

# BIBLE SERIES: "EXPLORING OUR AWESOME BIBLE"

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## 2 & 3 EPISTLES OF JOHN – THE SAME TESTS; THE LESSON OF DIOTREPHE

We will now cover the Second and Third Epistles of John in this study. Each epistle only has one chapter, yet, despite being brief, they contain vital truths, since, "All Scripture is given by inspiration of God" (2 Tim. 3:16). God had reasons to include them as part of the Holy Scriptures and we will examine what they are.

Interestingly, both epistles are about the same length (less than 300 words) and this is no accident. Just as today, we use an 8 by 11-inch sheet of paper to type on; in John's day they used a slightly smaller sheet of papyrus paper to write on (8 by 10-inch). It is the maximum length without having to use another sheet of papyrus, which was expensive, and the vertical ridges on the backside made it difficult to write on.

### **The Second Epistle of John**

Because of the similarity to the first epistle and the apostolic office John held in Ephesus, his second epistle appears to be addressed to one of the churches in Asia Minor that is described in Revelation 2-3. It was probably written in the 90's before John was exiled to the nearby island of Patmos, but it could have been written earlier.

John begins, "The Elder, To the elect lady and her children, whom I love in truth, and not only I, but also all those who have known the truth, because of the truth, which abides in us and will be with us forever" (2 John 1:1-2).

Notice John shows the same modesty and humility that James and Peter had shown in their epistles. He refuses to use bombastic titles to identify himself and simply calls himself "the elder." As *The Evangelical Commentary* explains, "The term 'elder' [*presbyteros* in the Greek], which John uses, refers first to his age, secondly, to a well-known person, thirdly, to his office in the Church, and fourthly, to the authority he has over a group of people." Remember, John considered himself so unworthy to be an apostle of Christ and so humble, that in his Gospel he only refers to himself as "the disciple whom Jesus loved" (John 13:23; 20:2; 21:7). Here he is "just" an elder.

He addresses this particular congregation as "the elect lady and her children." Throughout the

Old and New Testaments, God's people are symbolized as a "woman" (Is. 54:1, 4; Rev. 12:17) who is the "mother of us all" and thus, we are her "children" (Gal. 4:26).

Now, because of when John was writing this and the hostility toward the Church, it appears he was employing a symbol for the Church due to the increased Roman censorship of the mail against the Christians. After the great fire in Rome A.D. 64, Nero accused the Christians of causing it and the Church was declared an "illegal religion," thus bringing a fierce persecution against her. Therefore, if a censor were to read this letter, it would just appear to be written by an elderly man to a lady and her children. The censors would not notice anything strange and allow the letter to be sent. Yet, upon receiving it, the brethren would immediately know wrote it and to whom.

The first scene John touches upon is a familiar one--focusing on the truths of God that unite all Church members. Remember that "the love of the truth" was the second key test of the three that John gave (1 John 2:4) to know whether one is a true or a false Christian. John Stott, in his *Tyndale Commentary*, summarizes what John says: "Truth is the ground of reciprocal Christian love. We do *not* love each other because we are *temperamentally compatible*, or because we are *naturally drawn to one another*, but *because of the same truth we share*. Not only have we come to know truth objectively; but it abides *within* us as a present in-dwelling force, and *with us*, it will remain forever" (p. 203).

The concept that God's truth will be in us "forever" is mindboggling. It means that God's truth; based on His spiritual laws, never change. They are the basis for ruling eternally in God's kingdom" (see Is. 2:3; 9:6-7; 11:9). Peter puts it this way: "The grass withers, and its flowers fall away, but the word of God *endures forever*" (1 P. 1:24-25). So biblical doctrines don't change, just our understanding of them grows over time as God's Spirit leads us "into all truth" (John 16:13). This is accomplished by striving to be "approved to God, a worker who does not need to be ashamed, *rightly dividing the word of truth*" (2 Tim. 2:15).

John ends the opening greeting by saying, "Grace, mercy, and peace will be with you *from God the Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of the Father*, in truth and love" (vs. 3). We again see the central concept of God the Father and Jesus Christ, the Son of the Father, as that of a *Divine family*. Notice that spiritual blessings come from *both* of Them and not from *one Being nor from three*. In fact, we see here *the total absence* of the Holy Spirit, who, if it were a member of the divine family, it would *also* have to send those same virtues. It would thus be a great insult not to include a third Person if there really was a Trinity.

John continues: "I rejoiced greatly that I have found some of your children *walking in truth*, as we received *commandment from the Father*" (vs. 4). Notice the equivalent is made between the "truth" and "the commandment from the Father." So the "Father's commandment" does not go against "the Son's commandment," but both *complement each other*. As Jesus said, "If you keep *My commandments*, you will abide in My love, just as I have kept *My Father's commandments* and abide in His love" (John 15:10).

As John did in his first epistle, he mentions the third test of a true Christian: if one is keeping God's commandments, he has a duty to love those who are also keeping these truths and will cultivate these bonds of fellowship in the Church.

He says, "And now I plead with you, lady, not as though I wrote a new commandment to you, but that which we have had from the beginning: that we love one another. This is love, that we walk according to His commandments. This is the commandment, that as you have heard from the beginning, you should walk in it" (vss. 5-6).

Notice he addresses the Church as a "lady." He emphasizes the degree of love we need to have for one another, which is the "new commandment" given by Jesus--to love one another, *to the degree that He did*. As He said, "A *new commandment* I give to you, that you love one another; *as I have loved you, that you also love one another*. By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have *love for one another*" (John 13:34-35).

Why does John have to mention again these second and third tests in this epistle? He will now explain the reason: "For many deceivers have gone

out into the world *who do not confess Jesus Christ as coming in the flesh*. This is a deceiver and an antichrist" (vs. 7). Remember, John had said he was glad that some brethren were walking in the truth (vs. 4), which indicates others were not following the way of truth and were trying to take the brethren out of the Church to follow them.

The first test of the true Christian was having the *correct concept of the nature of God* and here some were denying that Christ "came in the flesh," or that "the Word" had become "incarnate" (which means "in the flesh"). A heresy existed then that Christ did not actually suffered in the flesh, but had descended when Jesus was baptized and departed from Him when He was about to be crucified, so that "the Word" would not suffer.

One heretic who taught this was Cerinthus, according to Irenaeus, a second century writer (170 A.D.). He writes, "Cerinthus, again, a man who was educated in the wisdom of the Egyptians, taught that the world was not made by the primary God, but by a certain Power far separated from him and at a distance from that Principality who is supreme over the universe, and ignorant of him who is above all. He represented Jesus as having not been born of a virgin, but as being the son of Joseph and Mary according to the ordinary course of human generation, while he nevertheless was more righteous, prudent, and wise than other men. Moreover, after his baptism, Christ descended upon him in the form of a dove from the Supreme Ruler, and that then he proclaimed the unknown Father, and performed miracles. But at last Christ departed from Jesus, and that then Jesus suffered and rose again, while Christ remained impassable, inasmuch as he was a spiritual being..."[after writing about other heretics, Irenaeus warns] "that you might know that all those who in any way corrupt the truth, and injuriously affect the preaching of the Church, are the disciples and successors of Simon Magus of Samaria. Although they do not confess the name of their master, in order all the more to seduce others, yet they do teach his doctrines. They set forth, indeed, the name of Christ Jesus as a sort of lure, but in various ways they introduce the impieties of Simon; and thus they destroy multitudes, wickedly disseminating their own doctrines by the use of a good name, and, through

means of its sweetness and beauty, extending to their hearers the bitter and malignant poison of the serpent, the great author of apostasy" (*Against Heretics*, Book 1, pp. 351-353).

So Cerinthus was a leader of an extremist Gnostic group that at one time had been inside of the true Church. Yet, as Irenaeus warns, other groups that came out of the Simon Magus apostate movement moderated or eliminated some of their Gnostic ideas to gain more followers. They would be the most dangerous ones and Jesus Christ warns us that they would form a great counterfeit church that would be in power until the end times and would have "daughters" (Rev. 17:4-5). This group would not openly deny that Christ came "in the flesh" or that He became incarnate, but would later affirm that the Word did not truly die, for there still was a "hypostasis" (presence) of Him in heaven. Such a false belief is still part of the current doctrine of the Trinity.

John again explains there is only one God the Father and one Son of the Father and admonishes them not to believe false things concerning the nature of God. He warns them, "Look to yourselves, that we do not lose those things we worked for, but that we may receive a full reward" (vs. 8). We see here that a member *can* lose his salvation if he becomes neglectful and strays. Christ adds in Rev. 3:11: "Hold fast what you have, that no one may take your crown." Yes, we can lose our reward and therefore we must "work out our salvation with fear and trembling" (Phil. 2:12).

Consequently, John mentions that the correct concept of what God is of utmost importance to have proper fellowship with God. He says, "Whoever transgresses and does not abide in *the doctrine of Christ* does not have God. He who abides in *the doctrine of Christ* has both the Father and the Son" (vs. 9). Again we note the absence of the Holy Spirit as a person when John describes the family of God and this is a fundamental doctrine of Christ (see John 17). John explains that God will not tolerate distortion of this concept of His Divine family, for it is His great purpose to bring "many children to glory" (Heb. 2:10, ERV).

Then John says, "If anyone comes to you and *does not bring this doctrine*, do not receive him into your house nor greet him; for he who greets him

shares in his evil deeds " (vv. 10-11). John was talking about the three "tests" to pass: (1) a right understanding of who God is; (2) keeping the commandments of God and (3) having Christian fellowship with those like-minded. So there is a danger of accepting other religious groups that come knocking at the door or on getting "hooked" to outside TV personalities. John says here that once we know God's truths, we are not to listen to the false teachings of other "Christian" religions. John says one becomes an accomplice by welcoming the one who does not bring these biblical doctrines. However, that does not mean that we should be rude, but politely reject them.

John then bids them farewell. He says, "Having many things to write to you, I did not wish to do so with paper and ink; but I hope to come to you and speak face to face, that our joy may be full. The children of your elect sister greet you. Amen" (vv. 12-13). It seems that John, probably because of Roman censure, prefers to talk to them about these problems in detail and in person.

### **The Third Epistle of John**

The Third Epistle of John is a bit shorter than 2 John. He addresses a faithful leader of the Church named Gaius. He says, "The Elder, To the beloved Gaius, whom *I love in truth*" (vs. 1). Again John emphasizes that our love of the brethren is based on "the truth" we share with them.

Then he says, "Beloved, I pray that you may *prosper in all things and be in health*, just as *your soul prospers*" (vs. 2). Here we see that it is God's desire that one prospers not only spiritually, but also materially and health-wise. He does not desire poverty for us, but that we prosper in every way, yet to do it His way through obedience (Pr. 22:4).

John continues: "For I rejoiced greatly when brethren came and testified of *the truth* that is in you, just as *you walk in the truth*. I have no greater joy than to hear that my children *walk in truth*" (vv. 3-4). Again, John emphasizes the importance of *practicing* the truth by what we do, following the apostolic doctrines (Acts 2:42).

John now goes to the heart of the letter: "Beloved, you do faithfully whatever you do for the brethren and for strangers, who have borne witness of your love before the church. If you send them forward on their journey in a manner worthy

of God, you will do well, because they went forth for His name's sake, taking nothing from the Gentiles. We therefore ought to receive such, that we may become fellow workers for the truth" (vv. 5-8). John thanks Gaius for being hospitable to the ministers or congregational leaders he sent to these regions to teach the brethren. As *The Bible Knowledge Commentary* mentions, "Thus the Lord's servants went out, *receiving no help from the pagans*. Even in the present day, there is something *unseemly* in a preacher of the gospel *soliciting funds* from people to whom he offers God's free salvation." That is so true (Mt. 10:8).

John then explains the importance of what Gaius was doing, "I wrote to the church, but Diotrephes, who loves to have the preeminence among them, does not receive us. Therefore, if I come, I will call to mind his deeds which he does, prating against us with malicious words. And not content with that, he himself does not receive the brethren, and forbids those who wish to, putting them out of the church" (vv. 9-10).

Here we see that Diotrephes, the leader in charge of at least one congregation was not obeying the instructions issued by John and was in the process of splitting the church. *The Expositor's Bible Commentary* mentions: "It seems that John was trying to counteract the flood of false doctrines in the region and had sent his emissaries to correct the situation. But this action had been rejected by Diotrephes and was producing a division in the Church."

We even see that John complains that Diotrephes was slandering him by "speaking evil words against us" (vs. 10). Here we see that Diotrephes, the minister or leader of the congregation, used his authority to forbid John's emissaries to attend the Church and even "disfellowshipped" the members who received these emissaries. In other words, Diotrephes was using his authority to separate his congregation from those led by John and was introducing doctrines different from those taught by the apostle John. What was the main reason? John points out that Diotrephes "likes to have the preeminence among them [of the Church]" (vs. 9). It is ambition for power, the very motive that led to Satan's rebellion (see Is. 14:13-14).

Now, let us project this situation to our own day. What would have happened if we were members or elders in the congregation led by Diotrephes? If we had insisted on keeping the doctrines of Christ's apostles, such as the Father's commandments about the Sabbath, the Holy Feasts, tithes or biblical foods, Diotrephes would have used his authority to intimidate us into following him and his "new" teachings, which were actually old heresies. He would have threatened us with expulsion from the Church if we did not follow his "doctrinal innovations." If he had discovered that we were corresponding with those who were supporting the apostolic teachings, or that we were gathering or harboring those who opposed him, he would have, as it says here, "expelled us from the Church" he led. Thus, the story of the struggle between the true followers of the apostolic doctrines and those who deviate from them happens over and over again.

The advice John gives will serve us, just as it did them. He says: "Beloved, do not imitate what is evil, but what is good. He who does good is of God, but he who does evil has not seen God. Demetrius has a good testimony from all, and from the truth itself. And we also bear witness, and you know that our testimony is true." (Vss. 11-12). Here John encourages Gaius to back Demetrius, who has rejected Diotrephes, and who has perhaps already been expelled from that congregation, so that they can reorganize those who resist Diotrephes and follow the apostolic truths. They would probably have to meet elsewhere in the meantime, and continue to support the apostle John.

John ends his epistle by stating, "I had many things to write, but I do not wish to write to you with pen and ink; but I hope to see you shortly, and we shall speak face to face. Peace to you. Our friends greet you. Greet the friends by name" (vv. 13-15).

John says farewell and will speak more of these things face to face. By the way, the ink he mentions here was made of soot mixed with water and gum. The pen was actually a reed with a special knife inserted in the tip.