

## CHAPTER 14

### OWNING A HOME – THE AMERICAN DREAM

Even though owning a home is not the only thing the average American would consider as “the American dream,” it would surely be a high priority for most Americans. The house is, of course, a major economic asset. I have seen studies which show that it constitutes a major portion of the wealth of a large segment of the population. That being the case, the question came to my mind, does the Bible give us any specific wisdom or commandments relating to buying or owning a home? Is there economic wisdom in the Bible which bears upon buying or owning a home? The purpose of this chapter is to answer these questions, and be true to the Scriptures as we do so.

A secondary purpose of this chapter is to share with you my suggested rule for purchasing a home, based on my personal convictions developed from studying the Bible. That will lead naturally to a third purpose for the chapter, which is to briefly pull together all of the principles and truths we have studied in the preceding chapters and begin to formulate a stewardship plan.

#### WHAT DOES THE BIBLE SAY ABOUT THE HOUSE?

The word “house” appears several hundred times in the Bible, but I was able to find only six passages that speak of the house in a financial way, that is, from the standpoint of our financial stewardship. I was amazed at how these passages present truth that bears directly upon the question, how do I buy a house in the will of God? We will look at four of the six passages before I give you my rule. The reason is ... that my rule is so strict, so hard, that I want a firm foundation from Scripture to back me up, else I fear that some will discontinue this study. In fact, the contents of this chapter will be too strong for some. I understand this very well, because not too many years ago it was too strong for me.

Understand that my rule is not your command. Like giving, under the New Testament teachings on stewardship, you have complete latitude in selecting the home you buy or build, whether or not you have a

mortgage, and so forth. Just keep in mind that you will be accountable to Jesus on how well you obeyed His command to store treasure in heaven rather than on earth.

Well, let's look at the four passages which are the foundation for my rule for buying a home. There is a common thread which runs through these passages, and it has to do with financial priorities.

PASSAGE 1 – ECCLESIASTES 2:1-11

First, a word of background. Most scholars believe the book of Ecclesiastes was written by King Solomon. In this book, Solomon confesses his sin of materialism. We've been learning that one of the forms of idolatry mentioned in the Bible is materialism lust, and since Solomon was the richest man that had ever lived, it was a natural trap for him, and he fell into it. Apparently, later in his life, he realized his sin and he wrote about his materialism and other sins in the book of Ecclesiastes. We can profit from Solomon's mistakes and his testimony.

I thought in my heart, "Come now, I will test you with pleasure to find out what is good." But that also proved to be meaningless. "Laughter," I said, "is foolish. And what does pleasure accomplish?" I tried cheering myself with wine, and embracing folly – my mind still guiding me with wisdom. I wanted to see what was worthwhile for men to do under heaven during the few days of their lives [Ecclesiastes 2:1-3].

Solomon embarked upon a series of experiments in search of happiness, or meaning in life. In these opening verses he mentions three of these experiments, pleasure, wine and folly. In verse 4 he mentions another.

I undertook great projects ... [Ecclesiastes 2:4].

I think that one of the best interpretations of this statement for our day would be, "I undertook the accumulation of status symbols." I think that communicates to us what Solomon was getting involved in. He bought every status symbol that money could buy. And notice which one he mentions first.

I undertook great projects: I built houses for myself and planted vineyards [Ecclesiastes 2:4].

I would imagine that the most universal, time-tested status symbol in human history is the house. It's not the only one, of course. Today we have many others ... cars, clothing, jewelry, club memberships, sun tans, boats, condominiums, and on and on the list would go. But surely the most time-honored of all the status symbols has been the house. And Solomon puts the house first in his list. His list continues.

I made gardens and parks and planted all kinds of fruit trees in them. I made reservoirs to water groves of flourishing trees [Ecclesiastes 2:5-6].

He had to put in an irrigation system to water all of his orchards and groves.

I bought male and female slaves and had other slaves who were born in my house [Ecclesiastes 2:7a].

All down through history, servants have been a status symbol.

I also owned more herds and flocks than anyone in Jerusalem before me. I amassed silver and gold for myself, and the treasure of kings and provinces. I acquired men and women singers, and a harem as well, the delights of the heart of man. I became greater by far than anyone in Jerusalem before me. In all this my wisdom stayed with me [Ecclesiastes 2:7b-9].

Solomon broke the record for possessing status symbols. His statement, "In all this my wisdom stayed with me," could mislead us if we did not learn from the Hebrew scholars that this is a Hebrew idiom, which we would interpret today something like, "I stuck with my experiment to the bitter end." Or we might say, "I gave it all I had." And this is consistent with what he says in verse 10.

I denied myself nothing my eyes desired. I refused my heart no pleasure. My heart took delight in all my work, and this was the reward for all my labor [Ecclesiastes 2:10].

Think about this. Solomon probably had as close to an unlimited supply of money as anyone has ever had in history. And he could pay cash for anything he wanted. But when we get to the first word of verse 11, there is a definite turn in the argument. He's going to tell us what all these status symbols did for him. Surely they brought him happiness and joy and fulfillment in life, didn't they?

Yet when I surveyed all that my hands had done and what I had toiled to achieve, everything was meaningless, a chasing after the wind; nothing was gained under the sun [Ecclesiastes 2:11].

Did Solomon enjoy his houses and other status symbols? The answer is clear: "All is meaningless and a chasing after the wind." It's like grabbing for a fist full of wind. Why?, we might ask. Because *his priorities were wrong*. Instead of using wealth to glorify God and build the kingdom, Solomon used wealth in an attempt to satisfy his own lust. **He tried to buy happiness with money**. But God did not give him wealth for that purpose. Thus, when he mismanaged it, God sent him sorrow and misery and restlessness. Is it possible that we could some day find ourselves saying the same thing about our house that Solomon said about his houses?

#### PASSAGE 2 – HAGGAI 1: 1-11

In the second year of King Darius, on the first day of the sixth month, the word of the Lord came through the prophet Haggai to Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, and to Joshua son of Jehozadak, the high priest: This is what the Lord Almighty says: "These people say, 'The time has not yet come for the Lord's house to be built' " [Haggai 1:1-2].

A word of historical background will help our understanding of this passage. The year is approximately 520 BC. It's after the Babylonian captivity. The remnant had returned to Jerusalem. The feasts had been reinstated, and a foundation for a new temple had been laid. But that foundation sat there with no building on it for fifteen years. And the people's excuse? We read it in verse 2, "These people say, the time has not yet come for the Lord's house to be built." They were saying something like this, "Economic conditions are not right for us to build this temple. We're in a recession. We're in a drought. Besides that,

we're in a hostile political climate." There were foreigners surrounding them, putting pressure on them. "Oh yes, we intend to finish building the temple, but the time is just not right. We have to wait for conditions to improve." That's basically what they were saying, and they had been saying this for fifteen years. Well, God had a word for them through the prophet.

Then the word of the Lord came through the prophet Haggai: "Is it a time for you yourselves to be living in your paneled houses, while this house (the temple) remains a ruin?" [Haggai 1:3-4].

The word "paneled" in verse 4 is the translation of a Hebrew word which meant ceiling material. That's the reason in the King James translation we read "your ceiled houses." But this ceiling material was also used as paneling in the more expensive, luxurious homes of that day. It was a status symbol. Today we have a perfect word to interpret this word "paneled". It is the word "plush." And he's saying in verse 4, "Is it time for you yourselves to be living in your plush houses while this house remains a ruin?" There's a good bit of sarcasm here. God through the prophet is saying in so many words, "I notice that the economic conditions and drought didn't keep you folks from building plush houses. Somehow you got the money to do that. But you haven't been able to get My house, the temple of God, built. And your only excuse is that the time is not right. Conditions are not right." Well, God had a further word for them.

Now this is what the Lord Almighty says: "Give careful thought to your ways" [Haggai 1:5].

Do you know what that's saying? Consider your priorities. Put first things first in your life. Put the work of God in first place.

You have planted much but have harvested little. You eat, but never have enough. You drink, but never have your fill. You put on clothes, but are not warm. You earn wages, only to put them in a purse with holes in it [Haggai 1:6].

Isn't that an interesting description of inflation? A purse with holes in it! We're not the only culture in history that has suffered from inflation. Throughout history, inflation has been a natural consequence

of men violating financial principles. I believe God uses inflation to judge the sin of materialism. These people were suffering inflation and drought because they had their priorities wrong. This passage also indicates the presence of medical problems. Food did not satisfy. Clothing did not warm. In other words, God stopped providing their basic needs. That was the consequence of their wrong financial priorities.

This is what the Lord Almighty says: “Give careful thought to your ways. Go up into the mountains and bring down timber and build the house, so that I may take pleasure in it and be honored,” says the Lord [Haggai 1:7-8].

It is interesting to me what God does *not* say in verse 8. He does not say, “As soon as the economy recovers from recession, build that temple.” He does not say, “As soon as inflation drops to 3%, build My house.” He does not say, “As soon as the political situation stabilizes, build the house.” He does not say, “As soon as you finish your house, your office, your condominium, or whatever else you’re working on, then build My temple.” He said, “Do it now ..... immediately.” He did not even say, “As soon as you are able to arrange a mortgage, or financing, build My house.” This is one of 16 passages in the Bible that mentions buildings in relation to God’s work. And as I have said previously, there’s not a single illustration in the Bible of the use of borrowed money to do God’s work.

Let me ask you a question to meditate on. If most of the members of a local church are poorly managing God’s money, how likely is that church to raise sufficient cash to underwrite the cost of a building? So what they usually do is take out a mortgage. Then they begin to waste some of God’s money by paying the interest on the mortgage. During my lifetime I have seen many churches default on their mortgages, damaging God’s reputation, and hurting the cause of Christ.

The value of studying this Old Testament passage in Haggai is to better understand the mind of God. Here is what I believe God wants us to understand about Him from this passage. He expects us to carefully consider our priorities, and put our stewardship of His property in first place. If a work of God needs to be done (spreading the Gospel, feeding the poor, supporting the local church and its ministries), it

shouldn't go wanting while God's people build plush houses and accumulate other status symbols for themselves. We are free to choose our priorities, but our choices will determine our reward and standing in eternity. I once heard a preacher state it in a way that has stayed with me. He said, "**Every Christian is the product of his priorities.**" That is worth meditating on.

PASSAGE 3 – ACTS 4:34-35

There were no needy persons among them. For from time to time those who owned lands or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales and put it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to anyone as he had need [Acts 4:34-35].

This was the Jerusalem church which was suffering from a drought, as well as extreme persecution. Their financial condition became so critical that in order to survive, they had to begin selling their assets, even their homes, and bringing the money to the local church treasury, from which distribution was made as people had need.

As I studied this, I wondered, could we do this today? Is it possible that we could do today what these first century Christians did? I am inclined to think we could, but I think things would have to get much, much worse before we could. If economic conditions became extremely hard, I think we might rise to this kind of action. Notice that this passage conveys the same message as the other two passages cited above, and that is that houses are not the priority that we have been conditioned to think they are.

I believe we have been deceived by the world concerning the priority of houses. Owning a home, or a particular home, should never take priority over doing the work of God. **Beware lest a house become an idol to you or me.**

Any time we come to believe we have to have some material asset ... a certain car, a certain house, a vacation, a certain investment ... watch out! It can easily become an idol. I encourage you to memorize and meditate on the following proposition: **When any material asset becomes an idol to us, then it becomes a liability instead of an asset, and sooner or later it will bring sorrow.** Yes, God intends for us to

enjoy earthly assets ... but only if those assets are dedicated to Him ... only if they are not idols to us ... only if our priorities are right. Re-study 1 Timothy 6:6-19, where both sides of this truth are taught in balance.

I have profited from studying the lives of some of the great heroes of the faith of the past 300 years, men like Hudson Taylor, George Mueller, John Wesley and others. I remember reading that on one occasion John Wesley was told that while he was away on a preaching assignment his house burned down. His response was, "It's not my house. It's God house, and it's one less responsibility for me."

This was the kind of emotional detachment to material things that these great men of the faith had. They were not attached to earthly treasure. If you and I can begin to develop this kind of attitude toward material possessions, guess what will happen? We will learn to enjoy material wealth. This truth is counter cultural and counter intuitive. The true enjoyment of material wealth comes from being unattached to it.

#### PASSAGE 4 – PROVERBS 24:27

Finish your outdoor work and get your fields ready; after that, build your house [Proverbs 24:27].

It is immediately obvious in this verse, like the others, that the verse sets a priority. And guess what it's not? It's *not* the house. This verse uses a farming illustration because it is set in an agrarian culture. Here, in my opinion, is a good 21<sup>st</sup> century interpretation of this verse. "Get your financial affairs in proper order; after that, build your house." This little sentence sermon is pregnant with wisdom, and contains one of the most important principles of financial management to be found in the Bible. I want to state the principle in as many ways as I can think of, so that we can learn it and learn it well. In its simplest form, this verse is saying: **Secure a source of income before starting your home.** The word "house" in this verse is broader than four walls and a roof. That's included, but it is really saying something like this: Before taking on the obligation of marriage and a family, secure a source of income.

Generalizing the truth a little more, we might state it like this: **Don't begin any task until the necessary resources are assured.**

Here is a third way of expressing the wisdom of this verse: **Wealth must be acquired before it is consumed.** That is almost so simple that we can miss it. We have become a nation of consumers ... I mean *expert* consumers. Our children are growing up automatically being expert consumers, but not being expert producers and savers. We are majoring on consumption and minoring on production and saving, and as this trend intensifies, we will decline as a nation. At this writing we are declining as a nation. Nations like China, Japan and other Asian nations that major on producing and saving are buying us out. They are buying our land, our businesses ... they are buying us out a piece at a time. The citizens of those countries save 15% to 30% of their income. As this is written, the US savings rate is essentially zero. We are consuming all our income, then borrowing to increase it further, and we will decline economically if this trend continues.

Let me suggest one last way of expressing the wisdom of this verse, in the form of an instruction, designed to give us a practical application to financial management: **Allocate your resources instead of attempting to pay for your desires.** Please let that sink in. Think about it long and hard. If you go through life attempting to pay for your desires, you will crash and burn financially.

Biblical financial management is the allocation of your resources according to the will of God, not the satisfaction of your desires. This is true for a very simple reason, because the property belongs to God, and we are His managers, not owners in our own right. If we ignore this wisdom, we will never find satisfaction or contentment. But if we accept it and follow it, our desires will be realized. "Delight yourself in the Lord, and He will give you the desires of your heart" (Psalm 37:4).

#### THE BEGINNING OF A FINANCIAL PLAN

There is a common truth in the four passages we have just discussed. It is very clear. That truth is that the house is not a top financial priority. And if the house is not, then what are the top financial priorities which we glean from studying the Bible? We have discussed them in

preceding chapters. Let me list four priorities which come ahead of the house, in my opinion.

- I believe a God-honoring plan of giving is more important than owning a home, or owning a particular home.
- I believe that paying taxes according to the law is more important than owning a house, that is, it has a higher priority. The reason I mention this is because Jesus puts paying taxes on an equal level with giving God what is due Him. It's a higher priority than the house.
- I believe that the elimination of consumer debt is more important than buying a house. This is almost too simple. If I have consumer debt, I am lowering my standard of living, and making it harder to pay for a house. That is just common sense. Do the math.
- I believe that establishing a systematic savings program to meet future known needs and emergencies is more important than owning a house, or a particular house that I might wish to buy. This will be the subject of the next chapter, and I believe it is a higher priority than buying a house. In other words, if I couldn't do both, I would set up a systematic savings program and delay the purchase of a house.

#### MY RULE FOR BUYING A HOUSE

Having established four priorities which come ahead of buying a house, I would like to give you my rule for buying a house. It is based on the wisdom derived from Proverbs 24:27, which implies that a set of conditions should exist before you build your house. **RULE:** Never buy a house, that is, a particular house you may be considering, until **all** of the following five conditions exist.

- You are honoring God in your giving.
- You are paying taxes to the government according to the law.

- You are out of consumer debt and paying cash for all living expenses.
- You have a systematic savings program in place with an agreed-upon amount going in each month.
- You have a balanced budget with sufficient income to pay all the costs involved in owning your proposed house.

The first four of these conditions are clear. They need no further explanation. But number five needs a little more explanation. Here's what it means. After paying the Lord, the government, your savings and all living expenses, you have sufficient funds remaining to cover all the costs required to own the house. What are they? The mortgage payment, insurance, taxes, utilities, upkeep and repair. And be careful not to underestimate upkeep and repair, which must be included in the budget.

By following this rule, you are *allocating resources* instead of *attempting to pay for desires*.

The five conditions fit together like the pieces of a puzzle, and note that when condition 5 is not met, sooner or later you will run out of cash to pay bills. When that happens, you either stop paying God and/or taxes, stop saving, or start borrowing. There are just no other alternatives. And at that point, you have stopped allocating resources, and started trying to pay for desires.

I admit to you that my rule is hard, and strict, especially when compared to the typical thinking in our culture today. Some of you, as you read this, may have been thinking, if I have to meet those conditions, there's no way I can buy a home. If that's what you are thinking, you are getting the message I wish to convey.

Many Christians cannot afford to buy a house, but they have not realized it. You cannot ignore the financial wisdom God gives us in the Bible and hope to prosper.

There is no wisdom, no insight, no plan that can succeed against the Lord [Proverbs 21:30].

The Congress of the United States cannot change that divine eternal truth. The Federal Reserve Board cannot fix it so that we can violate these financial principles and hope to prosper.

I want to be sure I am being understood. I am not saying that buying a house, or signing a mortgage to do so, is in and of itself a violation of Scripture. All I'm saying is that when these five conditions are not met, you are going counter to the wisdom of the Bible, and under those conditions the house becomes a liability, not an asset. And sooner or later, it will bring troubling times.

#### WHICH IS BETTER – BUYING OR RENTING?

Through the years I have often heard it argued that buying a house is always better than renting. Most of the time the reason given is that you are throwing your money away when you rent, and since houses always go up in value, you're better off buying than renting. I have no problem with this argument as long as the five conditions are met.

But I would add that houses do not always go up. In the twentieth century there were periods of several years during which houses went down in value. In my home town, there was a six year period in the 1980s when they went down. During that period the renters were the winners because they did not ride the house market down, losing their equities.

But even during times when houses are going up in value, you are not throwing your money away by renting. You are getting value received for your rent just as with all other goods and services you pay for. The market determines the value of all goods and services, including rent, and that can go up or down. As I write this today, it is very clear that overall, nationwide, renting is a better value than buying ... not just better, but much better in most cases. I will not argue for either approach. Much of the time buying would be better than renting. I'm saying, let the five conditions guide you to the right decision. If you can meet them by buying, then do it. If you can meet them easier by renting, then rent until you are in a position to buy.

GOD'S BEST MAY BE A DEBT FREE HOME

I cannot end this chapter without planting some seeds of truth from God's word which could bear fruit in your life. I cannot imagine even one in a hundred Christian couples ever asking God to make it possible for them to go through their entire married life without any debt whatsoever, not even a mortgage on their home.

That is such a foreign idea to our culture, it would rarely even be considered. But when I was born (1928), it was actually the norm. I may not be perfectly accurate with this figure, but I have read that at that time only 2% of all the homes in the United States had any debt against them.

There were no car loans in those days, and in fact it was many years later before people began to borrow to buy a car. So what I'm about to suggest to you would not have seemed unusual in those days. Today it is very unusual. That's the reason I'm suggesting it to you.

Since signing a mortgage involves a long term commitment, and no one knows the future, why not consider the possibility that signing a mortgage would not be God's best for you. Why not consider following all of God's wisdom which we are discussing in this book, and ask God for a house free of debt. He's been doing this for centuries. He owns all the houses. Please meditate on the following passages.

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 [James 4:2b-3].

This passage suggests asking God with the right motive. And what is the right motive? I would suggest an all-out commitment to follow all of God's financial wisdom and obey all His commandments, along with the understanding that God is in control and His answer to your request will be in your best interest.

This is what the Lord says – your redeemer, the Holy One of Israel: "I am the Lord your God who teaches you what is best for you, who directs you in the way you should go. If only you

had paid attention to my commands, your peace would have been like a river, your righteousness like the waves of the sea ...” [Isaiah 48:17-18].

This has become a very special passage to me. And every time I read this passage, I think back over my own life ... of all the heartache, all the failure, all the stress ... which I could have avoided if only I had paid attention to God’s commandments and wisdom. Please meditate on this passage.

Does having a house free of debt sound like more than you can imagine?

Now to Him who is able to do exceeding abundantly above all we ask or think, according to the power that worketh in us, unto Him be glory in the church by Christ Jesus throughout all ages, world without end. Amen [Ephesians 3:20-21 (KJV)].

How can you possibly estimate “exceeding abundantly above?”..... I realize my next statement is to some extent foolish, for no one can return to the past, but if I could start over as a young man with the present knowledge and understanding of the information in this book, this is the approach I would take with respect to a house. I would commit to never signing a mortgage on a home, or going into debt for living expenses, and I would ask God to give me a home free of debt, when and if it was His will to do so. I would wait in faith and eager anticipation for God to make good on His promise to do “exceeding abundantly above all I could ask or imagine,” whatever that turned out to be. I believe that is God’s highest and best approach to owning a home.

#### FINAL THOUGHTS

Here is financial management based on biblical wisdom reduced to one sentence: **Pay the Lord, the government and yourself (savings) first, then live on the balance without borrowing.**

*Memorize* the four priorities of Proverbs 24:27.

- Secure a source of income before starting your home (family).

- Don't begin any task before the necessary resources are assured.
- Wealth must be acquired before it is consumed.
- Allocate your resources instead of attempting to pay for your desires.

QUESTIONS FOR MEDITATION (Take to the prayer chamber)

- Does your house (or the house you are considering) meet the five conditions of my rule (see page 156) for buying a house?
- Are you honoring God in your giving?
- Is your house a joy? Really? Or do you find yourself saying about it what Solomon said about his houses? (“All is meaningless and a chasing after the wind.”)
- Are you allocating resources or attempting to pay for desires?
- Have you thought about asking God for a house free of debt?
- (The all encompassing question) Have you taken the steps necessary to determine whether your house is the perfect will of God? Don't buy a house until you have.

