



What Does Prosperity Mean to You?

Jaellayna Palmer

Hoping to better organize my home office, I got an additional bookcase this week—and now I can readily see several of my old books on the theme of prosperity.

Much like greeting longtime friends, I spent some time flipping through them, re-acquainting myself with their ideas. Through a range of perspectives and authors, they explore interrelated concepts including prosperity, abundance, success, and contentment.

For many years, beginning before I became a Baha'i, I have been intrigued with the concept of prosperity. What does prosperity mean to you?

What Does Prosperity *Really* Mean?

Conceptually it is intangible and reaches beyond the material. Surely prosperity is not about so-much-money or status or a luxurious life. Linked to the concepts of plenty and abundance, it is self-defined rather than quantified by others. As a spiritual condition, it transcends (though perhaps incorporates) the material state. One of the best definitions I've ever seen of the word "prosperity" is on the first page of a book by Catherine Ponder, a Unity Church minister: "You are prosperous to the degree that you are experiencing peace, health, and plenty in your world." – *The Dynamic Laws of Prosperity*, p. vii.

Mahatma Gandhi defined it this way: "It is health that is real wealth and not pieces of gold and silver."

The idea of both prosperity and material wealth is discussed in almost all religious and faith traditions. Sometimes it is written within a prayer asking for abundance; sometimes it is an acknowledgement of sufficiency. Prosperity is often related to peace, to strong character, to education, to honorable living. The Baha'i teachings speak of God as the source of real prosperity, and they also remind us that prosperity comes in two forms:

Two calls to success and prosperity are being raised from the heights of the happiness of mankind... The one is the call of civilization, of the progress of the material world... The other is the soul-stirring call of God, Whose spiritual teachings are safeguards of the everlasting glory, the eternal happiness and

illumination of the world of humanity... –Abdu'l-Baha, *Selections from the Writings of Abdu'l-Baha*, p. 282.

What Does Spiritual Prosperity Mean?

Recognizing prosperity as a spiritual state does not mean that we shouldn't be concerned with material prosperity. Life is practical, and the desire to live more comfortably is consistent with being thankful in times of need. Our planet and its beauty have been created for us to enjoy and to enhance. Since this requires material assets, then acquiring those assets can be a worthy goal. The key to this, however, is doing so with gratitude and appreciation, without being driven by materialism or seeking social status.

The Baha'i writings explore the sources of material sufficiency and even state that a mature society requires more than sufficiency—it requires wealth. Foremost among the sources of these material resources is work, whether that is through a profession, crafts, or a host of other endeavors. Income generated through work provides the means for our own maintenance and a more secure future.

Does Being Prosperous Mean You Have to be Generous?

The Baha'i teachings also encourage generosity in times of prosperity. They tell us to be grateful for that prosperity, even while recognizing it as a temporary state. As such, we should also be thankful during times of shortage or insufficiency, since that condition brings its own lessons and may also pass away.

Beyond our own personal interests, Abdu'l-Baha wrote that broadening our thinking can bring about material prosperity, even on a global scale. Describing the progress of a person from concern for self to the family, community, and country, he concluded:

... when ideas and views reach the utmost degree of expansion and ... perfection, then will he be interested in the exaltation of humankind ... the well-wisher of all men and the seeker of the weal and prosperity of all lands. – Abdu'l-Baha, *Selections from the Writings of Abdu'l-Baha*, p. 69.

The prevailing focus on materialism and self-interest can be overcome with increased concern for all humanity. Together we can choose to think about universal prosperity and base our actions on that as a primary concern. Everyone is worthy of health and sufficiency; all deserve abundance; and we all crave perfection—but the Baha'i teachings clearly say that we cannot achieve true prosperity until we overcome our prejudices and unite:

... all forms of prejudice among mankind must be abandoned and that until existing prejudices are entirely removed, the world of humanity will not and cannot attain peace, prosperity and composure. – Abdu'l-Baha, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 434.