



Research Paper

Theological Reflections on Faith and Reward

Abstract: This paper examines the theological question of divine reward, arguing that if God exists, He does not bestow earthly wealth and comfort upon believers but rather offers spiritual fulfillment. The study contrasts the life and teachings of Saint Paul with the prosperity gospel, which asserts that faith leads to material success. Analyzing Paul's suffering and martyrdom, the paper demonstrates that faith itself is a divine gift rather than a transactional means to prosperity. The prosperity gospel, rooted in New Thought and televangelism, is critiqued for its doctrinal inconsistencies and ethical implications. Drawing upon biblical and historical sources, this essay underscores that true Christian faith is rewarded with spiritual virtues such as love, joy, and peace rather than material abundance. The findings affirm that the prosperity gospel contradicts traditional Christian teachings, as exemplified in the life of Saint Paul.

Keywords: Saint Paul; Prosperity Gospel; Faith and Reward; Christian Theology; Biblical Interpretation; Spiritual Gifts

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In response to the question, this essay believes that if there is a god, he will not reward those who believe in him with earthly pleasures and comforts. But will reward them with spiritual rewards – and faith is already a reward. The essay will defend the argument from the perspective of Christianity- first discussing the story of Saint Paul. Then we will discuss the view of the prosperity Gospel, that wealth is a reward for faith, and we will compare with St. Paul's belief.

Saint Paul was one of the leaders of Christians after Jesus in the history of Christianity. During his childhood, Paul learned how to “work with (his) own hands”¹. In the middle point of his life, Paul was a member of the Pharisees, a religious party that emerged during the later Second Temple period in Jewish history. The Pharisees were very careful students of the Hebrew Bible.² He spent part of the first half of his life persecuting the nascent Christianity around the Jewish world. It is when Paul was on his way to Damascus that he had a vision of God's Son and started to believe in Christianity.³ There are three long journeys he made in the Roman empire, during which he was planting churches, preaching the gospel, and giving strength and encouragement to early Christians.

However, despite his honorable legacy of him, his suffering and death in the last part of his life was also an important moment in the history of Christianity. Here it comes to the question: If God gives earthly rewards in exchange for faith, how could a man with such a great spirit and faith in God turns out to be in such a desperate situation?

As we know, in the situation of Saint Paul, he had faith in God. Therefore, while he was condemned to death as a physical punishment, he has enjoyed a spiritually fulfilling experience of life. Indeed, in the Bible, he wrote: “Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh, I complete what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church, of which I became a minister according to the divine office, which was given to me for you, to make the word of God fully known.”⁴

In this essay, I will defend my thesis by discussing the counterargument, which is the teaching of the prosperity gospel- a teaching that focuses on the physical and earthly rewards that faith could guarantee.

The Prosperity Gospel

The prosperity gospel is the teaching that faith expressed through positive thoughts, positive declarations, and donations to the church will be rewarded with health, wealth, and happiness in believers' lives. It goes with many names and brands. In brief, the prosperity gospel believes that faith will make people rich, healthy, and prosperous.

The prosperity gospel was originated during the New Thought movement, a mind-healing movement based on diverse religious and metaphysical presuppositions. According to New Thought, humans can live in oneness with God in love, truth, peace, health, and plenty.

Moreover, many groups emphasized Jesus as a teacher and healer and further proclaimed his kingdom as being within a person. In the first half of the 20th century, black spiritual leaders such as M.J. Divine, Marcelino Manuel, and Lightfoot Solomon Michaux embraced the idea that thinking positively is a key to healing and material blessing. In the late 20th century, the prosperity gospel spread with the growth of televangelism, evangelism through religious programs on television. It was Oral Roberts; a televangelist who is known to everyone as a proponent of the prosperity gospel teaching. Eventually, televangelists in the U.S. such as Jim Bakker and Tammy Faye Bakker gained followers and significant wealth through their prosperity theology.

On the other side, David W. Jones regards these ideas as errors.: First, the Abrahamic covenant is a means to material entitlement. Second, Jesus' atonement extends to the "sin" of material poverty. Third, Christians give to gain material compensation from God. Fourth, faith is a self-generated spiritual force that leads to prosperity. Last, prayer is a tool to force God to grant prosperity.

Indeed, critics and Roman Catholic Christianity have claimed that the prosperity gospel is a gross distortion of the faith. Both religious and even secular critics expressed concerns that the teaching blames individuals lack of faith for misfortunes and saying that the prosperity gospel may be used to exploit the poor and the emotionally vulnerable. Furthermore, leaders of the prosperity gospel have been criticized for their opulent lifestyles. 5

Clearly, the ambiguous reasoning behind individuals who encounters misfortune is not convincing. Exceptions such as people who are born with disabilities or a person that has just gone just gone through an economic crisis that are desperate, surrounded by misfortunes, cannot be blamed for not having faith. On the other side, even those who have faith, will they be guaranteed to have a pleasant and opulent life just as the leaders of the prosperity gospel? Therefore, the prosperity gospel seems to be a false gospel, lacking reasoning and logic.

Saint Paul's story and teachings

Saint Paul was born in Tarsus in Cilicia, nowadays turkey, during 4 BCE. He was a Greek- speaking Jew. He was active as a missionary in the 40s and 50s of the 1st century CE. During his childhood, he could travel with a few leather-working tools and set up shop anywhere.

His family may not have been wealthy, but he learned to do everything by himself.

During Saint Paul's participation in the Pharisees, he believed in life after death, one of his deepest convictions. The Pharisees were a group of people that had a strong faith in the Hebrew Bible, thus, Paul was able to quote from Hebrew extensively from the Greek translation. In his account, he was the best Jew and the best Pharisee. 6 Saint Paul devoted the first fragment of his life to persecuting the nascent Christian movement. The chief persecutors of the Christian movement in Jerusalem were the high priest and his associates, called the Sadducees. For Paul, his persecution involved travelling from synagogue to synagogue and urging the punishment of Jews who accepted Jesus as the Messiah. Disobedient members of synagogues were punished by some form of ostracism or by light flogging. Although Paul was in the same situation for five times⁷, he does not say where or when.

It was when Paul was on his way to Damascus that he saw Jesus as a real person that believed in Christianity. After he returned to Damascus, he met the apostles of Jerusalem. (Acts 9).

After his meeting with the apostles, he then started his famous mission towards the west, preaching first in his native Syria and Cilicia. In the late 50s he was caught bringing a gentile too far into the temple precincts, he was then arrested and sent back to Rome. It is believed that he was executed in Rome.

Despite all Paul's suffering, his spiritual world is fulfilled. In Paul's words, he believed in Christianity more than anything: "For I am sure that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."⁸ Therefore, it is conspicuous that having faith in God does not necessarily involve an earthly reward, with all the pleasures and materials that make a man happy on earth; instead, God will offer a great spirit as a gift to men who believe in God.

Conflict between the prosperity gospel and Saint Paul's story and belief

The prosperity gospel, a teaching that views faith as a procedure to attain pleasure and earthly rewards, is completely different from Saint Paul's story and thinking. Indeed, Saint Paul's story could be a counterevidence against the teaching of the prosperity gospel. How could a man with such faith in God end up being tortured? Therefore, Paul's story reflects a situation that having faith in God does not guarantee an earthly reward to him nor a pleasant environment. Instead, he suffered for five times at least and ended up killed, according to the account.

The conflict is that the prosperity gospel believes that by having faith in God people will be rewarded with earthly rewards, but by Paul's idea and life God will only offer a spiritual gift to guarantee people. Therefore, it is important to define what is a gift and what is a reward. First, a gift is something that is gifted without any condition, people can choose to accept it or not to accept it. A reward, however, is a thing given to someone when someone does what the giver wants. The acceptor could choose to accept it or not.

According to Paul, "For by grace you have been saved through faith; and this is not your own doing, it is the gift of God— not because of works, lest any man should boast." Therefore, people are given the gift of faith from God, not because of anything. And that, is a spiritual gift.

In Paul's belief, God will equally offer everyone the gift of a spiritual gift, even though if there are no work done.⁸ The term spiritual gift refers to love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. For those who don't receive a spiritual gift, it might be because that it is their will to refuse to accept God's gift as treasure. These gifts, on the other hand, are not what is included in the prosperity gospel teachings.

Conclusion

Reviewing the thesis: If there is a god, he will not reward those who believe with earthly pleasures and comforts; but will reward with spiritual rewards – and faith is already a reward; By mentioning Paul's story and its conflict with the prosperity gospel, I prove that the prosperity gospel teachings is in contradiction with the Bible as evidenced by the life and teaching of St. Paul. Therefore, God will not reward those who believe with earthly pleasures but reward them with spiritual comforts.

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4: Colossians 1:24

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Conflict between the prosperity gospel and Saint Paul's story and belief

The Bible:

6: Philippians 3:4

7: 2 Corinthians 11:24

8: Romans 8: 34-39