

George Philip Bible Readings

Third Epistle of John

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1:1

If John's Second Epistle was sent to a fellowship of believers, this one is obviously sent to an individual named Gaius. Two other persons are also named, Diotrephes (9) and Demetrius (13). The Second Epistle warned against giving hospitality to those who were militant enemies of the truth of the Gospel, but this third epistle commends Gaius for his hospitality to and practical encouragement of the teachers of the Gospel. We are not sure who Gaius was, but we are left in no doubt in v.2-3 as to what he was. Three people in the New Testament have the name Gaius (a common name in those times) and although all of them are men of spiritual stature, we need not try to identify this Gaius with any of them. The three are Gaius, Paul's host (1 Cor. 1:14; Rom. 16:23); Gaius of Macedonia, who suffered with the apostle Paul (Acts 19:29); and Gaius of Derbe who accompanied Paul on his last journey to Jerusalem (Acts 20:4). Whoever the Gaius here is, he seems to be a leading figure in a group of Christians loyal to the truth; this seems to be indicated by the word "friends" in v.14b. They may have been a group of conservative loyalists within a church that was already divided by some departing from the truth "once delivered to the saints" (Jude 3) as indicated in the Second Epistle. This would be the case if v.9 refers to the previous epistle of John. The division within the church was a virulent one caused by Diotrephes (9) and this may well be part of the explanation of the deep bond between John and Gaius, a bond of love and truth between two men who were suffering for the Gospels sake. There is in fact no stronger or sweeter bond.

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It will be useful to read Psalm 1 along with this verse, The phrase "above all things" (AV) is better read "in all respects", for John would not suggest for a moment that physical health is the most vital thing in Christian life. The worldly-minded person says in his specious way; "As long as you have your health, that's the main thing," or "As long as you are happy; that is what matters." But both these statements are false. It profits us nothing if the soul does not prosper (Matt.16:26). The words "go well" literally mean "to have a good journey", that is, to make headway. For this reason God may use sickness as the avenue of blessing for the soul, just as He used the thorn in the flesh of Paul to make him a more effectual instrument of blessing for others (2 Cor. 12:7-10). On the face of it, the verse as rendered by the Authorised Version seems to be a prayer for health of body as a natural and spiritual issue from health of soul. That often happens, and many a person can testify that their physical and nervous health, to say nothing of their mental health, have been transformed for the good since they were converted to Christ and became realistically committed to spiritual discipleship under a ministry of the Word of God. The connection between the spiritual and the physical cannot be denied (1 Cor. 11:28-32), but on the other hand the issue is not simple. Think of Job in the mighty depth of his spiritual integrity and service being smitten most terribly in every human way. But this much is clear: health, which involves the spiritual, mental, emotional and physical, is something which flourishes best in the atmosphere of truth. Experience proves that the Word of God's truth is the agent above all others in the communication of that health which brings wholeness, integration and coherence of life and personality.

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Psalm 103, especially v.14, will help us today. There is no doubt at all in John's mind as to the spiritual health of this dear man Gaius. He knew it to be so, and when those who visited Gaius came back and testified to the manifest godliness and grace of the man, John was overjoyed. But there was one shadow of concern. He heard that Gaius was "burning himself out" in the work of the Lord, and in ministering hospitality to the Lord's people (v.5). This may have been inevitable if no one else was willing or able to share the burden. But Gaius had to remember that it was not right, nor was it pleasing to God, to take liberties with the body and its needs. There must be discipline and also some denial of the clamant demands of the body and all its varied appetites, but there must be no neglect of the legitimate claims of food, rest and health. If by our foolish imbalance we allow ourselves to become physically and mentally jaded, we are instantly open to the wiles of the Devil and his attacks through fluctuating emotions, and at the same time we are limited in our availability to God for spiritual

service. John is saying here, "I know your soul is in spiritual health, but are you taking care of yourself for the service that the Lord may have for you in the future? Some of us take far too good care of ourselves and know nothing of what it is to have virtue go out of us. Others are so busy rushing from one social commitment to another every spare moment that when the weekend comes they are only semi-conscious. Some of us would have transformed spiritual lives if we went to bed at a decent hour. Think well on these things before you say your soul is in health. Remember that God rested one day after six days of work.

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John takes care not to minimise in any way the tremendous ministry of hospitality exercised by Gaius, knowing that this service was rendered because of his close walk of obedience and fellowship with God. Have we any idea what it means to a stranger to be taken in and welcomed in a manner that does not embarrass but helps and encourages in a spiritual and human way? This is not merely a case of inviting to our homes those who are attractive to us, but those who are obviously lonely or out-of-joint or making heavy weather of life. This is a ministry of great possibility in the cure and salvation of souls, and it is a ministry better done by the people in the pew than the man in the pulpit. (But in the passage it is the teachers of the Word who are being looked after!) Keeping in mind the balance counselled by John in yesterday's verses, we must regard our homes as a stewardship from God. Some of us who were converted in the forces during the war remember with gratitude to this day those who took us in although we were strangers. What citadels of safety these homes were to unsteady converts still trying to disentangle themselves from the complications of sin in the world. Consider these Scripture references: Matt. 10:40-42; 25:35-45; Rom. 12:13; Heb. 13:1-3; 1 Peter 4:7-11.

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The phrase "send them on their way" is almost a technical term implying the assumption of financial responsibility for the departing teacher of the Word. This is practical sharing in the ministry of the Gospel and it sets free those who are called to preach so that they can give their undivided attention to their responsible, God-given task. We can see this principle at work in such references as Rom. 15:25; 1 Cor. 16:6, 10-11; 2 Cor. 1:16; Titus 3:13; Acts 15:3. This is the maintenance of the Christian ministry and is a privilege falling to the believing fellowship. The phrase "a manner worthy of God" signifies that these travelling teachers were in fact God's representatives. These holy men of God, consecrated to their calling of ministry, could not in any way be regarded as burdens upon the believers, for it was by their ministry that spiritual enrichment came to the lives of many. Was there not then a spiritual obligation to be expressed in practical terms? (1 Cor. 9:1-18; Gal. 6:6; 1 Tim. 5:17-18) These evangelists deserved all the help that could be given for two reasons. First, the general poverty of the Christians in these early days was most acute for those who had given up what jobs they had to preach God's word. Second, these ministers would not go cap-in-hand to beg support from the pagans, as many itinerant self-appointed 'preachers' did. It is a sad day when the Lord's servants must beg bread (Psalm 37:25). Paul escaped this necessity by working at his trade and by this means he was independent of obligation and no man could prevail on him to qualify his message.

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"This is a clear word on the assumption of financial responsibility by the Church for the missionaries it sends out. The missionary endeavour of the established churches is sometimes criticised by evangelicals as being less on "faith" lines than that of so-called "faith missions". But what are we to say of those "faith missions" who balance their books only, at the expense of the missionaries on the field who voluntarily accept a substantial reduction in their allowances for the year? What of those missions who are able to send only a percentage of the monthly allowance and in some months no allowance at all? The result of this system is that missionaries have to spend time in prayerful concern about how they are going to live and make ends meet. But this assuredly ought not to be the burden of the missionary's prayer life. It is the responsibility of the church at home to find the money with which to sustain the work and the worker. Is it not more in accord with John's word here to send out regular and full remittances to missionary personnel, even if it should mean temporary debt on the

home front, and then ask the church at home to meet its responsibilities? This puts the burden in the proper place." (Rev. J. Philip) This was in fact done one year by the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland when the matter of missionary allowances was raised from the floor of the house during debate. The allowances were raised, the church told, and the money was forthcoming. We need to remember that in one sense there is no such thing as "living by faith". Someone has to work in the sweat of his brow as the Book of Genesis declares, to provide the money. Miraculous provision by "ravens" and the "cruse of oil" are extraordinary methods which God reserves the right to use.

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Diotrephes and Gaius may have been members of the same fellowship or of neighbouring fellowships but they are two completely contrasting characters. Gaius is seen as a servant of the church (cf. John 13:1-17), while Diotrephes seems to have been a man who used the church for a platform on which to exalt himself.

It seems that the letter referred to in v.9 had been suppressed by this man, and destroyed without ever having been read to the congregation. Perhaps Diotrephes resented what he felt was John's intrusion into his territory, even although John had apostolic authority that was generally recognised. Dare we say he was the kind of man who was determined to set up a little kingdom of his own over which he would be the autocratic ruler? It is quite clear that the man was ruled by personal ambition that was not of God, and John promises to deal with him if the opportunity arises. This is not merely a case of clashing personalities but of deep spiritual importance. Here is a man exercising a baneful influence on the fellowship by his malicious, unrelenting slander against a proven apostle, and John warns him that the time for exposure and reckoning will come in the will of God. Note that John makes no clear charge of doctrinal error against this man. It is his motive and his influence that are evil, and when you find this in a strong-willed man there is scarcely any limit to the evil he can do in a congregation.

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Diotrephes did his evil work by three methods. He railed against John's person and ministry relentlessly. But he would not stop there. He refused to receive as men of spiritual integrity any who associated with John or recognised his ministry or respected his person. But even that was not enough; this is the passion of Hell that can never be satisfied. Diotrephes tried to forbid any other Christians from having dealings with John, or Gaius, or those associated with them. And if they did not bow to Diotrephes' demands they were cast out of the fellowship. Now, note how John urges Gaius in v. 11 not to be taken in by this carnal man, whom he brands as evil. Would you say that Diotrephes makes you think of a Christ-like man? Read 1 Peter 5:1-6 and Matt, 20:20-28. How we need our personal pride and ambition to be slain over and over again. It can be done, for it has been done in the death of Christ for us (Rom.6:1-7). In v.11 John deals not merely with the influence of Diotrephes, but with the fundamental inspiration of his whole life. In fact, John questions whether a man like this is a Christian at all. No one has the "right" to rule over a company of believers but someone must lead for the sake of order, decency and progress. Who then has this "right"? By their fruits you shall know them. Gaius was qualified. So was Demetrius. Diotrephes had as his main concern his place in men's opinion, his reputation and his personal power. Which would you call to be the minister of your congregation?

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Demetrius may possibly have been the bearer of this epistle and quite unknown to Gaius, who is now urged to receive him for what he is, a valid and authentic minister of the Gospel. There is a three fold testimony to this man in the one verse. First, the whole fellowship of the church at Ephesus from which place the epistle was probably written bore witness to this man's spiritual integrity. The word "everyone" may signify the believers in various churches which Demetrius had visited, or it might possibly refer to the general recognition of this man by even the unbelieving community. This latter thought is unlikely, as true saintliness is such a powerful searcher of the conscience that it is more often criticised than praised. The second witness to Demetrius is "the truth itself". The truth he preached was so clearly embodied in his whole life and manner that it was self-evident

that this was a man of God. There could be a reference here to the fact that when Demetrius preached there was such an unction of God upon his word that no one could doubt his authenticity. Thirdly, John himself testifies to the man, possibly one of his own converts. This last guarantee by itself would suffice for Gaius. He knew he could trust the judgment of John, There are men who can be trusted because they have proved themselves trustworthy in spiritual decisions over years of ministry and pastoral oversight. They are not infallible, nor would they ever entertain such a suggestion, but they can be trusted.

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Nothing is known of Demetrius except what is written here, but two interesting conjectures have been made as to his identity. Some say he is the same Demetrius as we read of in Acts 19:21-41 and if so, he was a most significant convert whose reputation would be widely known. There would obviously be many people with reservations about him and about his right to be a minister of the Gospel. Others identify Demetrius with Demas (Col. 4:14; Philemon 24; 2 Tim. 4:10) as the two names are really the same. If he was indeed the man who forsook Paul, leaving him in the lurch because of personal or worldly considerations, would there not be long term reservations about his right to be ministering to the people of God? And, would a man of John's stature commend Demetrius if he had not proved himself? Or would John not expect the saints to rejoice that a backslider like Demas had been restored? Should we not have enough grace in our hearts, we who ourselves have been forgiven so much (Matt. 18:23-35), to allow the past with all its failures to be forgotten? Is there not forgiveness with God so that, even the greatest failure may be restored to service as well as blessing? How harsh we can be to one another. Little wonder David asked to fall into the hand of God rather than the hands of men (2 Sam.24:14). We must allow others to live down their sins, We must not blackmail and blacklist them. Remember Galatians 6:1.

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The words and thoughts of these verses are virtually identical with those at the close of the second epistle, but there are two significant differences. Here (14) John's benediction bespeaks peace to this fellowship that is being strained or even shattered by dissension through Diotrephes; who is such a relentless character. When this happens, the Devil tries above all else "to get us on the run", to create panic and so to make us rush into unfortunate words and ill advised action. It is as if John is telling the saints not to panic and not to let this evil manifestation disturb their essential peace. God knows at all times what is going on, and we must believe that even the most terrible things are allowed by Him, strictly under His control and limitation, to serve His own purposes. After all, the malicious slander spread by Diotrephes would serve to make all sorts of people think more clearly about where they stood in relation to God. In the interests of the work of the Gospel it would drive prayerless Christians to their knees. It would be the instrument of making Christians more aware of and grateful for all the privileges they had, not least the faithful, living ministry of the Word of God amongst them. Can it be that John is already sensing the quickening of spiritual life in this fellowship through the strain they were undergoing? This is cause for rejoicing, not depression. Peace be with you, from God who is at work savingly amongst you, carrying forward His gracious plans for your blessing and upbuilding. Is John thinking of Jesus' words in John 14:1-3, 27; 20:19, 21, 26?

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When John penned the very last words of this epistle he must have been thinking with gladness in his heart of Jesus' words recorded in John 10:1-5, 11-15, 27-30; 15:15-20. There is no attempt to escape from the inevitable conflict of Christian life and service, and yet the compensations of grace abound. John sends a greeting to every one of the friends by name and you can imagine something of what that ministered in terms of encouragement to these believers who at that time were up against it. We are not an amorphous mass, nor a compilation of digits, nor cogs in a great depersonalised system, but individual persons whose names are known to God and written on His hands and His heart (Isa.49:14-16; Hos.11:8; Lk.10:20). If we mean this much to God, how can we feel inferior or un-needed? If we mean this to God, can we not show it in our dealings with each other? This

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is one of the rich blessings of being a small fellowship instead of a massive congregation. We know one another by name and can share one another's burdens and so fulfil the law of Christ (Gal.6:2). Within the intimacy of the family sharing the one communal life in privilege and responsibility, we can remain and indeed grow more and more our own true selves, We bear the unmistakable family likeness yet we remain unique, individual members, and together individually and corporately we are built up in faith and character in the truth. This is what it means to glorify God and enjoy Him for ever.

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