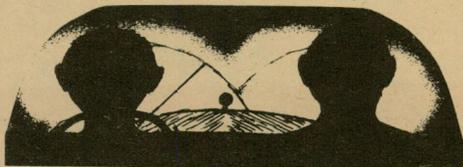


Poverty

in



Prosperity

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Reading a good book in front of a blazing fire would have been more appropriate on that stormy night than driving the winding road of a coastal highway. The wind was flipping leaves and branches across the road; rain slashed against the windshield; the wipers tried vainly to keep it clear. Except for the low hum of the motor it was quiet inside, even the radio was silent. The driver stared at the white stripe which the headlights were following; his passenger was dozing.

The bright lights of a passing car and the sheet of water which slapped against the windows made the driver duck involuntarily; it also woke up his companion. Possibly he wasn't asleep anyway for he said, "I've been thinking. You were right."

"About what?"

"About prosperity." The driver stole a glance at his friend. His face was only a dim outline in the light from the instrument panel; his eyes were closed.

"What about prosperity?"

"Well, I remember you said that it could be dangerous."

"Do you think it is?"

"Yes, I do. I didn't believe you before but I do now, because I feel trapped. I can't explain it but it seems that all the things I used to want, the things I liked to do, aren't fun anymore."

"You don't have to feel trapped--you can get out you know."

"How?"

"Get rid of the things that make your life so complicated and return to a simpler life."

"I can't do that."

"Of course you can."

"No, you don't understand. I can't...because I don't want to. I wouldn't be satisfied with what I had before. I like the kind of house I live in, the expensive suits, restaurants, and hotels. No, I wouldn't be satisfied at all."

What triggered this confession? was it the driving rain or the monotonous drone of the motor--possibly the hypnotic sound of the wipers? Whatever it was, this man was baring his innermost thoughts--his private self.

"And you know something else? Religion doesn't mean all that much to me anymore either."

There it was--the deadening influence of the insatiable desire for material things.

As a young man he had been a dedicated Christian, poor and honest; the church was his life. But as he became successful and affluent he gradually lost his spiritual perception; his finer sensibilities were dulled as "the end justifies the means" became his credo. As extravagance demanded more and more, his business became the graveyard of his religion.

While he used the term "prosperity" as the reason for his trapped feeling--what he really meant was wealth. Prosperity is not bad, it is simply having what one needs when he needs it; wealth is a surplus. It is the use one makes of the surplus that can be dangerous to spirituality.

Prosperity reaches the danger point when a person has all his needs satisfied and comes to a fork in the road. One path leads to beneficence, the desire to accumulate for the benefit of his fellowmen; the other to avarice, a passion for getting and hoarding. One wonders how many people the devil has trapped, using prosperity for bait to lure them into the prison of selfish desire.

And still, wealth must have a high priority in God's plans. The record is clear. Abraham, Isaac and Jacob were men of great wealth. The same was true of Joseph. The Israelites were promised the wealth of Canaan. Solomon asked for wisdom, and was given riches and wealth. John told the early believers, "Beloved, I wish above all things that thou mayest prosper and be in health." III John 2. But their prosperity was to be weighed on a spiritual scale, "as thy soul prospereth."

Prosperity must be important for it is an almost irresistible attraction of universal appeal. People are drawn to prosperous people. For this reason, if for no other, Israel was to be a model of health and prosperity to the world, for this would make it possible for them to witness to the benefits of worshiping the true God.

But, God also knew that wealth, given to be a blessing to them and to the world, could also become a curse if used selfishly. "And thou shalt see an enemy in my habitation, in all the wealth which God shall give Israel." I Samuel 2:32.

Someone may ask, "If God knew that wealth could be a snare, why did He give it to them?" But what kind of God would He be if He

kept His people in poverty? Man was born with the desire for nice things--beautiful things--lots of things. It isn't God's fault if man misuses his blessings. He continues to try to find people who will use His blessings in the right way.

He hasn't always failed. Abraham was known for his hospitality. Job testified that he was "eyes to the blind, and feet was I to the lame; and the cause I knew not, I searched out." Job 29:15, 16. And he was one of the richest men in the East. No, God hasn't always failed.

Even in modern times there have been men and women of wealth who have been a great blessing to their fellowmen.

One young couple, as they entered into their life's work with the bright prospects of wealth, prayerfully discussed how they should regard and use this surplus--if God blessed them in this manner. They decided that the only safe course would be to use it to the advancement of God's causes on earth.

One time this professional man was asked how his business was prospering and he replied, "Oh, my business is excellent (almost too good), but I have so many missionary projects that I have to work hard to keep up with them. But, God is blessing and I manage to break even." His smile was pure ecstasy as he added, "And I love every minute of it!" He was rich indeed.

But how can there be poverty in prosperity? In the first place, prosperity must not be associated only with money and material things. Paul says, "godliness with contentment is great gain." I Timothy 6:6. Consider these separately.

In the consuming desire for wealth there is danger of over-reaching, or even dishonest practices. Even if one stays within the law in his business dealings, he may take advantage of another's weakness, his ignorance, or his misfortune. If this desire makes him insensitive to the problems and needs of his fellowman, he is poor indeed.

If the desire for luxury and self-indulgence becomes the goal of life, godliness will wither and die for it cannot survive in the polluted air of selfishness. If one can be comfortable in a world filled with the hungry and the homeless then he is destitute of the love and sympathy which God-likeness demands.

Contentment is defined by Paul as "having food and raiment" (vs. 8), but how many people would be satisfied with this? Discontented men have become thieves because their earnings would not satisfy their desires. Women have ruined their husbands and themselves by their demands for the so-called "finer things of life." Thousands of men have gone to an early death or have been into debt, or crime to satisfy their inordinate desires. This is truly a

situation of poverty, for while the contented man has all he needs, the discontented man never has what he wants; for there is no way to satisfy a selfish heart.

Contentment must be an active, creative principle which makes it possible for a person to adapt to any situation and use whatever is available to its fullest extent. Paul had learned this secret of life. "I know both how to be abased, and I know how to abound: everywhere and in all things I am instructed both to be full and to be hungry, both to abound and to suffer need." Philippians 4:12. Then he gives the reason for his success, "I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me." (vs. 13).

She sat in church week after week envying her prosperous brethren as she placed a copper or two in the offering plate. "If I were only rich," she would say to herself, "I would give large gifts to God. Oh, how I wish I were rich."

And then her wishes came true. Everything she did prospered and she no longer was forced to live with the spectre of hunger and cold. Her every need was supplied--she came to the fork in the road!

Her surplus made it possible for her to give any size gift she wished. What did she do? She built a fine home, filled it with expensive furniture; became a collector of art objects; dressed in the latest fashion. But she actually gave less to God than she had before! She took the wrong road.

As her passion for gain increased, her concern for the unfortunate (of whom she had been a part such a short time before) decreased in proportion. All the concern, the pity, the mercy, the tender impulses were gone--blotted out by the stain of selfishness. Now she was really poor, no matter how much of this world's goods she might claim as her own.

Prosperity can be dangerous unless one chooses the pathway to beneficence, for if one makes the wrong choice he might gain the whole world and lose his own soul--and be bankrupt for all eternity.