

Prosperous Corinthians And Needy Macedonians

According to the simplistic version of prosperity taught by many modern preachers, those New Covenant believers who give generously to support church leaders and to help the needy and who live more godly lives in general should be prospering economically more than believers who do not manifest such generosity and good works. While it is true that God does promise to give earthly blessings to generous believers, the New Testament provides clear examples of some less generous more worldly believers prospering more than some more generous more godly believers.

Prosperous carnal worldly Corinthian Christians

God was economically prospering the believers at Corinth and in the surrounding Roman province of Achaia (see 1 Corinthians 16:2 and 2 Corinthians 8:14). This is despite the fact the Corinthian Church contained so many very carnal worldly Christians (see 1 Corinthians 3:1-3) who only understood the very basic “milk” of God’s Word and who were knowingly practicing many sins openly.

Many of the Corinthian Christians were constantly fighting (see 1 Corinthians 3:3) and had very little unity (see 1 Corinthians 1:11-13). They were allowing one of their members to live in an open adulterous relationship with his step-mother (see 1 Corinthians 5:1-13). Some were getting drunk (see 1 Corinthians 11:21).

Many or all of the Corinthians regarded Paul’s public speaking as “*contemptible*” and his Biblical letters as being “*weighty*”. In Greek, the word “*contemptible*” is a form of the word “*exoutheneo*” which means “to despise someone or something on the basis it is worthless or no value”.¹ “*Weighty*” in Greek is a form of the word “*barus*” meaning figuratively in this context “burdensome, difficult to fulfil of obligations (or) demands, severe”.²

As 2 Corinthians 11:20 shows, many of the Corinthians had allowed false apostles to devour them. In Greek, the word “*devours*” in this verse is a form of the word “*katesthio*” which means “to take advantage of someone”³ or “exploits, robs”.⁴ The Corinthians had allowed false apostles to exploit them. Mark 12:40 uses a form of “*katesthio*” in relation to the scribes devouring the houses of widows.

In 2 Corinthians 8:10-11 and 9:1-5, Paul shows that the Church at Corinth had been previously gathering a gift to help the poor believers in Jerusalem. But the context of 2 Corinthians 8:1-9:15 reveals the prosperous Corinthian Church had lost its zeal for giving this gift. It is possible that the greedy false apostles who had recently gained strong influence at the Corinthian Church had encouraged this change of attitude. These false apostles were primarily

¹ Louw and Nida, page 763.

² Bauer, page 134.

³ Louw and Nida, page 758.

⁴ Bauer, page 422.

interested in obtaining big offerings for themselves from the Corinthians. These exploiters were manipulative covetous fund-raisers.

In 2 Corinthians 2:17, Paul compared his and Timothy's ministry to the "ministry" of the false apostles, ***"for we are not, as so many, peddling the Word of God..."*** In Greek, the word ***"peddling"*** here is a form of the word "kupeleuo" meaning "to be a *retailer*, to peddle, to *hucksterize*"⁵ or "to *engage in retail business*, with the implication of deceptiveness and greedy motives".⁶ A huckster is someone who bargains or haggles for money. Hucksters use many different types of clever schemes and tricks to extract as much money as possible from their listeners.

In 2 Corinthians 11:7, Paul asked the Corinthians whether they thought he had sinned by preaching the Gospel to them free of charge. In Greek society at the time, professional philosophers sold their wisdom for money. It is possible that the false apostles who were demanding much money from the Corinthian churchgoers, were saying that proof that their "gospel" was better and contained more wisdom than Paul's amateur message was theirs was priced so much higher than his free Gospel. They may have argued that because they were professional speakers and Paul was only an amateur in speaking (see 2 Corinthians 11:6), their message obviously was of higher quality than Paul's.

Many or all of the Corinthian believers later accepted a false gospel, a false Christ and a different spirit to the Holy Spirit, after originally receiving the right Gospel, the true Christ and the Holy Spirit (see 2 Corinthians 11:2-4). In 2 Corinthians 12:20-21, Paul catalogues their sins: ***"For I fear lest, when I come, I shall not find you such as I wish, and that I shall be found by you such as you do not wish; lest there be contentions, jealousies, outbursts of wrath, selfish ambitions, backbitings, whisperings, conceits, tumults; and lest, when I come again, my God will humble me among you, and I shall mourn for many who have sinned before and have not repented of the uncleanness, fornication, and licentiousness which they have practiced."*** Despite all this, God was economically prospering many of their members by His undeserved grace and mercy.

The more godly very generous poor Philippian believers

At the time Paul wrote the Book of 2 Corinthians, all or most of the Philippian Christians were suffering great economic lack or poverty. The Philippian Church was one of the churches in Macedonia. In 2 Corinthians 8:1-3, Paul said: ***"Moreover, brethren, we make known to you the grace of God bestowed on the churches of Macedonia: that in a great trial of affliction the abundance of their joy and their deep poverty abounded in the riches of their liberality. For I bear witness that according to their ability, yes, and beyond their ability, they were freely willing."***

In 2 Corinthians 8:2, Paul mentioned the ***"deep poverty"*** of all or most of the Macedonian believers. In Greek, the word ***"poverty"*** here is "ptocheia" which means "a state of having insufficient possessions"⁷ or "poverty".⁸ The word ***"deep"*** in this verse in Greek is a

⁵ Vine, page 130.

⁶ Louw and Nida, page 581.

⁷ Ibid, page 564.

⁸ Bauer, page 728.

form of the word “bathos” which means in this context “an extreme degree”⁹ or “an extreme point on a scale of extent”.¹⁰ Bauer says that when used together in 2 Corinthians 8:2, “bathos” and “ptocheia” mean “extreme poverty”.¹¹

Despite being in such deep poverty, the Macedonian churches, including the Philippian Church, had very generously helped the even more poverty-stricken believers in Judea.

The financial situation of the Judean believers was worse partly because Judea was suffering a severe famine, as predicted by the prophet Agabus (see Acts 11:27-30). Other reasons for the poverty of the Hebrew Christians were persecution and social and economic ostracism. After initially having favour with non-Christian Jews in Jerusalem (see Acts 2:47), the Jewish Christians were strongly persecuted at various times (see Acts 8:1-3 and 12:1-4). Hebrews 10:32-34 records: ***“But recall the former days in which, after you were illuminated, you endured a great struggle with sufferings: partly while you were made a spectacle both by reproaches and tribulations, and partly while you became companions of those who were so treated; for you had compassion on me in my chains, and joyfully accepted the plundering of your goods, knowing that you have a better and an enduring possession for yourselves in heaven.”***

Also note in Philippians 4:10-18, Paul stressed that the Philippian believers had very generously supported his ministry time and time again. Philippians 4:10 and 15 records: ***“But I rejoiced in the Lord greatly that now at last your care for me has flourished again; though you surely did care, but you lacked opportunity...Now you Philippians know also that in the beginning of the gospel, when I departed from Macedonia, no church shared with me concerning giving and receiving but you only.”*** Here Paul states that the Philippian believers had been extremely generous in their giving to his ministry right from the time he first preached at Philippi.

As Acts 16:6-18 reveals, Paul first preached the Gospel at Philippi long before he preached at Corinth. Also as a result, the Philippian Church began *before* the Corinthian Church. So even before Paul recorded the words in 2 Corinthians 8:1-2 about the Philippian and other Macedonian churches experiencing deep poverty, the Philippian Church was actively supporting Paul financially.

Paul does not say it was only a few individuals at Philippi who were materially supporting him. He said the Church at Philippi as a collective unit was supporting him. In Philippians 4:18, Paul reveals that he was experiencing an *abundance* through the giving of the Philippians and that their giving to him was regarded as a sacrifice to God: ***“Indeed I have all and abound. I am full, having received from Epaphroditus the things which were sent from you, a sweet-smelling aroma, an acceptable sacrifice, well pleasing to God.”*** Epaphroditus was the messenger who carried the Philippian gifts to Paul to fulfil his needs (see Philippians 2:25).

Note also in the Book of Philippi, Paul praises the Philippians for their generous giving and does not accuse them of being as carnal and worldly as the Corinthian Church. The Philippians were so remarkably generous in their giving that in 2 Corinthians 8:3-4, Paul said they gave ***“beyond their ability”*** to the more needy believers in Judea.

In 1 Corinthians 16:2, Paul commanded the Corinthians to give according to their ability or prosperity. Acts 11:27-29 reveals the believers at Antioch gave according to their

⁹ Perschbacher, page 65.

¹⁰ Louw and Nida, page 687.

¹¹ Bauer, page 130.

ability or prosperity. But the Philippians, Thessalonians and other Macedonian churches gave ***“beyond their ability”***. Considering the Philippians and other Macedonians were already in economic hardship themselves, their giving was tremendous.

Also note Paul did not accuse the Philippians of lacking in unity and of regularly practicing the sins which 2 Corinthians 12:20-21 records many Corinthian churchgoers were. Actually in Philippians 2:12, he says the Philippians were always very obedient to the Lord: ***“Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence...”***

The poor Thessalonian Christians with great faith in God

The Thessalonian Christians were generally suffering poverty or great economic hardship. The Thessalonian Church was another one of the poor Macedonian Churches which Paul referred to in 2 Corinthians 8:1-3.

Note in 1 Thessalonians 1:3, 1:8, 3:6-7, 2 Thessalonians 1:3, 1:4 and 1:11, Paul mentioned the *faith* of the Thessalonian believers. In 1 Thessalonians 1:7-8, Paul said that the faith of the Thessalonians was a tremendous example to the other believers in all of Macedonia and Achaia: ***“so that you became examples to all in Macedonia and Achaia who believe. For from you the word of the Lord has sounded forth, not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but also in every place. Your faith toward God has gone out, so that we do not need to say anything.”***

The Roman province of Macedonia contained cities such as Philippi, Berea and Neapolis and surrounding rural areas. Achaia was the name of the Roman province which comprised all of Greece south of the province of Macedonia. So in 1 Thessalonians 1:7-8, Paul was saying that the Thessalonians’ faith was a great example to all believers in the areas of Macedonia and Greece. That was a very high recommendation.

Paul boasted to others about the strong faith of the Thessalonians. 2 Thessalonians 1:3-4 records this: ***“We are bound to thank God always for you, brethren, as it is fitting, because your faith grows exceedingly, and the love of every one of you all abounds toward each other, so that we ourselves boast of you among the churches of God for your patience and faith in all your persecutions and tribulations that you endure.”*** Note also Paul here said that:

- a) the Thessalonian Christians *faith* was growing ***“exceedingly”***. Like all believers, none of the Thessalonians had perfect faith (see 1 Thessalonians 3:10). But the Thessalonians’ faith was increasing greatly. In Greek, the phrase ***“grows exceedingly”*** is a form of the word “huperauxano” which means “to increase exceedingly”¹² or “increase beyond measure”.¹³
- b) the *love* of the Thessalonian believers was abounding or increasing towards each other.

Throughout the Books of 1 and 2 Thessalonians, Paul praised all the Thessalonian believers except the lazy unruly few mentioned in 1 Thessalonians 5:14 and 2 Thessalonians 3:6-15. In 2 Thessalonians 3:4, Paul told the majority of the Thessalonians: ***“And we have***

¹² Louw and Nida, page 685 and Perschbacher, page 418.

¹³ Vine, page 283.

confidence in the Lord concerning you, both that you do and will do the things we command you.” In 1 Thessalonians 1:3, Paul spoke about the **“work of faith”** of the Thessalonian Christians. These verses reveal the faith of the Thessalonians was expressing itself in their actions.

Compare this to Paul’s words about the weak faith of the Corinthians and their lack of love for each other (see 1 Corinthians 1:11-13, 3:1-4 and 2 Corinthians 12:20). In 2 Corinthians 13:5, Paul questioned their faith: ¹⁴ **“Examine yourselves as to whether you are in the faith. Prove yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you? – unless indeed you are disqualified.”** The Corinthian Church contained many very carnal, unspiritual, worldly believers. Also as shown in Chapter “Carnal and spiritual believers”, some of the Corinthian churchgoers had backslidden in their hearts from the better attitudes they had had at the time of their conversions.

God was generally economically prospering the Corinthian believers far more than the Thessalonian believers. This is even though the Thessalonian Church had so many people with *strong faith* and Biblical lifestyles and the Corinthian Church had mostly either worldly believers with weak faith and carnal lifestyles and backsliders.

A small minority of carnal Thessalonian churchgoers were not prospering because they were idle (see 2 Thessalonians 3:6-15). In 1 Thessalonians 4:11-12, Paul says that if such people would work, they would not have so many unfulfilled needs.

But the lack of prosperity of the godly majority at the Thessalonian Church was probably at least partly caused by **“the persecutions and tribulations”** which they endured from unbelievers (see 2 Thessalonians 1:4). 1 Thessalonians 2:14 also refers to these persecutions: **“For you, brethren, became imitators of the churches of God which are in Judea in Christ Jesus. For you also suffered the same things from your own countrymen, just as they did from the Jews.”**

Concluding comments

So the New Testament itself proves that:

- a) sometimes more carnal, worldly, sin-practicing local churches can be prospered economically far more than more godly local churches. This is at least for a short period of time. This partly explains why many very carnal, worldly compromising churches are prospering at present more than some more godly churches.
- b) generous giving by believers does not always result in the short-term in God financially prospering them. (If such prosperity was a fully merited reward, God would be indebted to give it immediately it was earned. But since such prosperity is merely an undeserved grace consequence of those with faith in God fulfilling His conditions of giving and of other good works, God can give it *whenever He chooses*. Also, any rewards that He gives at Christ's future Judgement-Seat, for giving and other good works, are only slightly

¹⁴ In 2 Corinthians 8:7, Paul said that the Corinthians **“abounded in everything – in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in all diligence and in your love for us.”** But note, however, in 2 Corinthians 6:12-13 and 12:15, Paul showed that the love of the Corinthians for him was limited and did not abound. Therefore in 2 Corinthians 8:7, Paul may have been speaking in faith about what he knew the Corinthians could be *potentially* in Christ. In 2 Corinthians 9:2-4, Paul spoke in similar ways about the potential giving of the Corinthians. This is even though they had not actually given as yet to the needy in Judea.

deserved. Because rewards at Christ's future judgment are only slightly deserved, God is not indebted to give them at the exact moment that they are earned in this earthly life.)

- c) those with *very strong faith* may experience great lack for certain periods of time (see Hebrews 11:35-40), while those like the Corinthians may be prospering financially *despite their weak faith*.
- d) in the New Covenant, God promises to supply believers' needs. In the same covenant, He promises to prosper believers by His grace. But note the examples of the churches in Judea, Philippi and Thessalonica suffering periods of great economic hardship or lack show that the promises of earthly blessings by God's undeserved grace and mercy in Mark 10:29-30, Romans 8:32, 1 Corinthians 16:2, 2 Corinthians 9:6, Philippians 4:19, 1 Timothy 6:17, 3 John 2 and Luke 6:38:
 - can *sometimes* take *years* before they are fulfilled.
 - can be fulfilled in such a way that there are *short* or *long periods of lack* or *great need interspersed* throughout the times of prosperity given by Him.