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HOW MUCH DOES 3 JOHN 2 PROMISE?

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“Beloved, I wish above all things that thou mayest prosper and be in health, even as thy soul prospereth” (3 John 2 KJV).¹

In an article entitled “How to Prosper from the Inside Out,” Kenneth Copeland asks, “How does God prosper His people?” The answer, he says, is in 3 John 2: God “blesses you materially as your soul prospers on His Word.” Copeland asserts that most Christians believe that God will make them prosper “as the economy prospers or even as [their] employers decide to promote [them].” This is wrong, he says; instead, “as the seeds of prosperity are planted in your mind, in your will and in your emotions...they eventually produce a great financial harvest.”²

Gloria Copeland interprets the verse in a similar way. She writes, “God’s plan is for us to grow financially as we grow spiritually.” The reason: God “knows it is dangerous to put great wealth into the hands of someone who is too spiritually immature to handle it.” She, too, interprets John’s wish as a divine promise: “God wants us to increase financially at the same rate we increase spiritually.”³

We can note two things in this interpretation of 3 John 2. One is that it construes the statement “even as” in a cause and effect way: spiritual prosperity *will* produce financial prosperity. The other is that this interpretation implies that the wish that the writer of the epistle expresses has the force of a promise from God.

Understanding the New Testament Epistles. We need to approach this verse and the common “prosperity” interpretation that the Copelands offer in light of the literary form (or *genre*) of 3 John, which is *epistle*. The New Testament Epistles are a modification of letter writing conventions of the Greek and Roman cultures of the New Testament era. The letters in these cultures typically included three elements: an *opening salutation*, which included the sender’s name, the addressee, and a greeting; the *body* of the letter in which the main topics were stated and elaborated; and the *closing*, which included additional greetings and final wishes.

The New Testament Epistles have these same ingredients. They, too, have an opening greeting: “Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy, To the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: Grace to you and peace” (1 Thess. 1:1). Likewise, they have what we would call the body of the letter, and they end with a conventional closing: “All who are with me send greetings to you. Greet those who love us in the faith. Grace be with you all” (Titus 3:15).

The Epistles, however, contain two sections that Greco-Roman letters lack. First, in most of the Epistles, the opening salutation is followed by a *thanksgiving*. It consists of a prayer for spiritual welfare, as well as a remembrance or commendation of the spiritual riches of the recipient. Paul’s thanksgiving in Colossians, for example, begins, “We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you” (Col. 1:3). Second, following the body or doctrinal section of a New Testament Epistle, we typically find a section of moral commands that goes by the Greek word *paraenesis*, which means “exhortations.” This section might contain groupings of proverbs, lists of vices and virtues, catalogs of commands about what to avoid and what to practice, or exhortations about a single moral topic. A specimen passage of *paraenesis* is this: “Put on then, as God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience” (Col. 3:12).

Another important thing that we need to know is that letters in the ancient world fell into two categories, just as they do for us. *Personal letters* existed to convey information that was personal to the writer, and those letters were filled with specific references that applied to the writer and the recipient. *Official letters* were public in content and tone. They were intended to be taken seriously as directives that applied generally to a number of people.

Finally, the New Testament Epistles are what literary people call *occasional pieces*. This means that they were written in response to specific occasions in the life and times of the writer and his recipients. The result is that, except for the epistle to the Romans (which is really a theological treatise), the New Testament Epistles are generally not systematic discussions of a theological or moral topic. The writer is instead responding to the questions or topics that have been directed to him.

Interpreting the Various Sections of the New Testament Epistles. It is easy to see that we need to pay attention to the place where a given statement appears in an epistle. A statement in the doctrinal *body* of an epistle has the status of authoritative truth. Here we find ideas that are universally applicable, not limited to the local conditions of a given church or the personal relationships between author and recipient.

The moral behavior that is prescribed in the *paraenesis* is also binding on all people at all times. These lists of virtues and vices, and of commands regarding what to do and avoid, are straightforward directives: "Let love be genuine. Abhor what is evil; hold fast to what is good" (Rom. 12:9).

The *salutation*, *thanksgiving*, and *closing*, however, are phrased in a different kind of rhetoric. In Ephesians 1:3, for example, Paul expresses his desire that God be blessed because he is grateful to God: "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing." Paul, as the writer, states what we, too, are thankful for as readers. These words of thanksgiving remind us of what we possess in Christ, but they are not a command to behave in a certain way, nor do they state a promise. The salutations and closings of epistles are similar to this. They express the author's wishes for the recipients: "The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit" (Gal. 6:18).

Epistolary Salutations. Let us think about the salutations in the letters and e-mail messages that we ourselves send and receive. I often begin an e-mail with the statement, "I hope that this communiqué finds you doing well." If I find that too understated for a given recipient, I might write, "I hope that this finds you and yours flourishing in every way." Are these promises? No: they are wishes. The person who receives my expression of good wishes does not claim it as something assured. In fact, sometimes the recipients of my letters share with me the difficulties through which they are currently passing.

Verse 2 of the epistle of 3 John appears as part of the salutation. In the beginning of the salutation (v. 1), John calls the recipient "beloved Gaius." The first thing we might note from this is that John is writing to a personal friend. Second, we might note that John is claiming to be expressing a wish or prayer (nearly all English translations read "I pray," although a handful, such as the King James Version, read "I wish"). John is expressing a wish for the complete well-being of his friend. He is not stating a general promise for all Christians.

Furthermore, the exact form in which John casts his prayer or wish was thoroughly conventional even in the surrounding pagan culture. Greeks and Romans, too, wished prosperity and good health to the recipients of their letters. For John, a Christian who believed in the primacy of the spiritual, no picture of welfare was complete unless it included a person's soul as well as body.

If we put the components of John's well-wishes together, they add up to a picture of complete or total well-being. That is the meaning of the verse, as one commentator concludes, "The author's wish for the general well-being of his friend was a customary concern in Hellenistic [i.e., Greek and Roman] letters and constitutes no basis for a 'right to prosperity' among Christians."⁴

To say that first-century pagans used the same formula in their epistolary salutations does not mean that the sentiment that John expresses is not inspired or is anything less than Christian; but some Bible interpreters have a way of implying that they have unlocked a secret and very special message that

ordinary Christians have overlooked. There are no hidden or esoteric spiritual truths embodied in a conventional epistolary salutation.

We should note in this regard that “prosperity” teachers attach an undue weight to the syntax that happens to appear in the English translation of 3 John 2. They believe that the phrase “even as” means “as a result of,” or “as an inevitable accompaniment to.” The gist of the passage, however, is that John already knows that Gaius is flourishing spiritually (as several English translations and numerous commentaries make clear). John hopes that his friend’s external circumstances might match his spiritual health, which according to the very next verse is good, and something that others had reported to John earlier: “For I rejoiced greatly when the brothers came and testified to your truth, as indeed you are walking in the truth” (3 John 3). The phrase “just as” or “even as,” then, has the force of a coordinate link, not a cause and effect link.

When we pray for ourselves and others, we pray in confidence, but we do not presume to claim that God promises to send everything for which we pray. When a friend sends good wishes to us in a letter, we know very well that our actual circumstances might be far from what our friend has wished for us. In short, an epistolary salutation is just that—a salutation in which one of the conventional niceties is for the sender to express a desire for the well-being of the recipient. Interpreting the wish or prayer of 3 John 2 as a promise of “health and wealth” is not in line with what we know about salutations in epistles or, for that matter, with the general tenor of New Testament teaching that a mark of true spirituality is suffering (e.g., Rom. 8:17; Phil. 1:29; 1 Pet. 4:1).

— *Leland Ryken*

NOTES

1. Unless otherwise noted, all Bible quotations are from the English Standard Version.
2. Kenneth Copeland, “How to Prosper from the Inside Out,” Kenneth Copeland Ministries, http://www.kcm.org/studycenter/finances/pdf/prosper_inside_out.pdf.
3. Gloria Copeland, “Build Your Financial Foundation,” Kenneth Copeland Ministries, <http://www.kcm.org/studycenter/finances/pdf/foundation.pdf>.
4. Thomas F. Johnson, *1, 2, and 3 John* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1993), 167.