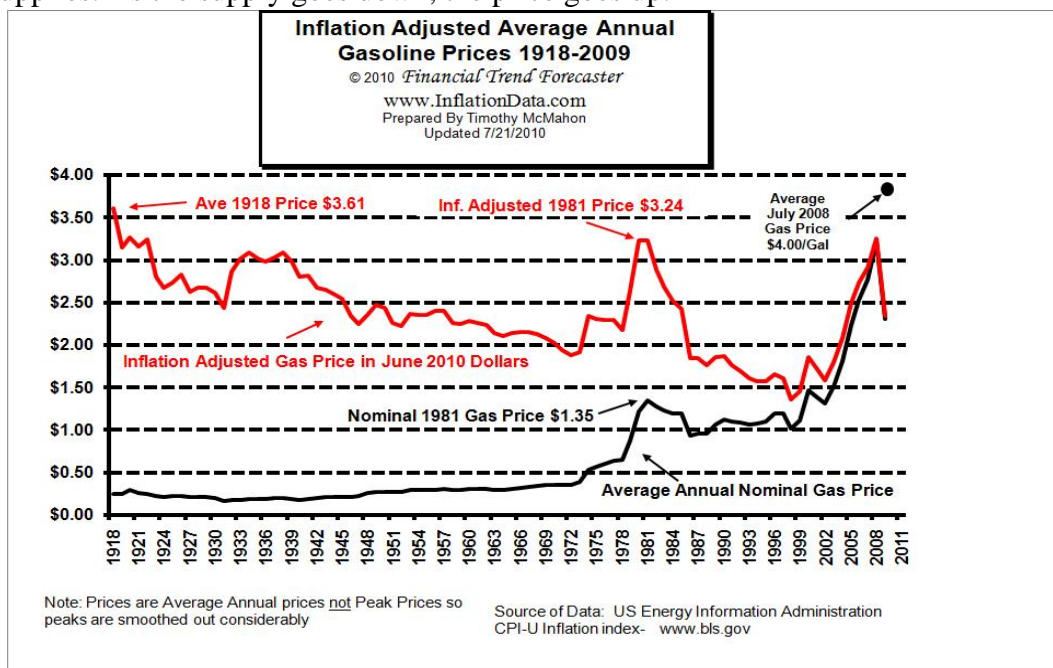


We all are feeling the recent rise in gas prices again as it recently shot way past \$3 per gallon. Interestingly, even though we feel like these gas prices are way too high, when you factor in inflation, gas prices are cheaper now than they were in 1918! Like the price of all goods, gas prices are driven by supply and demand, or in many cases, just the appearance of supply and demand. If conflict breaks out in the Middle East, you can be certain that crude oil prices will rise as the world economy braces for a decreased oil supply. Oil prices are inversely proportional to oil supplies. As the supply goes down, the price goes up.



As we start the first week of our series in the book of 2 Corinthians, we are confronted with the spiritual issue of supply and demand. In his opening paragraphs, Paul wrote about surplus of suffering. This is best seen in the NASB in verse five. *For just as the sufferings of Christ are ours in abundance, so also our comfort is abundant through Christ.* The word translated as abundance simply means a surplus. Therefore, Paul could have said that he had a surplus of suffering. He had more than he needed. That's kind of an odd way of speaking about suffering,

don't you think? After all, doesn't everyone have a surplus of suffering? Isn't even a little suffering too much?

As we work our way through 2 Corinthians, we will see that the topic of suffering is one of the core themes of this book. In addition to today's passage, Paul has famously written, *If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness* (11:30). And, *We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed. We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body* (4:8-10). The topic of suffering drips off the pages of this book and we will see that develop over the coming months.

Before we dig any further into this passage, I want to give you an overview of the whole book as well as Paul's relationship with the church in Corinth. It is important to get this background for several reasons.

First, this will anchor 2 Corinthians to its historical context. Far too often Christians study books in isolation from the rest of the Bible. It's usually worse than this even—we study chapters and verses apart in isolation from the rest of the Bible. Every time someone quotes their “favorite Bible verse,” I can almost guarantee that they do not have any idea about its context.

Philippians 4:13 is a prime example. “I can do all things through Christ who gives me strength.” I think I mentioned this before that this verse was displayed prominently in the weight room at Trinity College and Seminary. I couldn't help but wonder if the guys who read this continually applied it to their weight lifting goals. I can bench press 300 pounds through Christ who gives me strength. Do you see? We take a verse like this and turn it into a magical formula for success. The phrase “all things” becomes like a blank check that we can cash any time we please.

I can do _____ through Christ who gives me strength.

Just fill in the blank with whatever it is you need and Jesus will give you the strength to do it. Do you want to lose weight this year? Well then just keep saying, “I can lose 30 pounds through Christ who gives me strength.” Are you always running short of money and there's too much month left at the end of your money? Then repeat after me. “I can get a higher paying job through Christ who gives me strength.” We may not be so painfully crass about the way I am being, but if we are honest, this is the basic way we approach this verse. Meanwhile, we have absolutely no idea what this verse is actually about in its original context. In context, Paul was teaching about contentment. Contentment slips through our hands like a passing wind. We chase after contentment but never lay hold of it, yet Paul said, “I know the secret of being content in any and every situation.” If Paul had more than he needed, he could be content and if he did not have enough of the basic necessities of life, he could also be content. Therefore, in its proper context we understand that if Paul did not have what he needed, he could still be content. But can you see that this is the opposite of how we usually claim this verse? We take it to mean that if we don't have something, God will help us to get it but Paul says, “NO! If you don't have what you seek, you can still be content with not having it.”

Another life verse that gets abused and mangled is Jeremiah 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.” Does anyone know the context of this verse? It’s quite simple, really. Jeremiah 29:1 says, *This is the text of the letter that the prophet Jeremiah sent from Jerusalem to the surviving elders among the exiles and to the priests, the prophets and all the other people Nebuchadnezzar had carried into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon.* By this time in Israel’s history, they had been living in the Promised Land for about 900 years and the majority of those 900 years were spent in idol worship and rebellion. The Northern Kingdom had already been sent into exile more than a hundred years earlier and now the Southern kingdom had just been defeated by Nebuchadnezzar and carried into exile in Babylon. Jeremiah wrote a letter to these defeated exiles and this famous verse of 29:11 is part of that letter. When the exiles received this letter, they were facing 70 years of captivity in Babylon. Therefore, the “plans, future and hope” were to be lived out in captivity. This is not some generic promise or crystal ball gazing hope that your future will be bright and happy. The people who received this letter were facing 70 years of discipline for engaging in 900 years of idolatry and disobedience. But is this how we apply this verse to our lives? Never! I have never heard anyone use this verse in the way that it was written.

In contrast to this, let me give you a quick application of this verse in its context. Even while the Lord delivers the most painful discipline into your life, he still holds out hope for you. He will provide for you in the desert years. When you turn your back on him in utter defiance, he will still pursue you to bring you back. He will never give up on you. Now that is encouragement for weary sinners and suffering souls, is it not?!

Therefore, I hope that you can see what happens when you take Scripture out of its context as well as the beauty and wisdom of understanding Scripture within its context. Furthermore, when we understand the historical context, the other benefit is that we can have more confidence in the truthfulness of Scripture. This second letter that Paul wrote the church in Corinth (which was actually the fourth letter he wrote to them—we’ll get to that in a bit) was true, historical fact. The Bible never tells stories based on some fictional story just to make a good point. Most of the sappy, feel-good emails that get forwarded around are this kind of story. Did you see that email about the teenage girl who was swimming in the ocean and was suddenly swept out in a rip tide? A stranger was walking by and saw and quickly jumped in to save her. He was able to get her out of the rip tide so she could swim to shore but he was swept out further and drowned. Later, the teenage girl discovered that the man was not a stranger at all. He was the girl’s biological father whom she had never met because her mother had given her up for adoption and never told him. Isn’t that just a great story? I know that it isn’t true, but it sure is a great story.

That is something you will never say about the Bible—I know that it isn't true, but it sure is a great story. The Bible is rooted in history and actual fact. It is not based on a true story like TV movies. The names have not been changed to protect the innocent. Everything in that book you are holding is real and true and historical fact. You can trust what it says. You can understand what it says and it will change your life. This is why we must understand the big picture and



context of what we read and learn from Scripture.

Most of the background information I am referring to is that which is found in the pages of Scripture itself. First, we need to understand why Paul would have written a letter to the church in Corinth. We need to answer questions like, “How did the church get started and what role did Paul play?” Saul the Jew and persecutor of Christians, was radically converted in 33 AD. It was almost twenty years later on his second missionary journey that he finally arrived in the city of Corinth. Corinth is situated on an isthmus between the Aegean and Ionian Seas. As you can see from this map, the isthmus was the only strip of land connecting the northern and southern parts of Greece together. Since the isthmus is only 3 miles wide, the location of the city became a strategic place for the movement of good by land and by sea. The city of Corinth controlled the harbors in both seas. The Romans built a road across this narrow isthmus by which they would portage their ships across land and enter the Ionian Sea. The isthmus is no longer connected as now there is a canal that was cut through the rock and connects the two seas.



Even before arriving in Corinth, Paul would have seen the towering Acrocorinth which rose a third of the mile into the air. On the top stood the ancient temple of Aphrodite, the goddess of love, which was in reality the goddess of sexual perversion. By the time Paul arrived, the temple would have lay in ruins.



Paul was given assurance by the Holy Spirit to stay in Corinth so he stayed for a year and a half preaching the gospel and building up the church. Out of all of his church planting work, he only stayed longer in one other city, which was Ephesus. He spent two of the next three years in Ephesus and was staying in Ephesus when he wrote his first three letters to the church in Corinth.

I keep referring to extra letters that Paul wrote to Corinth, so I better explain that now. First Corinthians was not his first letter. In 1 Co. 5:9 he wrote, *I have written you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people*. The letter to which he refers first could not have been 1 Corinthians since he refers to this earlier letter in 1 Corinthians. The city of Corinth was always crowded with sailors and salesman from foreign lands and when you combine this with its history with the temple of Aphrodite, Corinth was a moral cesspool. This sexual immorality had infected the church to a large degree and Paul had already addressed this topic in his first letter to them.

All of this begs the question—where is this first letter and why have we never seen it? The simple answer is that the letter was lost and therefore copies were never made. That may seem like a strange concept to us, but it is possible that he wrote many more letters to other churches. Paul started churches in many cities that have no existing letters. He could have written to the

churches in Lystra, Derbe, Athens and Berea. We know that the Bereans were diligent in their study of Scripture, so that could have been an interesting letter to read. Perhaps there was a second Ephesus or a 3rd Thessalonians. We simply do not know and it doesn't really matter since God preserved the books he wanted to preserve. Any other books, like these two lost letters to the Corinthians and any other possible letters, were not supposed to be preserved. Had God intended, we may have had 29 or 31 New Testament books instead of 27, but that was not his will.

Sometime later while he was ministering in Ephesus, Paul wrote 1st Corinthians and delivered it to Corinth by the hand of Timothy. *For this reason I am sending to you Timothy, my son whom I love, who is faithful in the Lord* (1 Co 4:17). When Paul wrote 1 Timothy, he said his apprentice, "Don't let anyone look down on you because you are young." If he called Timothy young then, imagine how young he was ten years prior when he mentored Timothy.

Shortly after he wrote 1 Corinthians, Paul made a second visit to Corinth.¹ This will be my third visit to you (2 Co 13:1).² There were serious issues arising in the church in Corinth which warranted this visit. The situation was so severe that soon after his visit he wrote them for a third time. This would have been the second lost letter and we know it exists because he referred to it in 2 Corinthians 7:8. *Even if I caused you sorrow by my letter, I do not regret it.* He also hinted at this lost letter in 2 Co. 2:1. *So I made up my mind that I would not make another painful visit to you.* His second visit was painful because he had to directly confront those who were caught in serious sin. The letter was harsh and direct but Paul thought that a painful letter would have been better than another painful visit. With another short span in between, Paul wrote 2 Corinthians from Macedonia and sent it by Titus.³ A short while later Paul did make a third visit to Corinth.⁴

Here is a summary of the events.

AD 52

1st Visit (initial church planting)

AD 55-56

1st Lost Letter

1 Corinthians

2nd Visit

2nd Lost Letter

2 Corinthians

3rd Visit

That makes three personal visits, making a total of almost 2 years in Corinth, and four letters. Two of the visits and all four letters took place over a brief period of 18 months. All of this means that Paul spent more time and more effort on the church in Corinth than on any other church!

It's easier to see what Paul *wrote* to the church in Corinth but not as easy to see what he *did* for this church. All of this effort on their behalf shows his great love for them. Referring to his second lost letter, Paul said, *For I wrote you out of great distress and anguish of heart and with many tears, not to grieve you but to let you know the depth of my love for you* (2 Co 2:4). He

loved them deeply and was committed to seeing them grow in Christ likeness. He hurt so deeply for them that it overflowed into tears.

What does this mean for you and me? Here are a few points of application to consider.

First, if you are trying to help a fellow believer out of a sin or work through a conflict of some kind, or help your children learn obedience, no amount of effort is too great. Paul's example is a great model for all of us. He hung in there with this troubled church. In fact, he hung in there precisely because they were troubled. Hurting people need us to come alongside of them and stay with them no matter what. Don't give up on teaching and discipling your kids. I haven't even learned obedience myself yet so why should I give up on them? God hasn't given up on any of us.

Second, God asks us to do the right thing even if it doesn't go the way we hope it would. We tend to give up on helping people because we see that it isn't doing any good. Why should we help then when it seems we are beating our heads against a wall? Helping such people is not smart, we think. It is not an efficient use of our time. Don't believe those lies. God does not promise us success in all of our endeavors, but he does expect and equip us for faithfulness. We are to do what Paul did—do the right thing for the right reason in the power of the Holy Spirit and leave the results to God.

Rich Maurer
January 16, 2011

¹ "After I go through Macedonia, I will come to you—for I will be going through Macedonia. Perhaps I will stay with you awhile, or even spend the winter." (1 Co 16:5-6)

² Since he planned his third visit in 2 Corinthians, this means that his second visit came in between 1 Corinthians and 2 Corinthians.

³ *For Titus not only welcomed our appeal, but he is coming to you with much enthusiasm and on his own initiative* (2 Co 8:17).

⁴ *He traveled through that area, speaking many words of encouragement to the people, and finally arrived in Greece, where he stayed three months* (Acts 20:2-3). He certainly intended to visit Corinth a third time even though Luke does not record that he was definitely in Corinth. "Greece" would almost certainly have meant Corinth, the major church in Greece.