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A JOURNEY THROUGH THE BIBLE

Reading: 3 John

65. THE BOOK OF 3 JOHN

How many times have you struggled in a local church situation and said to yourself, “ *if only we could be close and committed like the 1st century church ?*” I wonder have you ever said that ? You see, somehow we read the New Testament and get the impression that the early church was like the garden of Eden, perfect. However as we journey back in time, the travel brochures of the New Testament depict quite a different setting. There was the scorching heat of persecution, accompanied by the flies and ants of heresy that needed constant swatting. And like sand in your bathing suit there were always abrasive people in the church who got under your skin, and rubbed you up the wrong way. It was not the garden of Eden we like to imagine. *Now when we turn to this picture postcard of 3rd John, the shortest New Testament epistle in the original Greek, John captures for us one of the most vivid pictures of the New Testament church in the 1st century.*

Here we have a golden opportunity to be a fly on the wall and eavesdrop on all that is happening and, for what it is worth, we even encounter a smattering of early church politics. Now this 3rd letter of John was written to an individual believer, possibly one of the leaders, certainly one of the members of a local church. Third John is

perhaps the most personal of John’s three epistles. For while 1 John appears to be a general letter addressed to churches throughout Asia Minor and 2 John was sent to a lady and her family (2 John 1) in 3 John the apostle clearly names the only recipient as “ *the beloved Gaius,*” whose name means “ *earthy.*” Now these last two letters of John are very moving. Here we see the aged apostle in his first letter concerned about the inroads of apostasy. He then adds a postscript, then another. Taking the three letters together they are very brief. In the first letter there are about 2,350 words, in the second only 245 words and although 2 John may be the shortest epistle as far as the number of verses is concerned, 3 John has fewer words in fact only 219 words in total. I wonder does John sense the desperate urgency of the situation ? He puts down his pen, picks it up again, puts it down again, picks it up again and puts it down a third time. He is the last of the apostles, he is old living in Ephesus and the times like ours are uncertain.

Persecution, error, apostasy, and Christians squabbling so John writes and writes and writes. Both 2 and 3 John are the shortest epistles in the New Testament they could fit on a single papyrus sheet (v 13) But don’t underestimate their importance because of their brevity, for as John Phillips says “ *it’s a mistake to measure the man by the size of his manuscript, the Holy Spirit does not always inspire long books to convey vital beliefs.*” Now as we come to consider this book there are some things I want you to notice by way of introduction. Notice,

1. SIMILARITIES:

In many ways both 2 John and 3 John bear a striking resemblance. For example,

They are almost the same length:

They were probably written at the same time around 90-95 A.D. in the city of Ephesus in the latter part of John's life:

They both address the very important issue of hospitality, and the church's attitude to itinerant preachers:

They both give us a glimpse into the life of the early church near the end of the 1st century. 1.

2. CONTRASTS:

2nd John was written to a lady and her children, 3rd John was written to a man and his acquaintances. The first is about somebody who was “*too soft*,” the second is about somebody who was “*too hard*.” In one there is an example of hospitality which is forbidden, in the other there is an example of hospitality which is encouraged. In his 2nd letter John says, “*the truth is worth standing for*,” in his letter he says, “*the truth is worth working for*.” In the 2nd letter no personal names are mentioned, in this 3rd letter 3 specific names are mentioned, Gaius, Diotrephes, and Demetrius. 1:2:

3. PERSONALITIES:

For the main divisions of this book centre around three characters. Gaius to whom the letter is written, a Christian of grace and generosity. Diotrephes a problem personality, a pain in the neck, and sadly someone who is still with us

today. Finally, Demetrius, a trustworthy and truthful Christian. Now these three have been described in different ways. David Jackman talks about, *Gaius a Christian Friend, Diotrephes a Christian Fraud, and Demetrius a Christian Follower*. J. B. Hewitt talks about *Gaius as a Beloved Brother: Diotrephes as a Bigoted Brother: and Demetrius as a Balanced Brother*. Warren Wiersbe talks about *Gaius as a Prosperous Christian, Diotrephes as a Proud Christian, and Demetrius as a Pleasant Christian*. Raymond Brown says that *Gaius Serves Others: Diotrephes Hinders Others: and Demetrius Attracts Others*. One thing is sure these three characters make up this small epistle. Now I want you to see that,

(1) “IN GAIUS,” we have a picture of CHARITY

The word “*charity*,” (*agape*) in (v 6) should be translated “*love*,” since it is the particular word used for divine love. Here was a man who loved the Lord (v 2) loved the Word of God (v 3) loved the people of God, (v 5) Now in the New Testament we find a number of men with this name Gaius. Like Jim or John Gaius was a common name in the Roman world. Indeed we meet this name several times in the New Testament. There was a *Gaius of Corinth* (Rom 16:23 1 Cor 1:14) who was Paul's host when he was in that city. It would seem that he was one of the very few people that Paul had personally baptised. Then there was *Gaius of Macedonia* who accompanied Paul and was present at the riot in Ephesus. There was *Gaius of Derbe* who was Paul's travelling companion and accompanied him to Jerusalem with the

collection for the poor saints. (Acts 20:4) Now we have no way of knowing if the Gaius addressed by John was one of these. However, he was a man much loved by the aged apostle. (v 1,5) Indeed if Gaius were a member of this church I don't think we would have any trouble loving him either. You see, John talks here about some qualities that marked him out. He talks about,

(a) HIS PHYSICAL DEBILITY: v 1-2

For it seems that Gaius was unwell. Could it have been that his energy was spent because of his selfless ministry to the servants of God ? (v 5) Whatever, he was physically weak. Incidentally this is one of the verses that is used to teach “ *the prosperity gospel, the health and wealth gospel.*” A gospel that promises health and wealth to those who respond to the message. When the promises fail to materialise and followers get sick or lose their jobs, they are told that either they do not have faith or else there is sin in their lives. But surely the example of Gaius contradicts this ? I mean here was a man whose spiritual condition was exemplary while his physical condition was poor. Did Gaius not have enough faith ? Was there sin in his life ? Not at all. Never assume that because a believer is unwell that there is sin in his life. (1 Cor 11:30) But notice also that John prays that Gaius might be well. You see, it's important to take of our bodies. Do you recall Paul's words to the young preacher boy Timothy ? “ *For bodily exercise profiteth little.*” (1 Tim 4:8) Have you not discovered that the physical and the spiritual are closely related ? (a)

(b) HIS SPIRITUAL PROSPERITY: v 3

His soul was prospering. Do you recall that in the Old Testament a person's spiritual prosperity could be measured by their material prosperity ? The Old Testament blessing was “ *the blessing of the Lord it maketh rich and he addeth no sorrow with it.*”

(Prov 10:22) Job was rich. (Job 1:3) Abraham was rich. (Gen 13:2) Jacob was rich (Gen 30:27) Solomon was rich (1 Kings 3:5-14) As John Phillips reminds us the Old Testament rule equated godliness with prosperity. But the New Testament blessing is quite different. Do you want to know what constitutes blessing ? Read the Sermon on the Mount. (Matt 5:3) God gives us no guarantee that He will give us health and wealth if we walk in His ways. We are God's heavenly people and our blessings are positional, spiritual and eternal. (Eph 1-3)

“ *Gaius, you're weak physically but you are prospering spiritually.*” John is saying, “ *I long that your physical health would mirror your spiritual health.*”

That would be an interesting test to apply to us today. I wonder if your physical health reflected your spiritual health what would you look like ? Would some of you be dead ? Would some of you be in hospital ? Would you be robust or weak ? Strong or sickly ? Is your soul prospering ? “ *Art thou in health my brother ?*” (2 Sam 20:9) Is your appetite for divine things still good ? Do you rest in the Lord ? Are you walking in the truth ? Are you a dynamic Christian ? (a) (b)

(c) HIS EXCEPTIONAL TESTIMONY: v 3-4

For Gaius was known as a man who obeyed the Word of God and “walked in truth.” (v 3) *Was Gaius led to Christ through the apostle John ? Or was he a member or leader of an assembly under John’s care ?* The word “my,” in (v 4) can be rendered “*my own children.*” It seems that John led Gaius to Christ and what a joy that is. But it’s even a greater joy to hear of Gaius growing in grace and standing up for the truth. I tell you, the false teachers who were knocking at the door of “*the elect lady,*” would receive short shrift at the door of Gaius. He would get the ugly truth of them in no time and send them away with a warning to steer clear of his flock. But more than that, Gaius was not only standing for the truth he was walking in the truth. (v 4) Gaius read the Word, meditated on it, delighted in it, and then practiced it in his daily life. (Ps 1:3) His entire life was wrapped up in the truth. You see, true living comes from the living truth. The Lord Jesus, the truth (Jn 14:6) is revealed in the Word, which is God’s truth (Jn 17:17) The Holy Spirit is also truth (1 Jn 5:6) and He teaches us truth.

The Spirit of God uses the Word of God to reveal the Son of God, and then to enable us to obey the will of God and “walk in truth.” My what an exceptional testimony Gaius had. What about your testimony ? Do other believers “*cringe,*” when your name comes up, because you have no testimony ? John never had to fear when Gaius’ name came up, for when he thought of Gaius he thought of his (a) (b) (c)

(d) HIS PRACTICAL MINISTRY: 5-8

We have no indication that Gaius himself was a preacher or teacher but,

1. He opened his Home to the Servants of God:

Now that is the background of what John is saying in (v 5-8) We have learned from his second letter the importance of Christian hospitality in that day. You see, when the preachers and teachers were travelling from place to place they did not have motels or hotels to stay in. There were Inns but they were infested with fleas and known as places of immorality, and because of that the believers opened up their homes to these travelling preachers. Alexander Strauch says,

If you doubt that hospitality was ‘ a distinctive mark of Christians and Christian communities,’ consider the following quotation: Indeed was there ever a visitor in your midst that did not approve your excellent and steadfast faith or did not proclaim the magnificent character of your hospitality. These glowing words of praise concerning hospitality were written in A.D. 96 by the church in Rome to the Christians in Corinth.

I wonder could these words concerning hospitality be said of us ? How seriously have we taken the hospitality commands of the New Testament ? I mean is your home open to the servants of God, to the people of God ? Is it not an indictment on us, that we are so reluctant to offer hospitality to the travelling preacher ? To the man of God.

But not Gaius, this man whose name means “*down to earth*,” opened up his home to the servants of God. Look at (v 5-6) These travelling preachers were coming through to where John was and they said, “*there is a man named Gaius in that church who extends Christian hospitality and he is such a blessing.*” My do you practice hospitality ? As an elder ? (1 Tim 3:2) As a deacon ? As a believer ? Peter says, “*use hospitality one to another without grudging.*” (1 Pet 4:9) Are our homes really at the disposal of Christ ? W.A. Criswell was one of the great Southern Baptist preachers. He tells the story that it was through his parent’s ministry of hospitality that he was saved. When he was 10 years of age a preacher came to their town to hold an evangelistic campaign, and his mother Anna Criswell invited him to stay with them.

The young W.A. Criswell was greatly impressed by the visiting evangelist John Hicks. When the evangelist went out for a walk little W.A. would walk with him, and he was going to and from church W.A. would go with him. When he was in the home during meals, he would sit close to the preacher and listen to the conversation. *John Hicks took time with that little boy, and by the time the evangelist left his home W.A. Criswell had trusted the Saviour.* I heard about a man who took his dog to the vet and asked him to cut off his tail completely. The vet said, “*I am not sure I could do that. Why on earth would you ever what to do that to your dog ?*” “*Well,*” said the owner, “*my mother in law is coming to visit us and I don’t want anything in the house to suggest she is welcome.*” Is this not the way our hospitality often is ? We do it reluctantly, not like Gaius who had an open home. 1.

2. He opened his Heart to the Servants of God:

Look if you will at (v 6) the phrase “*bring forward on their journey*,” means “*to assist on their journey.*” It meant more than giving them a friendly good-bye or handshake, it included making adequate provision for the next step of the journey. (1 Cor 16:6 Titus 3:13) Here was a man who opened his home, his heart, his hand to the servants of God. ***Practical Ministry to the servants of God.*** Now you may say, “*why should we engage in this kind of ministry,*” to the servants and people of God. Well, John gives us the answer. He says,

(a) It Glorifies the Lord:

John is dealing with the matter of supporting those who teach and preach the Word. The phrase in (v 6) “*after a godly sort*,” means “*worthy of God, as befits God.*” We are never more Godlike than when we are sacrificing to serve others. Since these itinerant preachers were representing the name of the Lord, any ministry to them was a really a service to Jesus Christ. (Matt 10:40 25:34)

(b) It Testifies to the World:

You see, God’s servants do not derive their support from a lost world, for God’s people are responsible to support God’s work. Look if you will at (v 7) “*Or receiving no help from the pagans.*” Is this not a rebuke to those who beg from all saint and sinner alike to support their work ? As if the Lord needed His work to be financed by the unsaved ? You see, when God’s people adequately support

God's servants it's a powerful testimony to the lost. But when pastors, missionaries, and societies go about soliciting from the unsaved world it makes the gospel look cheap and commercial. (a) (b)

(c) It Signifies our Obedience:

Do you see what John says in (v 8) ? “ *we ought therefore to show hospitality to such.*” You see, this ministry of hospitality and support it's not only an opportunity it's an obligation. Do you recall Paul's words to the Galatian believers ? He says, “ *Let him that is taught in the Word communicate unto him that teacheth all good things.*” (Gal 6:10) He's simply saying, “ *those who receive spiritual blessings through the ministry of the Word ought to share with the teacher of the Word material blessings.*” (1 Cor 9:7) This practical ministry (a) (b) (c)

(d) It Unifies the Church:

For when we “ *receive,*” God's servants and have a part in their ministry we become “ *fellow-helpers to the truth.*” (v 8) The word “ *receive,*” really means “ *to underwrite, to foot the bill.*” Some of you in your heart of hearts, would have liked to preach the gospel, some of you have dreamed about going to the mission field, but it did not work out like, but now as you pray, gave, and help others, you become a fellow-helper to the truth, you share in the ministry. A story is told about William Carey one of the best known early missionaries. When Andrew Fuller said to him, “ *There is a gold mine in India but it seems almost as deep as the centre of the earth.*” Carey immediately

replied, “ *I will venture down but remember you must hold the ropes.*” Hosting or assisting the Lord's servants is one way we can “ *receive,*” or support or hold the ropes for those who venture out in His name. Now it's one thing to fight apostasy and refuse to entertain false teachers, that's the message of 2 John, but it's another thing to open up our homes, and our hearts and our hands to promote the truth, that's the message of 3 John. Are you like Gaius ? Is your ministry marked and motivated by love ?

**(2) “ IN DIOTREPES,” we have a picture of
CARNALITY v 9-12**

Do you recall that Paul identifies some believers at Corinth as “ *carnal,*” ? (1 Cor 3:1) W.E. Vine says carnal means they were ‘ *governed by human nature instead of by the Spirit of God.*’ (1 Cor 3:3) Me first, foremost, and finally sums such a person up. Now who was Diotrepes ? This name occurs everywhere in Greek literature. It is identified with Greek aristocracy, even nobility. Evidently this man was upper class, among the elite when he came to know the Lord. He was accustomed to be in the limelight and that's where he wanted to stay. He was trying to run the church ? He was the church boss. Have you ever met such a person ? Of course you have. A church boss might be an elder, a deacon, a pastor, or even a layperson who has no official role in the church. Sometimes it can be a wealthy or influential person. But they feel that it their job to run everything and everyone in the church. J. Vernon McGee writes, “ *there is generally one like him in every church who wants to control the church and the preacher, this man tried to be the first*

pope. *He was Diotrephes the Dictator.*” Do you see for example,

(a) HIS PERSONAL AMBITION: v 9

The word “ *pre-eminence*,” in (v 9) comes from two Greek words which mean “ *to be fond of being first.*” Here was a man who loved to be first. He runs on a me first, look out for number one programme. Diotrephes had to be first in everything. Number one, he was running the show. My how often the work of Christ is hindered, the local church is stymied because some Diotrephes is so filled with pride, with himself, that he wants to be top dog all the time. Dr. Lee Robertson a Baptist in the U.S.A. and a noted Greek scholar wrote an article on one occasion in a denominational publication about Diotrephes. The editor of that magazine rang him and told him that 25 officials from various churches stopped the paper to show their resentment against getting personally attacked.

My the sons of Diotrephes are still with us. Did you know that there are only two places in the New Testament where the word pre-eminence occurs ? Do you know where the other one is ? Paul says in (Col 1:18) that Christ is the one who is supposed to have pre-eminence. “ *That in all things He might have the pre-eminence.*” You see, the bottom line is, its either self or Christ. There are no big shots or little shots in this church, Christ ought to be number one. (a)

(b) HIS TOTAL ANTAGONISM: v 9

John says, “ *he receiveth us not,*” (v 9) “ *neither doth he himself receive the brethren.*” (v 10) It would seem that John had written to the church but the letter was intercepted and destroyed by this man Diotrephes. Isn't incredible to think Diotrephes who may have been a church leader, intercepted John's letter, refused to have fellowship with one of the Lord's own apostles, and would not allow faithful preachers into the pulpit. Why ? *Why did Diotrephes reject John ?* Because John challenged this man's right to be dictator in the church. John was a threat to Diotrephes because John had the authority of an apostle. John knew the truth about Diotrephes and was willing to make it known. Imagine Diotrephes refused to acknowledge the leadership of John.

Total antagonism. Does that describe your attitude to your spiritual leaders ? You see, often when a member wants power, prestige and position he usually attacks the leadership privately and publicly Sometime's he starts a whispering campaign and tries to undermine the pastor's character and ministry. Like Absalom in the Old Testament he “ *hints,*” that the present leadership is not efficient (2 Sam 15:1) but if he were in power he could handle things better. My is the spirit of Diotrephes about you ? (Heb 13:7, 17) (a) (b) Do you notice,

(c) HIS VERBAL ACCUSATION:

“ *Prating against us with malicious words,*” (v 10) that simply means “ *bringing false and empty charges against us.*” “ *Prating,*” in Greek (phluareo) means “ *to talk nonsense.*” Is this not what Diotrephes was doing ? What

Diotrephes was saying about the apostle John was sheer nonsense, but there are people who love to hear such talk and will believe it. My the church of the 21st century is no different from the church at the end of the 1st century. There are gossips today. There are those who make false accusations against the servants of the Lord. That's why we need to be careful about everything we hear and read about the servants of God. If we could only remember that we are to listen to no accusations brought against the leadership of a work without witnesses present, would that not solve the gossip problem ? (1 Tim 5:19) Now are you beginning to see Diotrephes in his true light ? He wanted to be “ *top dog*,” he would not receive John or the brethren, he was making false accusations, he was also acting like a dictator for look at,

(d) HIS DICTATORIAL ACTION:

Notice (v 10) These Christians who received John's associates were dismissed from the church. You see, it seems that this man had enough power and enough of a following to excommunicate people who disagreed with him. Now Diotrephes had neither the authority nor the Biblical basis for throwing these people out, but he did it. The New Testament does teach church discipline, (1 Cor 5:1) there must be rule in the church and there cannot be rule without rulers, but there is no place for the Diotrephes type. Do you recall Peter's words to the elders ? “ *Neither as being lords over God's heritage, but being ensamples to the flock.*” (1 Pet 5:3) Now when you stand back and look at Diotrephes life what do you have ? A picture of carnality. Indeed John in (v 11) with both

men in mind exhorts us to follow that which is good (Gaius) and avoid that which is evil (Diotrephes) Now many scholars believe that Demetrius was the man who carried this brief letter to its destination. Moreover, Demetrius could encourage the heart of Gaius, for you see,

**(3) “ IN DEMETRIUS,” we have a picture of
CONSISTENCY**

You could take the Word of God and put it next to the life of Demetrius and he was consistent. His practice was in keeping with his profession. Now says John “ *if you want to imitate an example follow Gaius or Demetrius.*” The word “ *follow*,” (v 11) means “ *to imitate or mimic.*” Is it right for us to imitate human leaders ? Yes, if they in turn are imitating Jesus Christ. Paul says, “ *be ye followers of me even as I also am of Christ.*” (1 Cor 11:1 Phil 3:17) We cannot see God, but we can see God at work in the lives of His children. The godly life and dedicated service of another believer is always an encouragement and a stimulus to us. (Heb 10:24) Demetrius was that kind of person. Now who was Demetrius ? Is he the same man mentioned in (Acts 19) the silversmith of Ephesus and the leader of the opposition to Paul ? (Acts 19:24) Did this Demetrius get saved ? Did he since become a preacher of the gospel ? One thing is sure Demetrius was marked by consistency for look at his testimony.

(a) There was a UNIVERSAL Testimony:

“ *Demetrius hath good report of all men,*” (v 12) he was well spoken of by everyone. Not only believers but non-Christians were impressed by his life. What a recommendation for the gospel, when a follower of Christ impresses and attracts those around by the reality, consistency, and sincerity of his life. Sometimes, however when all men saved and lost, good and evil, speak well of us it may mean that we are compromising, but Demetrius not only had (a)

(b) *There was a SCRIPTURAL Testimony:*

For Demetrius was well spoken of by the truth itself. What does that really mean ? I think it simply means that our friend Demetrius was living his life in accord with the truth of Scripture, so that when his life was measured by that yardstick, the truth itself confirmed his quality. He was like Gaius, he was walking in the truth. Is that what you are doing ? Does your life harmonise with the teaching of Scripture ? (a) (b)

(c) *There was a PERSONAL Testimony:*

For John says, “ *yea and we also bear record,*” (v 12) John knew firsthand that Demetrius was a man of God, and the apostle was not ashamed to confess it. Tell me, what kind of testimony do you have in this or your church fellowship ? Do the believers know you and love you, and thank God for your consistent life ? All of us no doubt have heard of the Nobel Prize, but did you know how it came about ? One morning in 1888 Alfred Nobel, who was the inventor of dynamite, and a man who spent

his life amassing a fortune from the sale and manufacture of weapons awoke to read in the morning newspaper his own obituary. It was a simple journalistic error. Alfred's brother had died and a French reporter carelessly had got the wrong brother. Alfred was shocked, because he saw himself for the first time the way the rest of the world saw him. They called him “ *The Dynamite King,*” the great industrialist who made a fortune from explosives. As far as the public were concerned the entire purpose of his life was to be a merchant of death. That morning as he read down his own obituary with shocking horror, he resolved from that day on to make clear to the world the true meaning and purpose of his life.

He decided to do it, by disposing of his fortune when he died, and his will and testament would be the expression of his life's ideals. The result was the most valued of prizes given to those to day who have done most for the cause of world peace, ***the Nobel Peace Prize.*** But here's my challenge to you this ! Imagine tomorrow morning your obituary suddenly appears in the paper. Would it say anything in any way related to God's work ? Or would it be all about your own work, your own wealth, your own career, your own family ? What would it say ? When all is said and done, is this not what really matters ? What will you be known for ? What will you be remembered for ? ***Like Gaius will you be remembered for your Charity ? Or maybe like Diotrephes will you be remembered for your Carnality ? Or like Demetrius will you be known for your Consistency ?*** Three men at the end of the 1st century typical of three believers in any given local church in the 21st century. **Can I ask, which one is you ?**

