably expect from God in regard to our provision
- How we should treat any wealth we possess

Overall, our emphasis is more on God's intent for how we handle wealth, and less on what it means to depend on God for basic provision. Many who read this article may feel anxious about whether God will

provide for their needs, but we guess that for the majority of readers, much of the anxiety is really about whether they will continue to enjoy a high level of wealth—by world standards—rather than basic provision. Basic provision is nonetheless an essential part of the discussion, of course, and we welcome further insight in this area, especially from those whose experience in living with poverty and anxiety about basic provision is greater than ours.

God's Original Intentions: Blessing, Provision, Abundance

The account of Genesis 1 and 2 makes it clear that God planned for humanity to enjoy the beauty, abundance and fruitfulness of creation. In the idyllic setting of the Garden of Eden, the first humans found a rich, fertile place, and humanity was intended to prosper in every sense. God provides an abundance of resources and means for humans to flourish.

As the writer of Genesis states early on in the story about the creation of humans, “God blessed them” (Genesis 1:28). The word “blessing” or “blessed” is a central feature of the biblical story. Part of the blessing of relationship with God is very definitely tangible, in-the-hand stuff. And these material blessings are thoroughly integrated with the other benefits of knowing and loving the Creator.

Later, even in the barrenness of the wilderness, the people of Israel find daily provision from God, in the form of manna (Exodus 16) and water gushing from the rock (Exodus 17). The abundant wealth of God's creation is discovered further on in the biblical narrative by the people of Israel, when they finally reach the Promised Land. It is a land “flowing with milk and honey,” rich with all the ingredients needed to live according to God's design. Deuteronomy records the promise made to God's people in the desert that they would find on earth everything they need to prosper.

For the Lord your God is bringing you into a good land, a land with flowing streams, with springs and underground waters welling up in valleys and hills, a land of wheat and barley, of vines and fig trees and pomegranates, a land of olive trees and honey, a land where you may eat bread without scarcity, where you will lack nothing. (Deuteronomy 8:7-9)

From the beginning, God perfectly provisioned the world for humans to thrive. The good earth yields food when humans exercise their God-given ability to “till it and keep it” (Genesis 2:15). God's intent is that people would not merely subsist, but have good things in abundance. “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it” (Genesis 1:28). God gives people the capacity to understand the natural world so that we make use of its resources (Genesis 2:20). Human work and ingenuity are more than capable of developing God's creation to provide abundantly for all people. In partnership with the

Creator, we are to make creative use of the resources of the earth, growing and innovating, creating new products, improving on the original. There is more than enough raw material to go around. This is in stark contrast to the principle of scarcity that applies to most goods and materials in post-Eden economics.

At our best, we humans have cooperated with God amazingly well in developing his creation. Whether it be the development of agriculture and horticulture, the harnessing of coal, oil, gas, wind and water for power generation, the creation of parks, gardens and images of beauty, or the design and building of houses, appliances, clothes and modes of transport, all such developments that enrich our lives are expressions of co-creation. The capacity to innovate, produce and develop is part of what it means to be made in God's image.

The Effects of a Fallen World

The rebellion of the first humans (Genesis 3) had a catastrophic effect on all of creation—not just their relationship with God, but also their capacity to draw provision and create wealth from the land. The Fall demonstrates that when we break our relationship with God, we create economic problems, along with all sorts of other evil. Because God is the source of blessing, no longer being close to him undermines humanity's ability to find provision and wealth.

As a result of the Fall, people began to live under both a curse and a blessing. This had significant implications for work. The land—and therefore its productivity and fruitfulness—is deeply impaired by the breaking of relationship, prompting God to say to Adam:

Cursed is the ground because of you; in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life; thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you; and you shall eat the plants of the field. By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread until you return to the ground... (Genesis 3:17b-19a)

We may even become unable to draw basic provision from the materials of creation, whether by our own fault, or by the fault of others, or by no one's fault in particular. Drug abuse, poor work habits, lack of access to education, ill health, concentration of resources in the hands of elites, ethnic discrimination and a myriad of other causes may prevent individuals, families, communities, and entire societies from co-creation with God of the provision they need. In the fallen world we inhabit, God's original intentions for provision and wealth are disrupted in several notable ways.

Many People Are Unable To Obtain Even Basic Provision

About 1.4 billion of the world's population live in extreme poverty, meaning they lack the basic necessities of life. A further 1.1 billion live at subsistence level, on a kind of "hand-to-mouth" existence that is only one crisis away from disaster.^[1] Economic poverty affects nearly 40 percent of humanity. Given what we have seen in Genesis 1 and 2, this is clearly not how God intended things to be. So why is this the daily reality of so many people?

In a world that was entirely level and fair, good choices would lead to provision and wealth, and poor choices to poverty. In such a cause-and-effect world, the truth of proverbs such as, "In all toil there is profit, but mere talk leads only to poverty," (Proverbs 14:23) would make perfect sense. Laziness, wasteful indulgence, poor self-discipline and addictive behaviour would all lead naturally to poverty. On the other hand, hard work, careful consumption, healthy self-discipline and freedom from addictions would result in wealth. This may be the case for millions or billions of people in the world today—their relative wealth or poverty being due largely to their own good choices, hard work, and ingenuity. In well-governed societies, among those with equal access to resources and education, and in situations where illness, disaster, family dysfunction, crime, and accidents do not hamper people, individuals' wealth and poverty may be the fair outcomes of personal effort.

But the truth is that on a global scale, we don't live in anything close to a level playing field. The fallen world is neither fair nor even-handed. None of us start life from the same position. Our family, community and societal circumstances dictate much about our opportunities in the world. Some of us are fortunate to be born into loving, nurturing families in prosperous countries, with a myriad of abilities and opportunities. Sadly, others are born into circumstances that are resourceless in every sense of the word. They are never given the basis they need to provide for themselves.

It is true that the majority of poverty is a result of some form of human sin and error. But it is not necessarily *their own sin* that causes people to lack provision or wealth. Poor government, war, corruption, exploitation by the powerful, lack of education and training, family and social ills that prevent people from reaching their potential, all contribute to many people not having enough, through no fault of their own. In particular, lack of provision often lies in whole or part with social or personal sin *against* the poor. That is, they are victims of others' sin. A tyrant confiscates a family's land, depriving them of their capacity to produce. A factory exploits vulnerable workers by paying below legal wages and threatening those who object. A wealthy landowner strips large tracts of forested land of its vegetation, putting millions of people downstream at risk of flooding. A husband becomes addicted to gambling, and leaves his wife and children penniless. An investment fails because of fraud and deception, leaving a family who had saved hard for the future without means.

Even so, not all poverty is the result of sin, or at least not sin that can be traced to anyone in particular.

Some people are unable to provide for their needs because of disability, illness, age or other factors that aren't anyone's fault. In the Old Testament, three such groups of people were particularly vulnerable—"the widow, the orphan and the foreigner."^[2] Anticipating this, the Hebrew Law contained regulations that would ensure these people were provided for.^[3] Zechariah is typical of the Prophets when he writes: "Thus says the Lord of hosts: Render true judgments, show kindness and mercy to one another; do not oppress the widow, the orphan, the alien, or the poor" (Zechariah 7:9-10).^[4]

Other poverty occurs because of the unpredictability of our planet. A natural disaster such as an earthquake, tsunami, drought or flood can devastate whole communities, destroying crops, homes, possessions and livelihoods in a single moment. For example, a quarter of a million people lost their lives in the Boxing Day tsunami in 2004 that swamped coastal Indonesia and other parts of South East Asia, and many more survivors were left homeless and without any means to provide for themselves.

We must be very careful then, not to make assumptions about the reasons for anyone's situation—rich or poor. So many factors are at work, some of individuals' own making; many outside their control. The Bible is very realistic in this regard. For example, it has been noted that, "fewer than one-third of the proverbs dealing with rich and poor teach that people get what they deserve, whereas the rest recognize the presence and problem of socio-economic justice."^[5] So while there are times when the Bible connects provision or lack of it with a cause, generally Scripture is less concerned with identifying the particular causes of poverty and more concerned with the obligations of those who have wealth to care for those who lack provision.

Many People Find Provision and Even Become Wealthy—But Cause Great Harm

Compared to the billions of people who struggle to scratch out a daily existence, those in the world who have enough to satisfy their needs and more may seem blessed. And they are, economically speaking, at least. However, having plenty can come at the cost of great harm to the individual, family, community or nation that has it and also to those who may suffer as a consequence. We will explore several situations of provision or wealth causing harm to those who gain it or those they exploit to do so.

Wealth Gained Through Unjust Means is Harmful

Some national leaders attain provision or wealth through unjust means such as exploitation, force, corruption, theft and others. Brutal dictators and regimes take what they want, oppressing their own people through force and intimidation, living lives of luxury while their people struggle to survive. Burma, Zimbabwe, Libya...the list could go on.

Some multi-national corporations exploit cheap labour markets, impose unsafe working conditions on desperate workers, or devastate local ecosystems in order to reap outsized profits. Their gains occur at great cost to people and places unseen by home-country regulators and disconnected from the consumers who buy the products.

Some individuals and organizations defraud or deceive household investors into taking excessive risks, without any concern for the people they might be hurting in the process.

These are just a few of the ways wealth is obtained to the detriment of others. The cause of such injustices is so often greed—“an intense and selfish desire for wealth, power or food.”^[6] The Apostle Paul confronts this issue in the church at Ephesus when he writes to Timothy, arguing that

Those who want to be rich fall into temptation and are trapped by many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil, and in their eagerness to be rich some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pains. (1 Timothy 6:9-10)

The consequences of such greed are often more than just damage to our own spiritual state and the deprivation of others economically. Greed can also produce degradation of the environment—resulting in significant damage to the earth, which ultimately affects the capacity of others to live well and reduces future productivity for everyone.

Sadly, in ancient Israel some people became rich through unjust means. In fact, much of the message of the Prophets targets economic injustice by those with wealth and power in Israel. Through spokespersons such as Amos, Micah and Jeremiah, God states that our worship is meaningless if we are accumulating wealth through the exploitation of others. If we say we love God, then this should be reflected in the way we treat others and conduct business.

Judgment comes on Israel, “because they sell the righteous for silver and the needy for a pair of sandals” (Amos 2:6b). Such condemnation is an inevitable consequence of the nation of Israel’s failure to be faithful to its covenantal responsibilities. For God’s trademarks are his steadfast love, justice and righteousness.^[7] By implication, they are also core to what it means to be the covenant community. For ensuring that all members of society (and particularly the weak) have access to resources in order to live a life of dignity, is part of Israel’s covenantal responsibilities.

Sadly, the mechanisms under the Law that sought to build a fair, just and compassionate society had been flouted and ignored. Instead of modeling God’s shalom, Israel had become just like every other nation—a cesspit of oppression, abuse of power, and flagrant disregard for those caught on the

economic scrapheap. The rich gained ownership of much of the land (in contravention of Leviticus 25:25-28), then leased it back to small farmers at interest (forbidden by Deuteronomy 23:19-20), which in turn led to default of loans. Meanwhile, they perverted the justice system by bribery. As a result, those dispossessed of capacity to earn a living had to sell themselves into slavery.

In response, the prophet Amos pleads, “Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an everflowing stream” (Amos 5:24). Micah asks: “What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?” (Micah 6:8). The way we earn, employ or manage others, conduct business, invest and spend our money can be just *or* unjust. And this cannot be separated from our worship of God. We cannot love God and exploit other people in pursuit of wealth.

Legitimate Wealth Can Still be Harmful

Not all accumulation of wealth is a result of injustice. However, even when wealth is gained through legitimate means, it still has the potential to do great harm. There are many passages of Scripture that alert the reader to the truth that wealth is dangerous. Riches can cause all kinds of negative side effects:

Firstly, wealth can lead to pride and arrogance. Proverbs 28:11 notes, “The rich is wise in self-esteem, but an intelligent poor person sees through the pose.” It is easy for those with wealth to believe they have gained it solely through their own cleverness or hard work. Ezekiel warns the King of Tyre, “By your great wisdom in trade you have increased your wealth, and your heart has become proud in your wealth” (Ezekiel 28:5).

Secondly, wealth frequently leads to self-sufficiency, complacency and a false sense of security. One extreme example of this is Ephraim’s boast in Hosea 12:8. “Ah, I am rich, I have gained wealth for myself; in all of my gain no offense has been found in me that would be sin.” And the words of Hosea a chapter later are also very poignant—describing Israel’s abandonment of God—“When I fed them, they were satisfied; they were satisfied, and their heart was proud” (Hosea 13:6). Jesus also notes the danger of wealth lulling us into a false sense of security, in his parable of the rich fool (Luke 12:13-21). It is only too easy to think that we have no need of God when our bellies are full, life is good, and the future seems assured.

Thirdly, wealth can also dull our senses to the deep needs around us, draining us of compassion and mercy. Jesus tells the parable of the rich man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19-31). Even though the poor man Lazarus lives in great distress at the rich man’s gate, the rich man is impervious to his plight, so consumed is he with his own lifestyle and consumption. Ironically, even in Hades, the rich man is obsessed with his own needs and still views Lazarus as nothing but a pawn.

Fourthly, and most seductive of all, is the lure riches have in capturing our hearts and dividing our loyalties. Here we see the Bible's acknowledgment of the power that money wields. The Psalmist warns us of this when he writes, "If riches increase, do not set your heart on them" (Psalm 62:10b). This danger is also carefully spelled out for the people of Israel in Deuteronomy 8:12-17:

When you have eaten your fill and have built fine houses and live in them, and when your herds and flocks have multiplied, and your silver and gold is multiplied...then do not exalt yourself, forgetting the Lord your God...Do not say to yourself, "My power and the might of my own hand have gotten me this wealth."

These are sobering words. Perhaps this is why the writer of Proverbs 30 asks of God:

Give me neither poverty nor riches; feed me with the food that I need, or I shall be full, and deny you, and say, "Who is the Lord?" or I shall be poor, and steal, and profane the name of my God. (Proverbs 30:8-9)

The dangers of wealth are even more pronounced in the New Testament. Central to the attitude of Jesus is his statement:

No one can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth. (Matthew 6:24)

The word used here for wealth is *mammon*. Some translations, such as the NIV, capitalize this word to emphasize that Jesus is pitting one god against another. Both seek our allegiance and worship. Wealth is not neutral. It's insatiable—once you have some of it, you seem to keep wanting more and more of it. No wonder Jesus commented to his disciples after his encounter with the rich young man:

Truly I tell you, it will be hard for a rich person to enter the kingdom of heaven. Again I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God. (Matthew 19:23-24)

For Jesus then, wealth is a dangerous thing. It is like a stick of dynamite—having the potential to do

much good, but also to cause a lot of damage. And the more you have, the greater the risks.

Fifthly, gaining provision and wealth may fuel dissatisfaction with what we have and, with it, the desire for more. Envy and covetousness can easily develop as we compare our lot with that of others who have more than we do. In fact, the drive to accumulate and to consume more makes us vulnerable to manipulation. As early as 1929, Floyd Allen, an executive with General Motors, put it bluntly—“Advertising is the business of making people helpfully dissatisfied with what they have in favor of something better.”^[8]

More recently, sociologist Bernard McGrane suggested that

One of the sub-texts of all advertising is, “You’re not okay the way you are. Things are bad. You need help. You need salvation.” In that sense, advertising is designed to generate endless self-criticism, all sorts of anxieties, and then to offer the entire world of consumer goods as your salvation...In contrast, one message you’ll never hear in advertising is, “You’re okay. You don’t need anything. Just be yourself.”^[9]

We easily find ourselves perpetually desiring more. We have trained our appetites to always desire more. Working out what is enough is exceptionally challenging within this environment. Perhaps this is what James was addressing when he wrote:

You covet something and cannot obtain it; so you engage in disputes and conflicts. You do not have, because you do not ask. You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, in order to spend what you get on your pleasures. (James 4:2-3)

Sixthly, we can become anxious and full of worry about the future provision of our needs. One would think that this kind of concern would only fill the hearts and minds of those who genuinely don’t have enough. However, most people who have plenty also develop this insidious stress. Having more than the basic necessities seems to make us more anxious because now we have more stuff to worry about losing.

The fear of not having enough is what drives some people to work unnecessarily long hours under the pretext that to provide for their children means buying them the latest gadgets and fashionable clothes, when what they really need most is the parent’s time and attention. Others are consumed by the fear that they won’t have enough money to sustain them through their twilight years. And so they plan for their future provision at the cost of serving God and others in the here-and-now, developing rich and meaningful relationships, or living a balanced life.

Still others lie awake at night worrying about whether a particular investment is safe or dreaming of how to get the house or car they really want. In fact, more anxious energy is consumed on money matters than on almost anything else. Is it this anxiety that drives people to do things they normally wouldn't—like commit fraud, be less than honest, sacrifice a friendship or compromise their values?

Having more than the basic provision we need can be a burden. The well-known words of Jesus in Matthew 6—spoken to a crowd who knew what it was like to struggle to make ends meet—are particularly pertinent:

Do not worry, saying, “What will we eat?” or “What will we drink?” or “What will we wear?” For it is the Gentiles who strive for all these things; and indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. (Matthew 6:31-33)

This is a very provocative statement of Jesus. It is not easy to trust God—particularly if your economic future is uncertain. However, as N.T. Wright notes: “When [Jesus] urged his followers not to worry about tomorrow, we must assume he led them by example.”^[10] If we ask, “Can anyone really trust God this way?” we can answer that at least one person did.

Redeeming the Economic Sphere

While it is true that God's original intention for humanity to enjoy his provision and wealth has been disrupted, the story is not finished. God's response to the lack of provision and wealth in the world is to redeem the economic sphere so that it again provides what everyone needs.

The Apostle Paul reminds us in Colossians that

In him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself *all* things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross. (Colossians 1:19-20)

“All things” includes the economic sphere.

A critical way God brings about this redemption is through the lives of Jesus' followers. Colossians continues,

You who were once estranged and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, he has now reconciled in his fleshly body through death, so as to present you holy and blameless and irreprouchable before him. (Colossians 1:21-22)

And in his second letter to the Corinthians, Paul expands on God's work in and through us:

If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation; everything old has passed away, everything has become new! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation...entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. So we are ambassadors for Christ. (2 Corinthians 5:17-20)

This reconciliation with God has enormous implications for *every* aspect of our lives, including economics. Ambassadors, of course, represent their sovereigns' economic interests, along with all other interests.

So what might this mean for our role as Christ's ambassadors and redemptive partners?

We Are To Develop And Model Right Attitudes To Provision And Wealth

Redeeming our use of money resources begins with the nurturing of biblical attitudes—from which right actions will flow. Three fundamental biblical attitudes are trusteeship, gratitude and contentment.

From an Attitude of Ownership to Trusteeship

The first humans were directed by God to take care of the Garden and all creatures and plants within it. This is often called the "creation mandate." God shared the day-to-day management of the Garden with Adam and Eve. They were to view themselves as caretakers of the created order.

This trusteeship is built on the principle that ultimate ownership of everything we have and inhabit is not ours, but God's. God is the owner, who has entrusted management to us, to be exercised according to his purposes. As the Psalmist declares, "The earth is the Lord's and all that is in it" (Psalm 24:1). King David affirms the same in his prayer in front of the people of Israel, at the establishment of the Temple building fund. "All things come from you, and of your own have we given" (1 Chronicles 29:14b). We have no right to claim absolute ownership of any of our resources, neither money, possessions, business, abilities, physical environment nor heritage. We are merely trustees of whatever provision or

wealth we receive.

Fiduciary duty, or stewardship, is a key element of trusteeship. While trustees are given a great deal of freedom to act and make decisions regarding resource allocation, they do so *on behalf* of the true owners or beneficiaries of the body they manage. And, of course, the greater the resources entrusted to them, the greater their responsibility. Jesus picks up on this in his parable of the faithful or unfaithful slave, noting that, “From everyone to whom much has been given, much will be required; and from the one to whom much has been entrusted, even more will be demanded” (Luke 12:48b). Craig Blomberg puts it this way: “People in positions of power have no increased privilege—just increased responsibility!”^[11]

Acting as trustees of whatever wealth we have been given, is therefore foundational to a biblical perspective on provision and wealth. These resources are not for us to do with as we please. Nor is how we use them no one else’s business. While God does not expect us to live on nothing, he does require us to maximise our resources for the building of God’s kingdom. Those fortunate enough to be born into affluence have a responsibility to use their wealth to provide for those who don’t have enough. They may accomplish this in a variety of ways, including donations, investments, and direct service.

The command to use our resources for the benefit of poor people is given directly in the book of Exodus.

For six years you shall sow your land and gather in its yield; but the seventh year you shall let it rest and lie fallow, so that the poor of your people may eat; and what they leave the wild animals may eat. You shall do the same with your vineyard, and with your olive orchard. (Exodus 23:10-11)

Whoever owns land has a duty to let the poor use it free of charge one year in every seven, and even to let wild animals make use of it. This command is repeated in Deuteronomy in even simpler terms:

Since there will never cease to be some in need on the earth, I therefore command you, “Open your hand to the poor and needy neighbor in your land.” (Deuteronomy 15:11)

The crucial point is that we are not to hoard the resources entrusted to us for ourselves, maintaining lifestyles, homes and church facilities beyond what is needed.

Trusteeship reminds us *who* we are working for—God—and for *what* we are working toward—God’s kingdom. It centres us in a new economy and a different dream, one framed by God’s agenda for this

world, and for us. As partners with God we have been called to participate in this cause with all the resources at our disposal—including our wealth.

From an Attitude of Ingratitude to Gratitude

If we understand that everything we have is God's—including the very capacity to work, engage in business, create and produce, sell, and build wealth—we will be grateful to God.

Of course, if we are wealthy and have abundance, it's easy to convince ourselves that what we have is mainly a result of our own hard work, intelligence and creative genius. The reality is quite the opposite. If we have been born into a loving family, a prosperous country, a good educational system, a stable society with the rule of law, we have the good fortune needed to make it possible for hard work to pay off. This is not to suggest that hard work never contributes to economic success. Clearly, it is often a factor. Yet even intelligence and creative genius needed to make hard work fruitful are gifts from God. The Apostle Paul puts it bluntly when he asks the Corinthians, "What do you have that you did not receive? And if you received it, why do you boast as if it were not a gift?" (1 Corinthians 4:7). Paul's point is that even the very abilities we have are given to us by God. King David echoes this sentiment when in response to God's generosity he prays, "Who am I, O Lord God, and what is my house, that you have brought me thus far?" (1 Chronicles 17:16). Biblically, the response to the blessing of provision and abundance is deep gratitude, even if our own work played a major role in generating our wealth.

Yet even among Christians, affluence seems to breed ingratitude and a sense of entitlement—as if we are somehow owed something. This betrays an inflated view of our own importance, and a very limited awareness of gift, grace and good fortune in our lives. Another factor that prevents us from experiencing gratitude is envy. It is easy to begrudge others for what *they* have, rather than being content and grateful for what *we* have. If we see ourselves primarily as consumers, rather than servants, Western culture feeds this envy. Marketing, advertising, and even entertainment encourage us to make living like the rich our aspiration. In doing so, we crave for what others have—not only their possessions but also their abilities and circumstances. In contrast, the Bible commands us not to covet anything that belongs to our neighbor—whether positions at work, salaries, economic opportunities or bank balances—but to develop a growing gratitude for what *we* have been given.

How can we become more thankful? By giving thanks. We become more thankful through the simple act of giving thanks every day for whatever we have that we appreciate. Giving thanks actually changes our attitude. If, at the same time, we turn off or tune out the "aspirational" marketing and cultural messages, we can actually become more thankful and joyful in our lives.

From an Attitude of Discontentment to Contentment

Gratitude leads to contentment. Contentment is a delicious feeling in itself, and it is the antidote to greed and envy. The Bible presents a vision for economic life that doesn't depend on ever-increasing consumption to prevent us from feeling disappointed. In this vision, it is possible to have enough and to cease longing for more. The Israelites experienced this in the wilderness, when every day God gave them exactly enough bread ("manna") from heaven. "Those who gathered much had nothing over, and those who gathered little had no shortage; they gathered as much as each of them needed" (Exodus 16:18). Hebrews counsels us, "Keep your lives free from the love of money, and be *content* with what you have" (Hebrews 13:5). In the same vein, Paul writes, "Of course, there is great gain in godliness combined with contentment; for we brought nothing into the world, so that we can take nothing out of it; but if we have food and clothing, we will be content with these" (1 Timothy 6:6-8). And in a letter written from a prison cell, Paul shares something of his own journey.

Not that I am referring to being in need; for I have learned to be content with whatever I have. I know what it is to have little, and I know what it is to have plenty. In any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of being well-fed and of going hungry, of having plenty and of being in need. I can do all things through him who strengthens me. (Philippians 4:11-13)

Both Paul and the far-from-wealthy Philippian church he is writing to were barely surviving economically. Their attitude of being content in all economic situations challenges those who live in plenty to find contentment in what they have.

Contentment is knowing what is enough. What is enough profit? Pay? Hours employed? Savings accumulated? House size? Possessions? Given that none of us have a true gauge on what is sufficient and what is excessive, we will need help from others. What would it be like for Christians to meet in small groups to share their purchasing plans and reflect together whether they reflect true needs leading to gratitude and contentment, or envious aspirations that will lead merely to a sense of entitlement and discontent? So few Christians have tried this that it is hard to know what effect it might have simply to share our ideas about what is enough in practical terms.

We Are To Change Our Personal Lifestyles

Developing right attitudes to provision and wealth will inevitably lead to adjustment in the way we live.

From a Lifestyle of Self-Sufficient Individualism to Community

One of the more frequent words translated as “community” or “fellowship” in the New Testament is *koinonia*. This was a well-used word in the Greek world. In ordinary usage, it referred to having something in common with someone. However, the Bible’s use of *koinonia* emphasizes active participation—owning a share in something, rather than just being associated with it. When Paul, in particular, uses *koinonia*, it carries this strong sense of partnership, including the call to financial partnership. [12] A prime example of this is Paul’s commendation of the Corinthians for the “generosity of your sharing [*koinonias*],” referring to the money they donated for the relief of poor Christians in Jerusalem. Another example is the distribution of resources among the first “fellowship” (*koinonia*, Acts 2:42) of Christians. This fellowship was both spiritual and financial, with the result that “there was not a needy person among them” (Acts 4:32-35). God provided for the needs of the individuals, through the resources of community. “All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need” (Acts 2:44-45).

Although there is little indication that communal holding of wealth occurred outside this brief period in the New Testament church, it is clear the community in Jerusalem tried to realize God’s vision that provision and wealth are communal, not individual, matters. Of course, how this might be expressed in our various twenty-first century contexts will depend on a variety of factors. History has shown that collective ownership generally works out poorly. Yet some still practice full economic sharing within a highly-trusted community. Other faith communities might seek to pool donations from the wealthy to distribute to the poor. Still others might choose to give individually to specific people or to charitable organizations that provide for needy people. The Bible prescribes not the method, but the attitude. God provides for his people in the plural, even though the resources may be entrusted to individuals as stewards.

From a Lifestyle of Isolationism to Personal Engagement

The temptation of those who have much to become isolated from those who have little is very real. High-fenced houses, air-conditioned cars, a circle of friends limited to our own socio-economic group, and a church similarly restricted—all these conspire to keep the well-to-do trapped in their own wealthy enclaves. Those who have little are effectively banished from their world.

This means wealthy people often have minimal or no relationship with those who struggle financially—either at home or abroad. Their understanding of the circumstances of those who lack basic provision is severely limited by the geographic and social distance.

As noted earlier, the people of Israel were specifically commanded to care for widows, orphans

(fatherless) and foreigners.^[13] In an agrarian society these groups were particularly vulnerable because they had no access to land or means of income. These same factors made them prone to isolation. To care for them, the people of Israel would first have to engage with them personally. God himself is described by the Psalms as relating personally to them as the “father of orphans and protector of widows” (Psalm 68:5).

This same hospitality—the welcoming of “strangers”—is fundamental to following Jesus. Two key gospel passages—Luke 14:12-14 (inviting the poor to your banquet) and Matthew 25:31-46 (God’s judgment of the peoples)—shape the distinction between conventional and Christian hospitality. Conventional hospitality is shown to friends and family. Christian hospitality extends to the poor and “the least of these” (Matthew 25:40), the people who “cannot repay you” (Luke 14:14) or “invite you in return” (Luke 14:12). Jesus emphasizes the dimension of personal relationship in this care, when he states, “Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, *you did it to me*” (Matthew 25:40). Though the context indicates that Jesus is referring primarily to his disciples (“members of my family”) there is no reason to suggest that disciples should not also take the same attitude to those who are not Christians. After all, Christ died for us “while we were still sinners” and before we ourselves were members of his family.

When those who have much get to know those who have little, perspectives can change. Hearing their stories, seeing their struggles first-hand, realizing that there is much to learn from them and also that we all have much in common—these all reshape our minds and hearts. God himself took on human flesh to draw close to us personally as a human (Philippians 2:6-8), and because of this he is able to “sympathize with our weaknesses” (Hebrews 4:15). If God thinks it worthwhile to encounter we who are poor and weak compared to him, should we not follow his example and encounter those who are poor and weak compared to us? The poor are no longer just faceless numbers. They become real people with real needs and real lives.

It is important for Christians to think generously about *how* such hospitality is given. While giving and investing money are essential means of expressing hospitality, more personal and closer-to-home expressions are also important. Within every community there are many types of strangers, as we have seen. The problem is that for many people in well-paying jobs, living in well-to-do neighbourhoods, mixing in affluent friendship groups, and worshipping in prosperous church congregations, connecting with the poor is not likely to be a part of everyday life. Building personal relationships will require intentionally moving out of accustomed circles and into uncomfortable situations. It may even require geographic travel or relocation. And if it is to be genuine Christian hospitality, as such it will need to avoid paternalism (which disempowers others by doing for them what they can do for themselves) and seek to minimize power imbalances. This may particularly be a challenge for those who experience financial success, and for whom status and success are the predominant currencies of self-worth. It is hard to shed the prestige and privileges of power when our instinct is to fix problems from afar rather

than to encounter people in the midst of their struggles.

One of the biblical characters who models this kind of personal engagement with the poor is Job. Job's life intersected with the poor of his district on a regular basis. He was not isolated from them but lived in close proximity to his servants, widows, the fatherless and the stranger/foreigner.

The stranger has not lodged in the street; I have opened my doors to the traveler. (Job 31:32)

I delivered the poor who cried, and the orphan who had no helper...I caused the widow's heart to sing for joy...I was eyes to the blind, and feet to the lame. I was a father to the needy, and I championed the cause of the stranger. (Job 29:12-13, 15-16)

Job knew his poor neighbors, treated them as equals, felt a deep compassion for them and cared for them using his political and financial resources.

From a Lifestyle of Compulsive Work to a Rhythm of Work and Rest

Learning to trust God for our provision is an ongoing challenge, particularly if we are prone to compulsive work habits. Gordon MacDonald, a U.S. pastor, observes of his culture:

The more we want, the more revenue we must produce to get it. The more revenue we must produce, the longer and harder we have to work. So we build larger homes, buy more cars, take on added financial burdens and then find ourselves having to work harder to pay for it all. More work, less rest. [\[14\]](#)

But compulsive work habits are not limited to those who struggle with affluent culture. They are also the temptation of those who struggle to simply provide the basic necessities for themselves and their families.

Either way, the biblical practice of Sabbath is important for maintaining a Godly perspective on provision and wealth. For the people of Israel, the weekly Sabbath (ceasing from work) was part of their covenantal responsibility—a day to re-centre on God, and to celebrate his love for them. It was a gift from God to keep his people liberated from the grinding toil described in Genesis 3. It was a

kindness; an example of God's care.

The Sabbath rest is a regular repudiation of the covetousness for more. It is a statement to ourselves that there are other things in life besides producing and consuming. And that there is more to our identity than what we do or what we produce. We are not the sum total of our bank accounts, nor of the work or responsibilities we carry.

The Sabbath rest comes down to an act of trust. To observe it, we must dare to trust God to provide for our needs, rather than working all-out to provide for them ourselves. This is a hard lesson to learn, and it usually takes trial and error for us to really get it, as Israel discovered when depending on God's provision of manna in the desert (Exodus 16:1-36). And it is a reminder that ultimately life depends not on our hard graft, but on God's provision and grace. This is a challenge—both for those who struggle with the prospect of not having enough and for those who struggle with the peril of not recognizing what is enough.

CONTENT NOT YET AVAILABLE: See the article **Work and Rest* at www.theologyofwork.org for an in-depth discussion of this topic.

We Are To Use Our Wealth For The Aid Of Those In Poverty

Developing right attitudes to provision and wealth and making changes in our personal lives are a starting point for partnering with God to redeem the economic sphere of life. However, there is also a strong and consistent mandate throughout Scripture for those with wealth to use it to aid those in poverty. The most obvious way (and the one most written about in the Bible) is through giving. However, investing and judicious spending are also valid responses to helping the poor.

Aiding the Poor Through Giving

When we are genuinely aware of the presence of God's grace in our lives, our grateful hearts inevitably overflow into generous giving. Jesus directs his disciples, "Freely you have received, freely give" (Matthew 10:8). This is exactly what happened to the churches in Macedonia, as described in 2 Corinthians, chapters 8 and 9. These chapters form the fullest articulation in the New Testament of the practice of generosity and giving. According to Paul, the Macedonian churches spontaneously gave to the church in Jerusalem for the relief of its members enduring economic distress. Yet the Macedonian Christians themselves were poor. Paul tells us that

During a severe ordeal of affliction, their abundant joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part. For, as I can testify, they

voluntarily gave according to their means, and even beyond their means, begging us earnestly for the privilege of sharing in this ministry to the saints.” (2 Corinthians 8:2-4)

What is striking is that they did not give out of abundance, but in the midst of their own struggles. If we are ever to become givers, we have to begin giving now, out of whatever little we think we have. If we wait until we think we have enough, we will never have enough.

Paul observes that Jesus himself is the model for such giving. “For you know the generous act of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich” (2 Corinthians 8:9). Why are we to give? It is because the One whom we follow modeled generosity to us.

Paul goes on to argue that the wealthy should give to such an extent—and the poor should receive to such an extent—that a fair distribution results.

I do not mean that there should be relief for others and pressure on you, but it is a question of a fair balance between your present abundance and their need, so that their abundance may be for your need, in order that there may be a fair balance. As it is written, “The one who had much did not have too much, and the one who had little did not have too little.” (2 Corinthians 8:13-15)

His line of thought suggests that there are extremes of both wealth and poverty that are out of place in the Christian community. If there are brothers and sisters who are unable to provide for their basic needs, those who have a surplus need to respond. This is immensely challenging to most of Christians in the West, whose wealth far exceeds that of Christians in most of the world who struggle to survive on a day-to-day basis.

Yet Paul does not aim to use guilt to motivate us. Our giving should be characterized not just by generosity, but also by joy. “Each of you must give as you have made up your mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver” (2 Corinthians 9:7). We should give because we want to, willingly—out of the overflow of a thankful heart. If we don’t want to give, let us pay more attention to the practice of thankfulness and see if that will give us a cheerful heart for giving.

It is not easy to give generously. It is personally counterintuitive and deeply counter-cultural. On a personal level we fear that if we give generously, we won’t have enough for our own needs. Our culture reinforces this fear by presenting ever-increasing “needs” to us, and by appealing to our desire to find security by owning and hoarding. Only by the power of God’s spirit can we hope to break free of the

grip of wealth enough to give generously. Yet if we receive the gift of generosity from God, it is the gift of liberty from personal enslavement to wealth and cultural enslavement to the false gods of security and status.

Of course, having determined to give, the questions of *where* and *how* need to be answered. Wisdom is required to discern the most helpful and appropriate of a myriad of options. When choosing to give through an agency, two considerations might be:

- Does this organization empower the people they are seeking to assist? Do they listen well and work with the recipients to tailor assistance to what is most helpful? Do they pay attention to the cultural context in which they work? Or are they so intent on doing what they think is needed in the way they think is right that they inadvertently make matters worse?
- Is the organization transparent and honest regarding how they use their resources and how effective they are? Are they accountable to an independent board of directors and do they submit financial reports to international monitoring organizations? Sadly, it is not uncommon for organisations to lack integrity by exaggerating their claims, being less than open to independent audit or evaluation, prone to wasting resources, or spending unnecessary funds on administration, fundraising, high salaries for executives, etc.

Aiding the Poor Through Investing

While giving is a fundamental way of using wealth to aid those caught in poverty, wise investment of wealth can also be very effective in helping the poor. There are many examples of how this can be achieved. However, over recent decades two broad movements illustrate what can be achieved by investment in the poorest communities.

The first is the world of microfinance. Across the globe, though particularly in developing nations, co-operatives are established in poor communities to make loans to initiate small businesses. As these businesses generate income, the start-up loan is paid back and the capital lent to new small businesses. At least, this is the intention. The effectiveness of microfinance seems to be uneven in various contexts, and it has its share of supporters and of critics. However, at its best, it is a mechanism for those with entrepreneurial abilities to obtain capital, create a value-adding business, provide for themselves, and benefit their communities.

A second broad form of microfinance is that of “savings-led” co-operatives, which rather than giving loans to members, asks them to commit to saving a small amount each week, which is then aggregated with the rest of the group and eventually invested. Over time, with support and mentoring, the co-operative builds a reservoir of capital, which can be drawn on by individuals for urgent needs or borrowed in order to begin a business. The shared capital can also be used for enhancing the well-being of the whole community. Savings-led co-operatives help poor communities to overcome one

of the primary barriers for people improving their lot—that is, a lack of options for safely investing their minuscule savings.

Another movement growing in both developed and developing nations is that of “social enterprise.” These are businesses that are established to achieve social goals in addition to being profitable. Such enterprises often seek to generate a “sustainable” profit, but not necessarily to maximize return on investment.

A few examples of such enterprises are:[\[15\]](#)

- **Sarah and John** have set up a pottery business and only employ people who have multiple barriers to finding work. Workers may be homeless or semi-homeless and may have mental health issues, physical disabilities, substance addictions or other struggles. The employment is not full-time, but it does provide a supplement to whatever other means of support workers receive. The pottery is sold through specialty shops and also through the Internet.
- **Michael** runs a business assembling and exporting electronic components. He employs people with autism spectrum disorder (also known as Asperger’s syndrome), training them to do the highly delicate work. The business is only small (employing up to 12 workers at any one time), but the opportunity to train, mentor and develop people who otherwise would struggle to get work, is central to his motivation and decision-making.
- **XYZ organization** has established a jute bag making business in the red light district of a major Asian city. Bags are exported all over the world and are known for their durability and quality. The business only employs women who have been caught up in prostitution or are vulnerable to it. Offering women a way out of the entrapment of selling their bodies in order to feed their families, the jute bag factory provides meaningful alternative employment at a livable wage, plus the benefit of a supportive community.
- **Jerry** has operated an importing business for some years. Though he doesn’t employ anyone, he has invested considerable resources in order to build a business that is sustainable and profitable. He pays himself a livable wage and all profits are given away to a microfinance project in the developing world.

Although we have focused on investment vehicles that explicitly seek to aid poor people, ordinary for-profit business investments in poor countries and communities can also be powerful means of reducing poverty. The productive capacity of the world is not close to being exhausted, although human ingenuity and diligent stewardship of natural resources and the environment are required.

However, because the purpose of businesses is generally to benefit shareholders, not poor communities, they can also become powerful means of exploitation and abuse. Hundreds of millions of Christians work in businesses that invest in, manufacture, distribute, sell or transport goods and services in poor regions. Perhaps they have the greatest opportunity of all to shape business strategy and operations in ways that aid poor people throughout the world.

Aiding the Poor Through Spending

It may seem odd to suggest that spending is potentially a way to aid those in poverty. We often associate spending with excessive consumption. Many Christians hold a kind of frugality mentality that regards spending as vaguely ungodly. This may be true if it means we don't buy things we don't need. But it often comes out instead as a desire to buy things cheap, whether we need them or not. Somehow getting a bargain assuages our misgivings about buying things. But the result may be that we contribute to the pricing pressures that lead manufacturers to pay workers too little to support themselves and their families.

In some cases, spending *more* for the items we consume may improve the lives of those who make and sell them. In the present global economy, many workers are paid too little to provide for their daily needs. Meanwhile, those who purchase the goods and services they provide could easily afford to pay a higher price for the items. If there were a way for consumers to pay more—and for that increase to go to the workers who need it—spending could actually help aid poor people.

Over the past few decades, a whole movement has grown in the developed world to seek to pay fair prices for products made in the developing world. “Fair trade” looks to compensate small coffee, cocoa, cotton growers, craft makers, and other small industries, equitably for their work.

Spending money is also commended in the Bible when the money is spent in generosity to others. God commends spending lavishly on a dinner party for your neighbors, provided you are not looking for anything in return (Luke 14:12-14). It is only lavish spending *on your own pleasures* that the Bible forbids (James 4:3). So if our question is, “what should I do with the money I have?” then “spend lavishly on wonderful things for others when you expect nothing in return,” would be a good answer. However, this moves beyond the present topic of spending *to aid the poor*, so we will end this discussion here.

We Are to Change the Organizations and Structures of Society

Christians are called to work not only at the small enterprise and person-to-person level in seeking to alleviate poverty, but also at the macro or structural level. The world contains resources enough to meet everyone's needs. But the social, political and economic motivation and means to do so have never come together on a global scale. This too is a form of human sin and error. We are to be involved in changing the organizations and systems of provision and wealth in our societies. Although we may feel too small and insignificant, too far removed from the halls of power in our society, God has a habit of using outsiders and insignificant people to bring great economic changes in societies.

Perhaps the first agent of structural change in a foreign land was Joseph (Genesis 41-42). Born in the

insignificant land of Canaan, sold into slavery in Egypt, imprisoned on false charges, and otherwise marginalized, he eventually reformed the economic structures of the great nation of Egypt. With great prophetic foresight, he implemented an extensive network of storage cities, where harvested grain from the good productive years could be kept for times of famine. These were the original food banks! As a result, the capacity of the Egyptians to provide sufficiently for their people during the long years of famine, was masterfully increased and there was ample to feed everyone—even enough to provide for Joseph’s estranged family who ventured south in search of food. Without Joseph’s willingness to challenge the economic systems of Egypt, millions of poor people would have died during the seven years of famine that struck. But because he did challenge and change the system, poor and rich alike were able to survive.

Likewise, when the nation of Israel was held captive in Babylon, they found themselves powerless and disenfranchised. Yet the prophet Jeremiah counseled God’s people to “seek the peace and prosperity of the city and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare” (Jeremiah 29:7). God’s purposes were for his people to reform the structures of their own captors.

This became possible when a few young men, Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, were drafted into leadership roles within the Babylonian government. Rather than succumbing to the temptations of luxury afforded by their new positions, they challenged the system. They risked their positions—and their lives—to fight injustice and inequity. By acting as agents of change, Daniel and his friends worked for—not against—the prosperity of their host nation. God’s intention was to use them to redeem the system, culture and society where they lived and worked. In one case, this meant Daniel challenging the king directly. “O king, may my counsel be acceptable to you: atone for your sins with righteousness, and your inequities with mercy to the oppressed, so that your prosperity may be prolonged” (Daniel 4:27).

Wherever we find ourselves working—in government departments, political parties, non-governmental organizations, municipal structures, multinational corporations, small businesses, health or education systems, local neighborhoods—we too should seek to work for the welfare and prosperity of those we serve. At times this will mean challenging systems and structures that stand in the way of God’s provision and prosperity for all people. This may require changing the priorities, structures, and processes of such organizations—particularly where they oppress or marginalize the vulnerable or the poor. Whether it be in advocating for fairer taxation systems, helping draft legislation against monopolistic or anti-competitive practices, or challenging the way employers and unions relate to each other in a particular industry, there are many opportunities for Christians to bring systemic change to the way provision and wealth are obtained.

CONTENT NOT YET AVAILABLE: The closely-related topic of economic systems is discussed in depth in the article **Economics and Society* at www.theologyofwork.org.

We Are to Work With Non-believers to Increase Provision and Reduce Poverty

At a number of points in Scripture, God uses those who aren't his followers, to bring about his purposes. One example, in the Book of Ezra, concerns Cyrus the Persian.

In the first year of King Cyrus of Persia, in order that the word of the Lord by the mouth of Jeremiah might be accomplished, the Lord stirred up the spirit of King Cyrus of Persia so that he sent a herald throughout all his kingdom, and also in a written edict declared: "Thus says King Cyrus of Persia: The Lord, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth, and he has charged me to build him a house at Jerusalem in Judah..." (Ezra 1:1-2)

Remarkably, God chooses to appoint someone not of God's people to do the work of the Lord. God is not restricted to bringing about his redemptive purposes by working *solely* through his own people. Like Ezra (and later in the story, Nehemiah) we also can work with non-believers to redeem the world.

Jeff Dykstra describes partnering with business, government and non-governmental organizations to reduce hunger

One way of doing this is partnering with individuals and organizations who are seeking to improve the economic realities of the poor in all kinds of ways. There are many non-Christian individuals and institutions undertaking great work in providing meaningful employment, small business opportunities, poverty relief and community development. We can work in solidarity and partnership with such people and causes. Of course, we need to be discerning here. It is important to ensure that the effects of such partnerships are consistent with biblical aims and values.

Nehemiah - A Positive Role Model

Nehemiah is one biblical character whose attitudes, lifestyle, strategies and priorities work together to change society for the betterment of poor people. As governor of the city of Jerusalem—working for a foreign power—he risks his position to advocate rebuilding of the city walls in order to protect the native (mostly poor) Jewish population. Nehemiah is well rewarded materially for his leadership role. It would have been easy for him just to enjoy the privileges that went with his position. Yet when Nehemiah is approached by a group of Jews who are struggling economically he intervenes to help them. Like many Jews, they had ended up with crippling debt, forfeited their land, even becoming enslaved, because many wealthy people exploited unfair advantages during a tough economic climate. Nehemiah's response is to publicly denounce the exploiters and challenge them to give back what they had taken. Remarkably they did! Additionally, Nehemiah organizes a relief program for those in distress and institutes long-term financial reforms to ensure those impoverished were able to develop a livelihood again.

But the most remarkable feature of Nehemiah's response is a costly, personal change of lifestyle. Having observed how his predecessors and their assistants "laid heavy burdens on the people" and lorded it over them, Nehemiah chooses to reduce his income, live more simply and refuse many of the benefits he was entitled to. To reduce the tax burden on the people, he takes over the expense of 150 Jews, officials and foreigners, serving in his administration. In doing so he expresses a generous hospitality, hosting them daily at his own table (Nehemiah 5:14-19). See "[Restoration of the Wall of Jerusalem \(Nehemiah 1:1-7:73\)](#)" in "[Ezra, Nehemiah & Esther and Work](#)" at www.theologyofwork.org for more about Nehemiah's use of his wealth for the good of the people of Israel.

Hope and Help in God's Provision

What then, is reasonable to expect from God in regard to provision for our own needs?

We Can Seek Guidance About Provision From God...

We can seek guidance about provision from God and expect that doing so will help us meet our needs, the needs of those who depend on us, and the needs of the world. Jesus states,

Ask, and it will be given you...For everyone who asks receives...Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for bread, will give a stone? Or if the child asks for a fish, will give a snake? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good things to those who ask him! (Matthew 7:7-11)

After acknowledging and thanking the church at Philippi for their gift to him while he languished in house arrest in Rome, Paul confidently states, “My God will fully satisfy every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus” (Philippians 4:19).

Does this mean that if we don’t have enough to provide for our needs and the needs of those around us, we should ask God for help? Yes. We do not have God’s promise that he will provide everything we desire immediately. But we do have his promise to give us what we need. We should ask for his guidance in practical ways if we are in need. We can ask his guidance in finding a job, applying for benefits, changing jobs, resolving employee-employer disputes, obtaining education and job training. We should ask for his transforming power in our workplace ethics, creativity and productivity, work habits and other factors needed to keep a job and thrive in the workplace. If we are unemployed or under-employed, our disappointment or shame may lead us to back away from God. But these are the moments to draw closer to God than ever.

Looking to God for help doesn’t just apply to those who lack provision. If we have wealth, the choices in how to earn, invest and give are often bewilderingly complex. In such situations, we need God’s guidance and direction in deciding how to gain and use such resources well—in ways that honor God and don’t harm ourselves or others. James instructs, “If any of you is lacking in wisdom, ask God, who gives to all generously and ungrudgingly, and it will be given to you” (James 1:5).

We Are Meant to Depend on God for Provision...

We are meant to depend on God for provision, meaning that we should look to him to provide for us when our own means seem inadequate.

The miracle of Jesus feeding five thousand people is the premier biblical example of God providing when our own means seem inadequate. A large crowd follows Jesus as he goes into a remote area. They become hungry, and there is no place to buy food and no money to buy it with, anyway. One of the disciples discovers a boy who has a mere five barley loaves and two fish. Jesus receives these meagre supplies, gives thanks, and has them distributed to the whole crowd, as if they were a meal for thousands. Astonishingly, everyone in the crowd is able to take as much as they wanted. “When they were satisfied, he told his disciples, ‘Gather up the fragments left over, so that nothing may be lost’” (John 6:11-12). And when they do, they fill twelve baskets! (John 6:1-14; see also Matthew 14:13-21, Mark 6:30-44, and Luke 9:10-17).

God delights in making up what we lack. This is a reminder that none of us are self-sufficient. God is our provider.

We Are Meant to Work Diligently and Wisely...

We are meant to work diligently and wisely to the degree we are able. Dependence on God is an attitude towards human labor, not a substitute for it.

Although God is our provider, he calls us to use what we have in our hands, not what we haven't. God's first gift to us for our provision is our ability to work, as we [have seen](#) in Genesis 1 and 2. Our work does not stand on its own, as a substitute for God's generosity, but it is generally the first ingredient in God's provision. Even if disability, circumstances or injustice make our work fall tragically short of meeting our needs, God begins by making use of what we *are* able to do. Then he makes up the difference from his inexhaustible riches.

In response to news that there were some in the church in Thessalonica who were shirking work, Paul commands,

Anyone unwilling to work should not eat. For we hear that some of you are living in idleness, mere busybodies, not doing any work. Now such persons we command and exhort in the Lord Jesus Christ to do their work quietly and to earn their own living (2 Thessalonians 3:10-12).

No work, no eat. This, of course, presumes that there is work to do. It does not matter whether that work is paid or not. If there is useful work we can do, we cannot sit idle and expect God to bless our idleness. Many households depend on paid work done outside the household and unpaid work done within. Both kinds of work are elements of God's provision. Even those who need paid work, but who are unemployed or unable to hold down a paid job, can still work in voluntary capacities. It is our responsibility to work to the degree we are able, even if it is God's job to ensure that our needs are met. Idleness is not a valid form of dependence on God.

God Does Not Promise That Christians Will Escape the Effects of the Fallen World

Nowhere in Scripture does God promise that his followers will escape the effects of the fallen world. In fact, most of the biblical characters endured periods of time where circumstances, suffering and persecution robbed them of what they needed materially.

- **Joseph** spent years languishing in an Egyptian jail cell, no doubt with minimal rations to keep him healthy.
- **Naomi** felt the pain of living on the edge of survival—with no husband or land to provide for her and her daughter-in-law, Ruth.

- **Paul** endured harrowing experiences, including “toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, hungry and thirsty, often without food, cold and naked” (2 Corinthians 11:27).

God does not exempt us from the sufferings of the world, but he protects us from being overcome by them. Jesus prayed to the Father on behalf of his disciples, “I am not asking you to take them out of the world, but I ask you to protect them from the evil one” (John 17:15).

So what does God promise? Provision for our needs, not our wants. Help to endure and overcome whatever deprivations, sufferings and trials we experience. And, most of all, that God will use all situations we find ourselves in—including when we lack provision—to bring good. For himself, for us, and for the world. As the most well-known of verses in Romans states, “We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose” (Romans 8:28).

Wealth is No Indication of God’s Favor or Blessing

Some churches preach what may be called a “health and wealth gospel,” claiming that God always rewards his people with prosperity in this world. But in the Bible, wealth is no indication of God’s favor. Neither is poverty an indication of God’s punishment. “[God] makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous” (Matthew 5:45).

Advocates of the health-and-wealth gospel often note that in the Old Testament, many of the characters we most revere were wealthy. They include Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Boaz, Job, David and Solomon. And there is little doubt that their experience of abundance was tied in some way to their faithfulness to God. Biblical scholar Craig Blomberg notes that in the Old Testament,

Wealth *can* be a sign of God’s blessing, even if it is not always related to an individual’s or a nation’s obedience. But the unique covenantal arrangements between God and Israel prevent us from generalizing and saying that God must materially reward his faithful people in other nations or eras.[\[16\]](#)

Therefore, a strong connection between righteousness and wealth is difficult to make. The story of the people of Israel confirms this assessment. Many wealthy people in the Bible prosper because of their wickedness, not righteousness. These include a number of King David’s descendants. For example, in 1 Kings 21 we read that King Ahab lusted after Naboth’s land and when he failed to acquire it by fair means, his wife Jezebel had Naboth executed. This, even though Ahab was already unbelievably wealthy.

The association between righteousness and wealth is even more tenuous in the New Testament. In fact,

biblical scholar Gordon Fee argues that wealth is *never* related to a life of obedience in the gospels and other New Testament books.^[17] While we find a handful of well-to-do believers such as Joseph of Arimathea and Lydia, there is no suggestion by any of the New Testament writers that God's favor is particularly on those who have wealth. In fact, if anything the opposite is true.

For example, following his encounter with the rich young ruler, Jesus comments that it is easier for a rich man to pass through the eye of a needle than enter the kingdom. The shock of this statement causes his disciples to ask, "Then who can be saved?" (Matthew 19:25). In other words, "If not a rich man, then surely there's no hope for anyone else?" In a culture where wealth was presumed to be an indication of God's favor and blessing, Jesus' assertion was unequivocal. Wealth is not a sign of righteousness or God's favor. Instead, it is a grave peril to our relationship with God.

The Final Hope

The final hope of Christians is not to be spared the suffering that all people experience in the fallen world. It is to participate in the abundant life promised when the world is fully redeemed upon Christ's return. In the new earth there will be plenty for all. No one will lack provision. Justice will reign. Wealth will be experienced by all, without harm to anyone or anything. We will not suffer a lack of provision ourselves. We will not enrich ourselves at others' expense. All will be as God always intended it to be.

Isaiah prophesies about that time:

I am about to create new heavens and a new earth; the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind.... They shall build houses and inhabit them; they shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit. They shall not build and another inhabit; they shall not plant and another eat...They shall not labor in vain, or bear children for calamity....I will extend prosperity to her [Jerusalem] like a river, and the wealth of nations like an overflowing stream. (Isaiah 65:17, 21-23; 66:12)

John too foretells the prosperity of the New Jerusalem. God's provision is so extravagant that the gates of the city will be pearls, the foundations jewels, and the streets gold (Revelation 21:19-21). If the vision sounds a bit fantastical, perhaps it means that God's generosity is literally unimaginable to us, accustomed as we are to scarcity.

Conclusions

What then can we say in conclusion about provision and wealth in the Bible?

If we are wealthy, we are to be grateful and thankful for the blessing of wealth and seek God's guidance how to handle this wealth without harming ourselves, others or the environment. We are to learn to be content with what we have and as God's trustees, put our wealth at his disposal through acts of giving, wise investment and responsible spending. Recognizing the dangers of riches, we should ask for God's grace to not become proud, corrupt, self-sufficient, exploitative or complacent. And perhaps most of all, we are not to imagine that we are especially favored by God.

If we are poor—or struggling to provide enough for our needs—we are to ask God for guidance and help. Resisting the urge to be overcome by anxiety or despair, we can look for God's grace to remain generous and joyful, even finding a way to be more content with less than we desire. Most of all, we should ask God for his grace not to imagine we are less valuable to God or are being punished by him.

If we feel we are neither rich nor poor—just getting by, as it seems—we are to express gratitude for what we *have* received and ask for God's guidance how to use it well. Being on the guard for worry, we should rejoice in the opportunity our economic situation provides to trust God daily for our needs. We are called to learn contentment and practice generosity beyond what we feel we can afford. Even when we feel uncertain of our own security, we are called to work for economic justice, though it might seem to threaten our own prospects. Together the practices of thankfulness, contentment, generosity and justice may show us more clearly the difference between what we feel we need and what is truly best for us. Perhaps they will prepare us to trust God's promises to provide for us.

Rich, poor or somewhere in-between, we can look forward in confidence to a future where there is no more struggle and none will lack anything. We will live in abundance in the renewed earth. God's vision for us and for his world will be fulfilled.

ENDNOTES

- [1] World Bank, World Development Indicators 2011 (Washington, DC: World Bank Publications, 2011), 65. In the World Bank's definition, "extreme" poverty means living on less than US\$1.25 a day (at purchasing power parity) and "subsistence poverty" means living on less than US\$2.00 per day.
- [2] The care of these three groups was repeatedly viewed as a yardstick of whether Jewish society was fulfilling its covenantal responsibilities. See, for example, Exodus 22:22; Deuteronomy 10:18; 24:17-22; Psalm 146:9; Isaiah 1:17; Zechariah 7:9-10.
- [3] Gleaning was one practice prescribed for this very situation. See, for example, the situation of Ruth

and Naomi in Ruth 2:2-3.

- [4] See also Jeremiah 7:5-7.
- [5] Craig Blomberg, *Neither Poverty Nor Riches* (Eerdmans, 1999), 65, noting an observation of Norman Gottwald.
- [6] *The Concise Oxford Dictionary*. 10th ed., revised (Oxford University Press, 2001).
- [7] From the text of a lecture given by Walter Bruggemann, “The Continuing Subversion of Alternative Possibility: From Sinai to Current Covenanting,” Laing Lectures, 2008, Regent College, Vancouver, Canada.
- [8] Harvey Salgo, “The Obsolescence of Growth: Capitalism and the Environmental Crisis” in *The Review of Radical Political Economics* 5 (Fall 1973), 32.
- [9] Transcript from the documentary film, *The Ad & the Ego* (Parallax Pictures).
- [10] N.T. Wright, *Matthew for Everyone, Part One* (SPCK, 2004), 66.
- [11] Craig Blomberg, *Neither Poverty Nor Riches* (Eerdmans, 1999), 84.
- [12] In fact, N.T. Wright notes that, “...in Paul’s world it was the normal word for a business partnership, in which all those involved would share in doing the work on the one hand and in the financial responsibilities on the other.” N.T. Wright, *Paul For Everyone: The Prison Letters* (London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 85.
- [13] See for example, Exodus 22:22; Deuteronomy 10:18; 24:17-22; Zechariah 7:9-10; Jeremiah 7:5-7.
- [14] Gordon MacDonald, “Rest Stops” in *Life@Work Journal*, Vol. 2, No. 4.
- [15] These enterprises are known to the contributor of this article, but are not documented in publicly-accessible sources.
- [16] Craig Blomberg, *Neither Poverty Nor Riches* (Eerdmans, 1999), 51.
- [17] Gordon Fee, *The Disease of the Health & Wealth Gospels* (Regent, 1996), 9.