

# THROUGH THE BIBLE STUDY

## 2 & 3 JOHN

Today, I'm starting the New Year with a Top Ten List. It's entitled, "The World's Top Ten Shortest Books." *You might notice that my list includes a few pretend titles...*

- 10) America's Most Popular Lawyers
- 9) Different Ways to Spell Bob
- 8) The Engineer's Guide To Fashion
- 7) The EPA's Spotted Owl Recipes
- 6) The Loganville Travel Guide
- 5) Everything Men Know About Women
- 4) Everything Women Know About Men
- 3) The Amish Phone Directory
- 2) The Atlanta Falcon's 2023 Highlights

And the world's number one shortest book: 1) Pastor Sandy's Jokes That Are Actually Funny

These would all be very short books, indeed. And speaking of short books... we have two to study today. 2 & 3 John are the shortest books in the Bible. In the original text both combine for less than 500 words.

I call them "The Lilliputian Letters" after the little people in Gulliver's Travels. You could also call them "The Fruit of the Loom Letters," *since both are brief.*

John begins his second letter with an introduction, "The Elder..." These two letters were perhaps the last NT books written. By the time he penned them John was 100 years-old - the last living of the original twelve apostles. And John's stature was unsurpassed in the Christian community. John was known not just as *an* elder, but as "THE Elder" - an elder with a capital "E."

And he writes, "to the elect lady and her children." Some expositors believe the "elect lady" is actually a "sister church." In the NT the Church is referred to as *the Bride of Christ...* But it's also possible "the elect lady and her children" are titles for specific believers. To me it's *more probable* John has a person in mind.

*Some have suggested both ideas are true.* He could be writing to a devout Christian lady who's vibrant witness had birthed a church-full of spiritual children.

No personal names were used by John because he wrote at a time of persecution. The Elder didn't want to provide the enemies of Christianity any specific targets.

John writes “to the elect lady and her children whom I love in truth...” And here’s John’s theme: **love in truth**. 1 John told us if we love God we’ll love our brother, but here we’re told real love never ignores the truth. **God’s love is always in harmony with God’s truth**.

If ever our love causes us to ignore the truth - if in the name of love we tolerate, or gloss over, or accept a falsehood, realize we’re not exhibiting the true love of God. **Real love affirms and supports God’s truth!**

And in today’s “Can’t Offend, Tolerant-Of-Everything, Watered Down World” many churches have adopted a “**Love is Supreme, Unity at all Costs**” type of mentality. To them *nothing is as important as love, peace, unity*. But apparently, they’ve forgotten the words of Jesus.

In Luke 12:51-53 the Lord told us, “Do you suppose that I came to give peace on earth? I tell you, not at all, but rather division. For from now on five in one house will be divided: three against two, and two against three. Father will be divided against son and son against father, mother against daughter and daughter against mother, mother-in-law against her daughter-in-law and daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law.” Jesus promised that He would draw a line in the sand.

Jesus came to confront us with the truth about God and life and us, and we’re forced to make decisions that put us at odds with folks who choose the opposite. Sometimes friction even erupts in the same family.

Not everyone humbles themselves and receives the truth. It’s been said, “**You shall know the truth and the truth can make you mad**.” To insist on unity at all costs glosses over the reality of objective truth - God’s truth.

Once, a pastor called the kids to the front of the church for a children’s sermon. The pastor taught on unity. He said, “**Boys and girls, God wants us all to be one**.” A little four year-old shouted out, “**Yea, but I wanna be five**.” The truth is, **all people are NOT one**.

To suggest that Christians, Muslims, Hindus, Atheists, Mormons should just overlook their differences and love one another as brothers is ridiculous. As Christians we need to love all people and point them to Jesus, but for us to embrace them as family is to deny the truth that saves us and defines us!

**Real love will never deny God’s truth!** And to suggest it really doesn’t matter what you believe - *that doctrine is irrelevant - that all that matters is love* - reveals a real naïvety about what the Bible teaches!

Please understand, **your doctrine will determine your destiny.** Having **love**, even **faith**, is not enough - the real question is, can **the object of my faith** save me?

Just because a baby sucks a bottle is no guarantee he or she will grow up healthy. *It depends on the contents of the bottle!* Likewise, faith alone will never save us. **Faith and love have to be grounded in truth!**

And John *loves in truth*. He writes, **“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...”** Truth is eternal. It doesn't morph from age to age, or generation to generation. God's truth remains unaltered by human opinion. God's truth is *timeless*.

In verse 3 John extends his greetings to the elect lady and her children, **“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.”**

Verse 4, **“I rejoiced greatly that I have found some of your children walking in truth, as we received commandment from the Father.”** Apparently, John had been in contact with a group of Christians who'd been discipled by this *elect lady*, and he rejoices that they're doing well. This was a credit to her and her ministry.

**“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.”** Notice love is measured not by *how we feel*, but by *how we walk* - in short, *by what we do*. Love is a lifestyle. **Real love is love in action.** If I really love my wife I'll not just do what's easy or convenient for me to do - *what I feel like doing* - but I'll love her in the way she wants and needs to be loved.

*Love aims to please.* And this should be our approach to God. Anybody can say they love God, but a real love for God walks according to what pleases Him, as John says, **“according to His commandments.”**

And **“This is the commandment, that as you have heard from the beginning, you should walk in it.”** And the Apostle John asserts that God's commandments haven't changed. From the outset of Jesus' ministry, **“from the beginning,”** He taught us to love one another.

Theologian Richard Niebuhr once said, **“The great Christian revolutions have come not by the discovery of something that was not known before. They happen when somebody takes radically something that was always there.”** We tend to look for new tactics, but it's the rediscovery of simple truths that reignites passion.

We don't need a new commandment. We need to move out of our comfort zone, and put our love into action. *Really love people... and it'll change the world!*

Verse 7, *“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.”*

Mark Twain once said, *“A lie can travel halfway around the world while the truth is putting on its shoes.”*

Paul warned the Ephesians about being *“tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, in the cunning craftiness by which they lie in wait to deceive...”* False doctrine constantly blows through the Church. Whether it's those in **John's day** who denied Jesus' humanity, or those **today** who deny His deity - *let's be on-guard.*

Warren Wiersbe once quoted the pastor of a faithful and biblical church as saying, *“If I took my eyes off this work for 24 hours and stopped praying, it would be invaded before we knew it.”* He knew the importance of being vigilant in the cultivation of sound doctrine.

Once a little boy was asked by his Sunday School teacher if he knew the meaning of *“false doctrine.”* The boy thought he said, *“false doctoring,”* so he replied, *“False doctoring is when a doctor gives the wrong stuff to people who are sick.”* And this also defines *“false doctrine”* - it's giving wrong stuff to the spiritually sick.

And here again, John tells us how to spot the person who is *false doctoring* - they may be right on 95% of what they say and teach, but invariably they stray when it comes to what they believe about Jesus.

John identifies the deceivers of his day as those *“who do not confess Jesus Christ as coming in the flesh.”* John battling the heresy of *“Gnosticism.”* It was a system of belief that denied the humanity of Jesus. In contrast, most false teachers today deny Jesus' deity. And both are wrong! Our Lord Jesus revealed Himself as *the God-man*. He was both *fully man* and *fully God*.

John continues, *“Look to yourselves, that we do not lose those things we worked for, but that we may receive a full reward.”* John labored for years to lay a solid foundation of right teaching in the church of his day, but he knew all that had been gained could be lost. And as I look at all God has done at CalvaryCSM, I also realize if we don't continue to serve, support, give, pray - we too can lose the gains we've made.

If we kick back and say, *“I did my time in the nursery when my kids were younger... I gave money to the last project... I've done the usher thing. It's someone else's turn... I've been involved in the church, now I deserve a little time off...”* If we all now pass

the buck we can lose what we've worked so hard and long to build. We need to *"look to ourselves"* and continue to do our part.

Verse 9, *"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."* And this is why it's so crucial that you're correct in your belief about Jesus. *If you're not right about Jesus you can't be right with God!* Jesus is the means by which God chooses to redeem a wayward world! **Jesus is the bridge between man and God!**

There is a bridge in China, the Danyang-Kunshan Grand Bridge that purports to be the world's longest. It's part of the Beijing to Shanghai freeway. Its length is 540,682 feet - that's a tad more than 102 miles long.

Yet this is not the longest bridge. **Jesus connects heaven to earth. He links God to man.** He spans the enormous gulf that's been caused by our sin... Today, even though you've broken and violated God's law, God has built a bridge from heaven to you. And you can still have a relationship with Him through Jesus.

And verse 10 goes after those who don't abide in the doctrine of Christ, *"If anyone comes to you and does not bring this doctrine, do not receive him into your house nor greet him..."* In the first century traveling apostles were common. Infant churches lacked good leadership so men traveled from place to place to fill the gap. Churches would put these fellows up, provide their needs, and support their ministry. Yet there were false teachers who took advantage of this generosity.

In a second century document known as the *Didache* or *"The Teaching of the Twelve,"* instructions were given to churches concerning these traveling apostles.

The *Didache* reads, *"Every apostle who comes to you should be received as the Lord. But he should not remain more than one day, and if there is some necessity a second as well; but if he should remain for three, he is a false prophet."* In other words, if the fellow stays more than the weekend without offering to pay you for his upkeep he's a freeloader, a deadbeat!

It continues, *"And when the apostle departs, he should receive nothing but bread until he finds his next lodging. But if he requests money, he is a false prophet... And not everyone who speaks forth in the spirit (or who claims to speak for God) is a prophet, but only if he has the kind of behavior which the Lord approves. From his behavior, then, will the false prophet and the true prophet be known... And every prophet, who in the spirit, (or who speaks as if by the Holy Spirit) orders a table to be spread shall not eat therefrom; but if he does, he is a false prophet."* If truly God's

Spirit speaks the man will order food for the hungry and needy around him - not for his fat-cat self.

The Didache also reads, “Whoever says in the spirit, ‘Give me money’... do not listen to him. But if he says that it should be given for others who are in need, let no one judge him.” Hey, a greedy or lazy person in the ministry is still greedy and lazy. Don’t give in to his appeals for money no matter how spiritual he sounds.

It reminds me of the old maxim, “Treat your guest as a guest for two days. On the third day give him a rake.” Or “put him to work.” The Didache was written in the second century to correct the first century church’s lack of discernment. The inaugural church seems to have abounded in love, but lacked discretion. They had the habit of taking in everyone - *true* and *false teacher*.

The church was so enamored with the need to love they failed to support the truth. And John is teaching us **a love not wedded to the truth is not real love at all.**

And it seems this problem in the early church was so prevalent that Christian charity was actually helping the heretics and perpetuating the spread of their heresies.

This is why John warns, verse 11, “for he who greets him shares in his evil deeds.” In essence, if you offer a false teacher support you become accomplice to their deception. You’re aiding and abetting a deceiver.

If a Mormon missionary comes to your door dying of thirst, or if you see him with a flat tire - *please, help him to safety - cool him down or give him a ride home* - but don’t let the guy relax all day so he can resume his mission or help him fix his flat tire. He’ll just keep **pedaling** his heresy. As one commentator puts it, “John warns us not to unintentionally collaborate with the enemy. Don’t be mean, but when he comes to your door don’t moisten lips that lie with your lemonade.”

John concludes his second letter, “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. And this is why these letters are so short and to the point. John was planning a visit where he would end up filling in all the details.

“The children of your elect sister greet you. Amen.”

John’s third letter begins, “The Elder, to the beloved Gaius, whom I love in truth...” 2 John was written to “the elect lady” - 3 John to a man named “Gaius.”

There are actually three Gaius’ in the NT... Acts 19 speaks of **Gaius the Macedonian**... Acts 20 lists **Gaius of Derbe** in Galatia... Romans 16 and 1 Corinthians 1 speak of **Gaius who lived in Corinth**...

This Gaius to whom John writes could be either of the three I've mentioned, or a different man altogether.

Whoever this Gaius was, John loved him in truth! The Greek name, "*Gaius*" means "*on Earth*" - and the message John sends to Gaius would indeed apply to all of us who presently live on this fallen planet. 3 John is in short **a letter from the Elder to the earthlings.**

And welcome to THE shortest book of the Bible, In the original language it's 26 words shorter than 2 John.

And the names of four men appear in this book: **John the Elder, Gaius, Demetrius,** and a man who is held in a not so flattering light. A villain named **Diotrephes.**

Thus, I like entitling 3 John after the 1980s movie, "**Three Men And A Baby.**" **John, Gaius,** and **Demetrius** were the men, while **Diotrephes** acted like a baby.

Verse 2, "**Beloved, I pray that you may prosper in all things and be in health, just as your soul prospers.**"

And here is one of the most misunderstood verses in all the Bible. And it's misinterpretation has led millions of Christians into serious error. What the Apostle John intended as a simple greeting has been taken by today's prosperity teachers as a promise of perfect health and ultimate wealth for all Christians. Kenneth Copeland, Oral Roberts, and Joel Osteen among many others, are major culprits of this erroneous teaching.

Here's the problem. Throughout the Bible, especially Hebrews 11, and across Church History there've been countless examples of devout believers who suffered financially, and didn't live their lives in perfect health, yet despite trials they gained God's approval **by faith.**

Godly people can be poor, and get sick - just like sinners. We all live in a germ-infested, fallen world. To take what John meant as *a common salutation - a simple wish for health and happiness* - as an iron-clad promise is an example of shoddy biblical interpretation.

Greek scholar Gordon Fee writes, "**To extend John's wish for Gaius to refer to financial and material prosperity for all Christians of all times is totally foreign to the text. John neither intended that, nor could Gaius have so understood it. Thus it cannot be the 'plain meaning' of the text.**" One of the first rules of hermeneutics, or biblical interpretation, is to look at the verse in its historical and cultural contexts. Remember the adage, "**A text without a context ends up a pretext.**"

Gordon Fee refers to John's phrase in verse 2 as "the standard form of greeting in a personal letter of antiquity." It was simply a hopeful and happy greeting. He's wishing his readers well, spiritually and physically.

John gets to the body of his letter in verse 3, "For I rejoiced greatly when brethren came and testified of the truth that is in you, just as you walk in the truth."

It's interesting, throughout the NT the Christian life is referred to as *a walk*. Not a run, or a hop, or a skip, or a crawl... but a walk. We're to *walk in love, walk in the Spirit, walk by faith, and walk as children of light*.

*When you run you get exhausted... When you hop you can trip... When you skip you miss things... When you crawl you have no focus...* But when you take a walk your attention is on the One you're with. Walking is a consistent, steady forward progression. Step by step. Time spent walking refreshes and rejuvenates.

To "*walk in truth*" is to continue with God - trusting, learning, applying the truths of God's Word to your everyday life. Gaius was a man who walked in truth!

John says to Gaius in verse 4, "I have no greater joy than to hear that my children walk in truth." And like John, as your pastor, I have no greater joy than to hear of you walking well! To hear you're making a difference for Jesus in your world is what keeps me and the other pastors going! It truly is our greatest joy.

"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." Notice, God desires for His work to be funded and supported by His people. Here the ministers of the church are commended for having taken nothing from the Gentiles or unbelievers.

I'll never forget the first time we studied this verse. We began CalvaryCSM in 1980, in the book of Luke. By late 82 we'd studied through the NT and had reached 3 John. It was our first journey through the NT. Forty-three years later we're finishing up our sixth trip.

At the time, we were occupying an old warehouse *on a temporary basis*. The owner didn't really want us in the building. He wasn't charging us rent. He was just doing us a favor by allowing us to meet there until we found something else. Well, the weeks dragged into months. There were few alternatives on the horizon.

That's when we read 3 John 6, "*they went forth for His name's sake, taking nothing from the Gentiles*." In other words, God doesn't want His people mooching off



nonbelievers. He wants His people carrying our own weight - paying our bills. As John puts it, He wants us traveling through life *“in a manner worthy of God.”*

I was convicted. In occupying that warehouse without paying rent felt like we were *“taking from the Gentiles.”* We were drawing *worldly support* for a *spiritual venture*. John says it’s the responsibility of God’s people to pay their own freight, so the next week I sent the landlord an unsolicited check for our rent.

Remember, the owner didn’t want to rent to us. He had other plans, but after a few months of us sending him money, he asked us if we’d like to sign a lease. I believe it was God’s way of blessing our obedience!

The point of the story is God wants to fund *His work* through *His people* - not secular grants. **God reserves for believers in Jesus the joy of giving to His work.**

Verse 8, *“We therefore ought to receive such, that we may become fellow workers for the truth.”* Here’s a beautiful principle - when you give of your time, or hospitality, or money, or effort, or prayers to a servant of God you invest in their ministry. You’ve become a partner - a stockholder - and you share in their reward.

If you’ve gave to this church in 2023 you contributed to Christian ministries in England, Germany, Italy, Kenya, Congo, Canada, Honduras, Haiti. And you now share in the rewards of ministries you’ve never visited.

Verse 9, *“I wrote to the church, but Diotrephes, who loves to have the preeminence among them, does not receive us.”* Here is the infamous Diotrephes - *the big baby*. I read where the average American eats 70 hot dogs a year. That’s a lot of hot dogs... but this man, Diotrephes, didn’t eat hot dogs - *he was a hot dog!*

**No one should *relish* being like a Diotrephes.** He loved to bask in the limelight. He liked being the center of attention. It reminds me of a comment Woodrow Wilson made of a proud associate, *“He was the only man I ever knew who could strut while sitting down.”*

And Diotrephes could strut! He loved to be in control. He was a power-monger. Diotrephes knew how to manipulate, and intimidate, and dominate. And when he came to the church he brought along this attitude.

Diotrephes was the self-appointed church sheriff. He thought nothing could go on in *his town*, even in Jesus’ name, without his approval. And it was this lust for *“the preeminence”* that made him jealous of others. He was threatened by the ministries of fellow believers.

And Diotrephes refused to **“receive”** John. Verse 10 accuses him of making vicious slurs to discredit the Elder. John writes, **“Therefore, if I come, I will call to mind his deeds which he does, prating against us with malicious words.”** *Diotrephes was a slanderer!...*

Bible expositor, AT Robertson, once wrote an article for a Southern Baptist magazine. In it he depicted the conduct of Diotrephes, *but without naming him*. In the weeks that followed, 25 Baptist church leaders across the state wrote letters to the editor canceling their subscriptions to the magazine. They all claimed that Robertson had been pointing his finger at them.

It's sad, but **the Church today is still plagued by Diotrephes**. When a church develops a sort of union boss, who dictates to God and God's people what can and can't be done - the Spirit is grieved and quenched.

Jesus said in Matthew 20:25-27, **“You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and those who are great exercise authority over them. Yet it shall not be so among you; but whoever desires to become great among you, let him be your servant... Whoever desires to be first among you, let him be your slave...”**

Christian leaders are to be *servants* not *sergeants*, *disciples* not *dictators*. It's been said the challenge of a leader is to **“lead and not drive, inspire and not dominate, create respect and not fear, win support and not opposition.”** There's only one Master - only one Boss for the believer - and His name is **“Jesus Christ!”**

Verse 12 continues Diotrephes' indictment, **“And not content with that, he himself does not receive the brethren, and forbids those who wish to, putting them out of the church.”** Not only did Diotrephes oppose John the Elder, he opposed anyone else in the church who supported John, and tried to offer him assistance.

With Diotrephes it was *his way* or *the highway*. The man did not allow for dissenting opinions. Diotrephes was an arrogant man - a cult-leader in the making.

And notice what John says at the beginning of verse 10 - *when he comes he'll put Diotrephes in his place!* Don't you wish you could've been present for that encounter? Sparks flew! The Elder put his foot down!

**“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.”** The knowledge of God produces a desire to obey and walk in His commands.

Instead of being a Diotrephes, we should all be a Demetrius. Verse 12, **“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.”**

Nothing is said of Demetrius other than **he was a good example**. He had *“a good testimony from all...”*

If we contrast Demetrius with Diotrephes, he must've been a humble, servant-leader. He was always willing to lend a helping hand. If Diotrephes was about *putting people down*, Demetrius was about *lifting people up*.

Verse 13, *“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.”*

*Ever send an email that was misinterpreted?* Of course, it happens commonly. Tone, in-flexion, volume, body language are all absent from an email. *The same with a letter.* No matter how awkward or unpleasant it might be, messages need to be conveyed face to face.

And John will arrive shortly to update his friends.

John concludes, *“Peace to you. Our friends greet you. Greet the friends by name.”* John has been reflecting on the love of Jesus. And remember what John said of Jesus, the Good Shepherd, *“the sheep hear his voice; and he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out.”* When John tells his readers to greet his friends by name, he's exemplifying the personal, and intimate, and very specific love of Jesus.

You've heard the statement, *“I love humanity. I just can't stand people.”* That's not Jesus! **He loves each one of us as if there were only one of us to love!**