

Christian Prosperity

Ecclesiology Part 1
On Corporate Service

Introduction

We're going to look at three things this morning. **First**, what the Bible means by the idea of prosperity; **second**, what we have been given by God to prosper us; and **third**, how we can use what we've been given so that we may prosper as God intended. We're not going to have time to explore these things in depth, but we will take the time to get a feel for what the Christian life is supposed to look like within the context of the Church. Why there? Because learning how to order our individual life around the corporate life of the Church is how we prosper. The Church is an organism made of living stones. ***It's a mutually dependent communion of saints.*** Let's unpack that. ***It's a mutually dependent – communion – of saints.***

We're not independent but dependent – on one another. We live in *communion* which is a contraction of *common-union*. We share something in common that *unites* us. What we share in common is *Christ*. We are *united* to him; as a result, we're united to one another. We are *saints*, or God's *holy ones*. That means each one of us is committed to holiness as the mark of our faith. The Church is God's provision to prosper his people through holiness, so that the Church itself is holy and prospers. Only by working as ONE, interacting under the headship of Christ, may we fulfill the Great Commission, and thereby glorify God.

LET'S COME BEFORE GOD IN PRAYER BEFORE WE BEGIN.

O Lord our God, *Jehovah Jireh*, our Provider – You are *El Shaddai*, the Almighty God: May we learn to be your diligent servants. Teach us how we may do your will on earth as it is done in heaven. Teach us to be obedient using what you have given us. You have given us the Church, the Body of Christ, that we might be equipped for works of ministry. You have foreordained good works that we should walk in them. You abide in us by your Holy Spirit, that we might have your precious comfort, wisdom, and power. We have your mercies which are new every morning. We want to prosper as YOU would have us prosper, and not as the world would have us prosper. We don't want to love the world or anything in the world, so that your love might dwell in us and be evident to all. May we not grieve your Spirit by our sin, or quench him by our doubts and our indifference. Together, may we grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ until we all reach full maturity in Christ. Amen.

I. What does the Bible mean by Prosperity?

Jer 29:11 [For I know the plans I have for you," declares the LORD, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future"](#).

God has plans for each one of us. He also has the will and the sovereignty to carry them out, as we've been learning. It's ***vital*** to believe that his plans are intended to prosper us. God intends to give us hope and a future rather than intending to harm us. That's a promise which is tied to his

character. We can trust God's promise because we can trust God. What *are* God's plans to prosper us and what exactly does God mean by the word "prosper"?

We can see "prosperity" by comparing fruit that has prospered with fruit that is perishing. Prosperity indicates an attractive outcome. Fruit that has prospered is attractive: it's full, ripe, and healthy; it has a pleasing aroma. It attracts animals to eat its seed so its tree will be reproduced. This kind of fruit is the opposite of fruit that is perishing. Perishing fruit is shriveled, rotten, and unappetizing. We have to consider which kind of fruit we generate, and which kind of seed we carry. The world has its native trees, just as the kingdom of God does –each one produces its own fruit with its own seed. A good tree will produce good fruit with good seed (Lk 6:43-44). Christ is our good tree, and the good seed we bear is the Gospel. The Bible says that Christ is our vine and our root. We PROSPER only in him. Apart from him we can do nothing. (Jn 15:5) ***In him***, we are planted in rich soil beside streams of living water, and we *will* be fruitful. (Eze 17:8; Jn 7:38)

We know these things. And yet we are as likely to produce the bad fruit of our culture as we are to produce the good fruit of God's kingdom. How can that be? It's because we plant the things of the world in the fields of the kingdom; we sometimes let the world's definition of prosperity govern our life in Christ, and our relationship with God. For example, in our American culture, "prosperity" means we get something that WE want. We *negotiate* for it. It's to OUR benefit. We seldom consider our prosperity in the context of God's glory and sovereignty – but God ***does***. We think that if God gets any glory out of what we're doing, then it's probably going to COST us. In other words, we sometimes doubt God's good intentions toward us. That's what happens when we don't know him accurately. Either we doubt God's sovereignty or else we doubt his goodness. Let me explain what I mean by that.

We suspect that if God is sovereign, he may not be good. Why? Because bad things happen to us by the hand of God. Or we may believe that God is good, but he cannot be sovereign. Why? Because bad things happen to us and God appears unable to prevent them. Let's be very clear about this. God is completely good, and he is completely sovereign. But his providence, his provision for us, does NOT mean that only good things happen to us. When he intends to prosper us in the long term, it may require adversity in the short term. It may even require a *lifetime* of adversity. We have to trust his promise that he does NOT intend to harm us, but to give us hope and a future. ***In adversity, it's just as important to trust God as it is to obey him.*** When we doubt either God's sovereignty or his goodness, we assault his character. *God's glory is always foremost in his mind, but our good is always linked to his glory.*

Jerry Bridges writes, "God never pursues his glory at the expense of the good of his people, nor does he ever seek our good at the expense of his glory."¹ That's important, so let me repeat it: "God never pursues his glory at the expense of the good of his people, nor does he ever seek our good at the expense of his glory."

OK. Let's assume that's true. We still want to know what "our good" or "our prosperity" looks like to God. When I was a child and my mother said, "I'm doing this for your own good," it only had one meaning: it was going to hurt. Pain and prosperity don't go well together in my mind.

¹ Bridges, Jerry, *Trusting God, Even When Life Hurts* (NavPress, Colorado Springs, 1988) pp. 25-26

Maybe it's the same for you. Yet the Bible tells us that discipline or adversity will benefit us. They hurt in the short term, but they yield a harvest of righteousness and peace in time. ***And that harvest of righteousness and peace is GOD'S definition of prosperity.***

Heb 12:10-11 **Our fathers disciplined us for a little while as they thought best; but God disciplines us for our good, that we may share in his holiness. No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it.** (See 1Tim 4:7-8; 2Tim 3:16; Tit 2:11-14)

It's tempting to condition our faith on receiving God's blessings, isn't it? If he gives us good things, which we define as things we want, our faith is strong and our hearts are glad; but if he withholds something from us, *anything at all*, we assume he's either mad at us, or we're somehow unworthy. And so our faith is weakened; we begin to doubt God's good intentions. Our relationship with him suffers. What we want and what God wants for us are sometimes at odds, aren't they? We like to define our blessings and our prosperity in material and temporal ways. God likes to define them in spiritual and eternal ways. We want to trust God, but only for the "good" things in life, like cars, homes, money, fame, and power. But these are the things that the world values. If God denies them to us, as he denied Adam and Eve the fruit, we resent it just like they did. And then we make what is forbidden the sole object of our desire, just like they did. We justify it to ourselves, just like they did. And then, in the style of Job, we want God to explain to us why he has withheld that object of our desire. How did God react to Job's accusation that he was being unjust? Job 40:8 **Would you discredit my justice? Would you condemn me to justify yourself?**

And yet that's exactly what we do. We find a verse to prove that God owes us what we want, like John 15:7 - **"If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be given you."** But we neglect the next verse, John 15:8 **"This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples."** What it says is that the purpose for God's gift, his answer to our prayer, is to enable us to bear fruit, fruit that lasts (Jn 15:16). It is meant to yield evidence that we are Christ's disciples. It is not for our own private advancement. Let's try another one.

James 4:2 **"You do not have, because you do not ask God."** And what's the context? **"You want something but don't get it. You kill and covet, but you cannot have what you want. You quarrel and fight. You do not have, because you do not ask God. When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures. You adulterous people, don't you know that friendship with the world is hatred toward God? Anyone who chooses to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God."** The world and its things have no place in the kingdom of God. We must leave them behind, outside the city gates of the kingdom. They will not prosper us.

If our children want illegal drugs, sex outside of marriage, or they want to quit school, will we allow it? No! They're harmful! Well, our Father God will also deny us those things which are harmful and will not prosper us. They are not for his glory or our good. God loves us and will not permit it. Paul likewise warns Timothy of the dangers of worldly prosperity:

1 Tim 6:6-10 But godliness with contentment is great gain. For we brought nothing into the world, and we can take nothing out of it. But if we have food and clothing, we will be content with that. People who want to get rich fall into temptation and a trap and into many foolish and harmful desires that plunge men into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs.

When we mistake material prosperity for blessings, and license for liberty, we misperceive God's love for us. We reject the prosperity which God intends for us. We must believe, accept, and *act* on the fact that God *always* intends our good. When we encounter adversity, strife, deprivation, and rejection, we think that God is not at work – that we're not *prospering*. We're like the young disciple in the movie *Karate Kid*. If you remember the story, he felt deprived when the disciples of another teacher were instructed differently than he was. He thought he was missing out. Instead of seeing measurable results, he was painting fences and waxing cars, ignorant of why he had been given those tasks. He thought he was an unrewarded slave of an uncaring and incompetent master. *Wax on, wax off...* until his master showed him the usefulness of what he had been doing and experiencing. And then the young man was in awe of what he had learned. More importantly, he grew in his awe and admiration for his master. That's what happens to us when we realize the *true* character of God and the value of his provision for us. We worship a GOOD God, who loves us, and intends the best for us. *The best is to no longer conform to the pattern of this world but to be transformed by the renewing of our mind* (Rom 12:2), *that we might be conformed to the likeness of Christ* (Rom 8:29).

II. What have we been given to prosper us?

What we're concerned with here is what plans God has that will give us hope and a future. We want to learn how to prosper in the kingdom, not in the world. That's where we live: IN THE KINGDOM. We only sojourn in the world. Everything in the world will pass away (Mt 24:35; 1Cor 13:8). It cannot and will not last. But everything in the kingdom is eternal – and eternally good. We are reluctant, however, to accept the truth that the things of the world and the things of the kingdom cannot be reconciled. They are diametrically opposed to each other. We're not talking about technology or material things in themselves. We're talking about our lust for them, our natural bent to be motivated and ruled by them. We cannot serve two masters (Mt 6:24).

1Jn 2:15-17 – We must not “love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For everything in the world – the cravings of sinful man, the lust of his eyes and the boasting of what he has and does – comes not from the Father but from the world. The world and its desires pass away, but the man who does the will of God lives forever.”

Then must we live in deprivation? Does God's plan to prosper us refer only to our salvation and not to our present well-being? *Of course not.* Phil 4:5-6 “Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God.” But our petitions, Paul suggests here, are for the kingdom, for unity, and for God's glory. The purpose of our prosperity isn't to enjoy this world, but to further the kingdom. Paul writes in 1Cor 15:19, “If it is only for this life that we have hope in Christ, then of all men, we are most to be pitied.” He

acknowledges the frustrations and the struggles that go hand-in-hand with the Christian life; yet he implicitly acknowledges our present hope as well. Jesus speaks of this same contrast of struggle and hope in John 16:33:

“Remember the words I spoke to you: 'No servant is greater than his master.' If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also... They will treat you this way because of my name, for they do not know the One who sent me... John 15:20-22 “I have told you these things, so that *in me* you may have peace. [However,] ***In this world you will have trouble.***” He then gives us this hope: “But take heart! I have overcome the world.”

OK. It's clear that *Christ* is victorious, but how are *we* victorious? *He* has overcome the world, but how do *we* overcome it? How do *we* prosper? The answer is found in the fact that we are *united* to Christ. What is his is ours. We too can overcome the world, because we no longer live; our life is now hid in Christ – Col 3:3. We have all the fullness of Christ living in us – Col 2:6-10. Because our life is hid in Christ, we have Christ's authority to overcome the world. Each time we say “in the name of Jesus” we exercise his authority. But we must be cautious to exercise it on *his* behalf and not our own. We are stewards of *his* household.

Matt 28:18-20 - "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. **THEREFORE** go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."

His authority is not intended to provide wood-paneled houses for ourselves while the House of God lies in ruins (Hag 1:4). It is to be used to build the House of God, with us as its living stones. (1Pet 2:5) Christ's presence is not for our isolated benefit, but to encourage and strengthen us for the task before us. Why? So that we may glorify the Father, just as the Son has glorified him (Jn 17:4). To that end, God has given us his great and precious promises to see us through. ***What are they and how do we claim them?***

Jn 14:15-21 "If you love me, you will obey what I command. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Counselor to be with you forever – the Spirit of truth. The world cannot accept him, because it neither sees him nor knows him. **But you know him**, for he lives with you and will be in you. I will not leave you as orphans; **I will come to you**. Before long, the world will not see me anymore, **but you will see me**. Because I live, you also will live. ***We have his Spirit.***

On that day you will realize that I am in my Father, and you are in me, and I am in you. [*In other words, we are united with Christ*] Whoever has my commands and obeys them, he is the one who loves me. He who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I too will love him and show myself to him." ***We are united with him and so we have his love.***

Jn 14:25-27 "All this I have spoken while still with you. But the Counselor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you. **Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you**. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid... ***We have his peace.***

Jn 15:26-27 **When the Counselor comes**, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who goes out from the Father, **he will testify about me. And you also must testify**, for you have been with me from the beginning. ***We have his mind, and a commission to discharge.***

God promises that we have Christ; we have his Spirit; we have his peace. And we believe him. In the last verse we also have a duty to respond to these gifts: *we also must testify*. Here again we see the link between what we've been given, and its intended purpose. "**You also must testify.**" In fact, this says the evidence of our love for Christ is our obedience to this command and to his other commands. "**If you love me, you will obey.**" THAT's how we claim his promises and fellowship with him. We ABIDE in Christ, and we EXPERIENCE Christ, through our obedience to Christ. In every sense of the word, we are PROSPERED through obedience; Christ is *praised* through our obedience; and the Gospel is *proclaimed* through our obedience. Let me repeat, *our obedience is a response to what God has given us, to what we believe is true*. Let's read Paul's description of what our union with Christ gives us, and how our obedient response will bless and prosper us according to God's plan:

Eph 1:3-14 **Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ** with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, even as he chose us **in him** before the foundation of the world, that we should be *holy and blameless* before him. In love he predestined us for adoption through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, *to the praise of his glorious grace*, with which he has blessed us in the Beloved. ***Can you see the link between our good, or God's blessings, and his own glory?***

In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace, which he lavished upon us, in all wisdom and insight making known to us the mystery of his will, *according to his purpose*, which he set forth in Christ as a PLAN for the fullness of time, *to unite all things in him*, things in heaven and things on earth. ***This plan to unite all things in Christ, including us, is God's plan to prosper us and make us holy.***

In him we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to the purpose of him who works all things according to the counsel of his will, so that we who were the first to hope in Christ might be *to the praise of his glory*.

In him you also, when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and believed in him, were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit, who is the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it, *to the praise of his glory*.

Look at what we have been given here: election, adoption, redemption, forgiveness, knowledge, spiritual blessings, an inheritance, the truth, the gospel, salvation, and the Holy Spirit – sealed and guaranteed to the praise of God's glory. **Let me ask you, are these things material? Or are they immaterial?** I asked my wife how she would define the difference. She said, "Immaterial things are things that don't matter. They are immaterial. Material things are things that matter; they count." So let me ask again. Are these things which I've just listed – election, redemption, forgiveness, etc. – are they material or immaterial to you? Do they matter? Of course they matter. And so they are *material*.

But are they tangibles or intangibles? Intangibles are things we can't lay our hands on and physically experience. Don't confuse intangible things with things which aren't real. Freedom is an intangible, but it's very real. Are things like **peace** and **communion** and **victory over the world** tangible or intangible? Can we practice them? Can we experience them? Ah. So when I put it that way, we know they are *tangible*.

Are they *palpable*? Can we respond to them emotionally? Do we sense them, or are they insensible to us? Here is a crossroad in the Christian life. If we don't really believe that we HAVE peace, that we HAVE communion, that we HAVE victory, and that we've been CALLED to serve God, then we *cannot* respond to these things emotionally, and we *will not* act on them. Active belief is what we mean by FAITH. Faith not only saves us, but it also drives us to action. If we have no **object** for our faith, no material, tangible, and palpable thing which we believe to be true, then we *cannot* have faith in it, and we *will not* evidence our faith with action. That was James' whole point when he said that faith without works is dead. He wasn't calling us to legalism through works, but to faith in Jesus Christ as the object of our faith. Do we BELIEVE in him, TRUST in him, and therefore WALK with him?

Paul links his own active belief to the corporate Church. He implies that we are not gifted for our own benefit, or to serve our own interests. That will not prosper us. Rather, we are given spiritual blessings to further the kingdom, and to prosper it. Only when we exercise our gifts in that regard will we truly prosper ourselves, and realize our spiritual blessings:

Col 1:24-29 [Now I rejoice in what was suffered for you \[in what Paul suffered for them\], and I fill up in my flesh what is still lacking in regard to Christ's afflictions for the sake of his **body**, which is the **church**. I have become its servant \[i.e. the Church's servant\] by the commission God gave me to present to you the word of God in its fullness – the mystery that has been kept hidden for ages and generations, but is now disclosed to the saints.](#)

[To them God has chosen to make known among the Gentiles the glorious riches of this mystery, which is **Christ in you** \[plural\], the hope of glory. We proclaim him, admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone perfect in Christ. To this end **I labor**, struggling with all HIS energy, which so powerfully works IN ME.](#)

Why does Paul labor? To present the word of God in its fullness, teaching everyone with all wisdom. Whose energy does he exert to that end? Christ's. Is that any different for the rest of us? We have been given the secrets of the kingdom, the keys to the kingdom (Mt 16:19), the power of Christ, and the Great Commission, so that all the people of God may be presented perfect in Christ. And moreover, we have been given *the Church*. Technically, we have been given TO the Church. We have been baptized into it by the Holy Spirit of whom we all drink (1Cor 12:13). The Church is the presence of the kingdom in the world. The Church is God's provision for his people. It is the pasture in which we are nourished and healed. It is our refuge in the world. It is our safe haven and our school. In the Church, we are taught the secrets of the kingdom, and we are instructed in the practice our faith. It is where we live out God's grace in love, humility, and harmony – all to the praise and glory of God. And that brings us to our third and final point.

III. How do we use what we've been given to prosper?

God favors spiritual prosperity over material prosperity. That's a shock to most American Christians, but it's true. If we happen to be blessed by material prosperity, we should rejoice and be grateful, because it is rare in this world. We need to learn the secret of being content, as Paul did, whether we have a lot or a little (Phil 4:12).

In Ecclesiastes, Solomon explores all the worldly ways in which we hope to prosper. But in the end, each of them turns out to be a vapor that slips through our fingers. We want, and God intends for us, the kind of prosperity that lasts for eternity. And so we are commanded to store up treasures for ourselves in heaven “[where moth and rust do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.](#)” (Matt 6:20-21)

What are these treasures? How do we store them up for ourselves in the heavenly realms? Here's a secret: God gave us some things for this life, and he promised us other things in the life to come. They are linked together. We need to learn *how to use his gifts for this life to reap the inheritance waiting for us in the life to come.*

2Pet 1:3-4 [His divine power has given us everything we need for life and godliness – HOW? - through our KNOWLEDGE of him who called us by his own glory and goodness. Through these \[i.e. his glory and goodness\] he has given us his very great and precious promises, so that through them \[i.e. through his promises\] you may participate in the divine nature and escape the corruption in the world caused by evil desires.](#)

The key word in this passage is “knowledge”: We are given *knowledge* of God and his promises. This knowledge is perhaps our greatest treasure in this life. Why? Because, this verse says, it gives us “everything we need for life and godliness.” Through our knowledge of God and of his promises we may participate in the divine nature and escape the corruption in the world caused by evil desires. That describes spiritual growth - PROSPERING. We grow when we apply the truth of God's word to the way we live. God's word *sanctifies* us. That is, it cleanses us and gives us a conscience – a conscious knowledge of right and wrong. It separates us from the world as our minds are renewed in Christ. We become more and more useful to God as we are more and more sanctified. We are becoming progressively conformed to the image of Jesus Christ by practicing and experiencing our knowledge of God, and by acting on his promises more and more, in increasing measure. Keep in mind that when the Bible speaks of the promises of God, it is speaking of things that have already been accomplished or set into motion. God promised to make atonement for his people, and he accomplished that in Christ. Every promise of God is already fulfilled in Christ. They are presents, gifts, that we have begun to enjoy, but we will not fully enjoy them until his return. We listed them earlier. Although they are already in effect, they are not yet fully realized.

We are completely sanctified in Christ and on his account. But we are also being sanctified ourselves – in reality and in deed by the power of the Holy Spirit. How does this process of sanctification work? We want to know, because *that's* how we're going to prosper.

2 Peter 1:5-9 For this very reason, make every effort to add to your faith goodness; and to goodness, knowledge; and to knowledge, self-control; and to self-control, perseverance; and to perseverance, godliness; and to godliness, brotherly kindness; and to brotherly kindness, love. For if you possess these qualities in increasing measure, they will keep you from being ineffective and unproductive in your knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.

This verse tells us there is a link between our knowledge of God, and our response to that knowledge. By appropriately responding to the truth, by applying it to our everyday life, we become convinced of it. The practical application of God's truth makes us effective and productive in our knowledge of God. In other words, "Right thinking leads to right practice." Our doctrine and our walk are tied together. What we believe about God and his promises will alter our lives forever. Listen to Col 1:4-14

We have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love you have for all the saints - the faith and love that spring from the hope that is stored up for you in heaven and that you have already heard about in the word of truth, the gospel that has come to you. All over the world this gospel is bearing fruit and growing, just as it has been doing among you since the day you heard it and understood God's grace in all its truth...

We have not stopped praying for you and asking God to fill you with the knowledge of his will through all spiritual wisdom and understanding. And we pray this in order that you may live a life worthy of the Lord and may please him in every way: bearing fruit in every good work, growing in the knowledge of God, being strengthened with all power according to his glorious might so that you may have great endurance and patience, and joyfully giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in the kingdom of light. For he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.

The hope of things stored up in heaven promotes faith and love. Faith and love bear fruit. Understanding God's grace in all its truth causes this fruit to grow. Growing in our knowledge and understanding of God's will enables us to live a life pleasing to the Lord, and it also qualifies us to share in the inheritance of the saints in the kingdom – because we acknowledge that we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins, in Jesus Christ alone.

Now let's get practical. I've provided you with a chart adapted from John MacArthur's book *The Church, the Body of Christ*. In the left column, 30 truths are listed which specify who we already are and what we already have in Christ. These are the things God has done FOR US. They define our *position* in Christ. In the right column you'll see how God expects us to respond to those truths. For every grace we've been given by God, there's a corresponding responsibility on our part. If we truly *believe* each truth, then we are supposed to *respond* to each one as God commands. When James says that "faith without works is dead," he links our works to our faith as a package deal. He chastises us when our behavior does not reflect the truth of what we claim to believe. He implies that if we don't act on it, we don't actually believe it – or else we do believe it, but we refuse to obey.

I'm not going to go through the list here. Please, take it home and study it. I find that it's a useful tool to identify those truths in the left column which I apparently don't believe or won't obey. How do I know? Because I'm not responding to it as I'm commanded to do in the right column. Each one is an area of obedience in which I need to grow. That's helpful to me.

But I can't learn to obey on my own. I NEED THE CHURCH TO HELP ME. "The eye cannot say to the hand, I don't need you." (1Co 12:21) "My brothers, if any among you err from the truth, and someone turns him back, know that turning a sinner from his wandering way will save a soul from misery, and will veil² a crowd of sins." Jm 5:19-20 Yet, the Church can't *teach* me obedience directly. It can only *model* obedience for me. Believers model obedience by modeling Christ to one another *in the Church*. That's what every one of us has been called to do. ***And that too is part of God's plan to prosper us.***

3Jn 2-4 Beloved, I pray that you may prosper in all things and be in good health, just as your soul prospers. For I rejoiced greatly when brethren came and testified of the truth that is in you, just as you walk in the truth. I have no greater joy than to hear that my children walk in truth.

This says that walking in truth prospers our soul. The word we use to describe someone who walks in truth is *sanctified*. It means set apart for God's use; holy and cleansed. In a nutshell, *sanctification is God's plan to prosper us*. Solomon reached the same conclusion at the end of Ecclesiastes where everything we value in this world turns to dust in the wind. "Now all has been heard; here is the conclusion of the matter: Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole [duty] of man." (Eccl 12:13) HOW are we sanctified? What has God given to us to sanctify us? God's word is what sanctifies us (Jn 17:17). It sets us apart for his purposes. Through his word, God gives us the mind of Christ (1Cor 2:16). It is *absolutely indispensable* to our prosperity! That's why we are told to be *eager to present ourselves to God for his approval, as men and women who do not need to be ashamed because we rightly divide his word of truth.* (2Tim 2:15) *Knowing* the truth won't sanctify us, however. It is *not* a passive process. Only *practicing* the truth will do that (Mt 7:24-27). And the church is our practice field.

Our obedience to God is part of our spiritual worship. It's how we offer our bodies to him (Rom 12:1). But this kind of spiritual worship is not private and personal. Obedience is a public affair. It is taught, modeled, practiced, observed, and corrected within the context of the corporate body of Christ. God ordained the Church to instruct us in the faith, and to equip us for the Great Commission. It is the place where we fellowship with one another, and with God. *We serve Christ by serving the **Body** of Christ with our gifts.* The Church is the beneficiary of our gifts just as we are the beneficiaries of its instruction. As I said, we are mutually dependent.

Eph 4:11-16 [Christ] gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God's people for works of service [*ministry*], so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.

WHY?

² (NT:2572 *kalupto*) to hinder the knowledge of something; to conceal or hide. The idea is that by correcting a fellow believer, we can preclude subsequent related sins. We veil them; we cover them so that their shamefulness will not be exposed (as with Noah's sons when he became drunk Gen 9:23. The one sin will not multiply into a crowd of sins. The additional misery which a sin might produce is thereby avoided. Also 1Pet 4:8.

Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of men in their deceitful scheming. Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ. From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, *as each part does its work*.

1 Peter 4:10-11 Each one should use whatever gift he has received to serve others, faithfully administering God's grace in its various forms. If anyone speaks, he should do it as one speaking the very words of God. If anyone serves, he should do it with the strength God provides, so that in all things God may be praised through Jesus Christ.

The Church exists to equip us in sound doctrine and loving practice so that we may fulfill our calling in the world. And we have been gifted to serve the Church so that it too may fulfill its calling in the world. As living stones in the spiritual house of Christ, we are not separate from the Church. We *are* the Church. We train together, worship together, pray together, live together, love together, suffer together, and praise together. We come together with joy, and we are refreshed together. (Rom 15:32) When we come together under Christ as our Head, we will *prosper* together. **THAT'S the Plan.**

1Pet 2:4-6 As you come to him, the living Stone – rejected by men but chosen by God and precious to him – you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.

Conclusion

God knows the plans he has for us, plans to prosper us and not to harm us, plans to give us hope and a future. He doesn't define prosperity in material terms. He defines it in spiritual terms, terms that provide for our good and his glory, and never one at the expense of the other. To that end he has united us with Christ and promised us an inheritance. He has given us his Word, His Spirit, and his Church that we might proclaim his grace and his glory through the Gospel of Jesus Christ. He equips us for that purpose. And when we are obedient to God's purposes, we *prosper* – and God is *exalted!*

God has *qualified us to share in the inheritance of the saints in the kingdom of light*. (Col 1:12) He has equipped us with *everything* necessary to prosper, *everything* necessary to grow and be fruitful. We live at the City Gates of the Kingdom of God, at the intersection between heaven and earth. Here we keep one eye on the cross, and one on what lies before us. We stand here in the sight of both God and men. We are diligently looking for ways to further the kingdom and to proclaim the Gospel, knowing that the kingdom and the Gospel will find their perfection only in the life to come. And yet it is right here that we prosper, because it is right here that we abide in Christ through obedience. Truly our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. Knowing this truth, our joy is complete (1Jn 1:3-4).

May we *prosper in* Christ and *with* Christ, knowing what our Great God has done FOR US and IN US by his grace. “My God will meet all your needs according to his glorious riches in Christ Jesus. To our God and Father be glory for ever and ever. Amen.” (Phil 4:19-20)