

The Epistles of John and Jude

“These things write we unto you, that your joy may be full.”—I John 1:4

In addition to his Gospel account of Jesus’ ministry, the Apostle John wrote three letters, or epistles. The first is styled a “general” epistle because it is not addressed to any particular group or individual. In our opening verse, John states his reason for writing the letter—that their “joy may be full.” What are “these things” which he writes in order to give Christians fullness of joy? One of them is mentioned in the three opening verses of the epistle.

We quote:

“That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon, and our hands have handled, of the Word of life; (For the life was manifested, and we have seen it, and bear witness, and shew unto you that eternal life, which was with the Father, and was manifested unto us;) That which we have seen and heard declare we unto you, that ye also may have fellowship with us: and truly our fellowship is with the Father, and with his Son Jesus Christ.”

The “Word” of life which John refers to is, in the original Greek, the *Logos* of life. It is the same “Word,” or *Logos*, which he writes about in the first chapter of his Gospel, which, he explains, “was made flesh, and dwelt among us.” (John 1:14) All the apostles understood clearly that Jesus had a prehuman existence, but John is the only one who speaks of him as the Heavenly Father’s *Logos*, Word or mouthpiece. John was evidently deeply impressed with this viewpoint, for the first chapter of his Gospel is devoted to it, as well as these opening verses of his first epistle.

In verse 5 of this opening chapter of his epistle John writes, “This then is the message which we have heard of him, and declare unto you, that God is light, and in him is no darkness at all.” In verse 9 of the 2nd chapter, we read, “He that saith he is in the light, and hateth his brother, is in darkness even until now.”

Thus John indicates that “light” manifests itself by love, and “darkness” by hatred. “God is love,” John tells us. (I John 4:8,16) God is also light. These single-word definitions of the characteristics of God would not give us a very clear understanding of him except as we find them enlarged upon throughout the Scriptures.

Light is used in the Bible as a symbol of truth, and the word “truth” embraces the entire divine plan for the redemption and restoration of a lost race. Every feature of that plan is prompted by divine love. It was because God loved the world that he sent his Son, the *Logos*, to be man’s Redeemer. (John 3:16,17) Every detail of his plan whereby the benefits of this gift will reach and bless the people is a further manifestation of his love.

Since darkness, the absence of truth, is manifested by hatred, and love is the manifestation of light, or truth, John could properly say that “God is light, and in him is no darkness at all.” Christian love, then, is not just an abstract principle. Neither is it an indefinite feeling of emotion. It is, rather, the outworking of the example of unselfishness we see in God as day by day we endeavor to learn the Truth and obey it. John wrote, “Whoso keepeth his word, in him verily is the love of God perfected: hereby know we that we are in him.”—I John 2:5

Just as John seemed especially inspired by the thought of divine love, he was also impressed with the importance of the outgrowth of love in the lives of God’s people. Throughout the epistle he touches upon this theme again and again. We quote a few examples:

“He that loveth his brother abideth in the light, and there is none occasion of stumbling in him. But he that hateth his brother is in darkness, and walketh in darkness, and knoweth not whither he goeth, because that darkness hath blinded his eyes.”—I John 2:10,11

“This is the message that ye heard from the beginning, that we should love one another.”—I John 3:11

“We know that we have passed from death unto life, because we love the brethren. He that loveth not his brother abideth in death.”—I John 3:14

“Whoso hath this world’s good, and seeth his brother have need, and shutteth up his bowels of compassion from him, how dwelleth the love of God in him? My little children, let us not love in word, neither in tongue; but in deed and in truth.”—I John 3:17,18

“Beloved, let us love one another: for love is of God; and everyone that loveth is born [begotten] of God, and knoweth God. He that loveth not knoweth not God; for God is love. In this was manifested the love of God toward us, because that God sent his only begotten Son into the world, that we might live through him. Herein is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us, and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins. Beloved, if God so loved us, we ought also to love one another.”—I John 4:7-11

“God is love; and he that dwelleth in love dwelleth in God, and God in him. Herein is our love made perfect, that we may have boldness in the day of judgment: because as he is, so are we in this world. There is no fear in love; but perfect love casteth out fear: because fear hath torment. He that feareth is not made perfect in love.”—I John 4:16-18

In these various texts we get a comprehensive view of the manner in which divine love will affect the life of a Christian. It reflects obedience to God’s Word. It prompts to self-sacrifice on behalf of the brethren. The last text quoted speaks of a love which gives boldness “in the day of judgment.” This is not a reference to the world’s future judgment day of a thousand years, for faithful Christians will not be on trial then. (Acts 17:31; II Pet. 3:8) Together with Jesus they will be the judges at that time. Rather, John’s words speak of the present judgment time, which pertains only to the “the house of God.”—I Pet. 4:17

In I John 4:15, the apostle wrote, “Whosoever shall confess that Jesus is the Son of God, God dwelleth

in him, and he in God.” For one in John’s day to make this “confession” required great courage. We recall that one of the charges the religious leaders brought against Jesus was that he claimed to be the Son of God. (John 19:7) Jews who later espoused his cause and confessed that he was the Son of God were also hated and persecuted by their countrymen. Gentiles making this confession were looked down upon even more.

Indeed, it required “boldness,” courage, to take this stand. The Greek word translated “judgment” in the expression, “boldness in the day of judgment,” is *krisis*. *Thayer’s Greek Definitions* offers one of the meanings of this word as “decision.” If we translate John’s words literally, then, we could say that love gives one boldness in the day of decision. In Christian experience this day of decision, trial, or judgment, begins with consecration and continues until death. Every day is a challenge to faithfulness. Every day is a trial, a test, of faithfulness. Every day, therefore, “boldness” is needed, a boldness that is born of love for God, for his Truth, and for his people.

John had the proper understanding of love. He did not see it as something which should cause the Christian to compromise on issues of truth and righteousness. He admonishes us to “try the spirits,” or teachings meant to influence us and our thinking. He says, “Every spirit that confesseth that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh is of God: And every spirit that confesseth not that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh is not of God.”—I John 4:1-3

This is a straightforward statement which shows no inclination toward compromise. Additionally,

this must be understood in the light of John's own explanation of the manner in which Jesus came in the flesh, as we find it in the first chapter of his Gospel. In this chapter he did not say that Jesus became incarnate in flesh, but that he was "made flesh."

During the Dark Ages an overzealous translator, who was evidently not satisfied with the way John explained this matter, endeavored to help by injecting an interpolation into the 5th chapter of his epistle. This unauthorized addition to the inspired Word is found in verses 7 and 8 of the *King James Version*, a portion of which reads as follows: "The Father, the Word, and the Holy Ghost [Spirit]: and these three are one." This mistranslation was an attempt to insert the doctrine of a triune God into the Bible. These words, however, do not appear in any Greek manuscript prior to the fifteenth century, and all Bible scholars agree that they are spurious.

One of the most superb statements of John shows the awe-inspiring love of God towards his faithful people. It reads: "Behold, what manner of love the Father hath bestowed upon us, that we should be called the sons of God: therefore the world knoweth us not, because it knew him not. Beloved, now are we the sons of God, and it doth not yet appear what we shall be: but we know that, when he shall appear, we shall be like him; for we shall see him as he is. And every man that hath this hope in him purifieth himself, even as he is pure."—I John 3:1-3

John's Second Epistle

John's second letter was written to "the elect lady and her children." (II John 1:1) We have no certain

knowledge of who this Christian lady was. Verse 13 indicates that she had a sister, and that her sister had children. The letter reveals that she was a very devoted Christian, with great love for the Lord and for the Truth. John told her that he rejoiced greatly “that I found of thy children walking in truth.” (vs. 4) In verses 5 and 6 he admonishes her, “love one another,” and then explains, “This is love, that we walk after his commandments.”

The main purpose of John’s second letter seems to have been to caution this sister in the Truth against allowing her kindness and generosity to work injury to the cause of Christ. False teachers were plaguing the church. Their heresy was, as John wrote, that they “confess not that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh. Whosoever transgresseth, and abideth not in the doctrine of Christ, hath not God.” (vss. 7,9) According to John’s first letter, this meant that they were not of God, so were to be shown no cooperation of any kind.—I John 4:3

Continuing his letter to the “elect lady,” John wrote, “He that abideth in the doctrine of Christ, he hath both the Father and the Son. If there come any unto you, and bring not this doctrine, receive him not into your house, neither bid him God speed: For he that biddeth him God speed is partaker of his evil deeds.”—II John 1:9-11

In the action thus commanded by the apostle, we have the boldness of love manifested. It no doubt required courage for John to give what might easily be construed as harsh advice. It would require even greater Christian strength on the part of the “elect lady” to carry out the instructions. Perhaps, unwittingly, she had already been

entertaining those opposed to the Truth. If so, it would be doubly difficult for her to take the bold stand which the apostle urged.

It would not be over-emphasizing the importance of the Lord's providences to believe that John's attention was called to this situation in a manner to make necessary this short letter. Its purpose would be not only that this sister in Christ might benefit, but that the entire church throughout the age might have an authoritative precedent to guide them in matters of this kind.

The principle involved is very understandable. We need to ask ourselves where we would draw the line in matters of faith and practice. If we decide that it would be wrong for us to believe and preach certain views, or to conduct ourselves in certain ways, then it would be equally wrong to render assistance to others who may be doing so. Taking such a stand does not mean that we are to put hindrances in the way of those with whom we cannot cooperate. It does prevent us, however, from assisting them in teachings or conduct that we believe are fundamentally in error.

John's Third Epistle

The third and last letter by the Apostle John was addressed to "the wellbeloved Gaius, whom," John said, "I love in the truth." (III John 1:1) In verses 3 and 4 he wrote, "I rejoiced greatly, when the brethren came and testified of the truth that is in thee, even as thou walkest in the truth. I have no greater joy than to hear that my children walk in truth."

John's reference to Gaius as one of his "children" indicates that the apostle was the one who had first

presented the Gospel to him. It was evidently under John's teaching that Gaius became one of the followers of Christ. The Apostle Paul had also used this affectionate manner of speech in referring to his "son" Timothy.—II Tim. 1:2

The immediate purpose of John's third epistle seems to have been to request Gaius' cooperation in caring, at least temporarily, for some brethren who were moving into the territory where he lived. (III John 1:5-8) John commended these brethren to Gaius very highly. According to tradition, Gaius was a wealthy man, and verse 6 indicates that he was using his resources faithfully to the glory of God.

An interesting sidelight appears in the letter. John explains that he had written to the church—evidently where Gaius attended—about the foregoing matter earlier, but he had received no reply. He blames this lack of interest on Diotrephes, "who loveth to have the preeminence among them."—vs. 9

John promised that if and when he came himself, he would remember Diotrephes' "deeds which he doeth, prating against us with malicious words: and not content therewith, neither doth he himself receive the brethren, and forbiddeth them that would, and casteth them out of the church."—vs. 10

Demetrius was evidently one of the leading brethren for whom John was seeking a place to reside. He assured Gaius that he was a brother having "good report of all men, and of the truth itself." Giving his personal recommendation, John said, "Ye know that our record is true." (vs. 12) Perhaps the important lesson of this epistle is the one stated by the Apostle Paul. In writing to the Hebrews he said, "Be not forgetful to entertain

strangers: for thereby some have entertained angels unawares.”—Heb. 13:2

The Epistle of Jude

This is another “general” epistle, since it is not addressed specifically to a certain congregation or individual. Jude, or Judas (not Iscariot), the brother of James, was one of the twelve apostles. His purpose in writing the epistle is stated in verse 3, which reads: “Beloved, when I gave all diligence to write unto you of the common salvation, it was needful for me to write unto you, and exhort you that ye should earnestly contend for the faith which was once delivered unto the saints.”

The reason Jude deemed it important to exhort the brethren to “earnestly contend for the faith” was the fact, as he then reveals, that “certain men crept in unawares, who were before of old ordained to this condemnation, ungodly men, turning the grace of our God into lasciviousness, and denying the only Lord God, and our Lord Jesus Christ.”—vs. 4

In his condemnation of these “ungodly men” who were mingling with the brethren, Jude uses language almost identical to that found in II Peter 2:1-19. Evidently he had been impressed with Peter’s arguments and felt he could do no better than to follow his line of reasoning and use the same Old Testament examples of ungodliness.

Some have endeavored to use Jude’s reference to “Sodom and Gomorrah” in verse 7 to prove the erroneous doctrine of torment in a fiery hell. He speaks of them as suffering “the vengeance of eternal fire.” However, this is poor reasoning. The “fire” referred to by Jude was not “hell-fire,” but the

literal fire which God caused to destroy those cities. (Gen. 19:24,25) The people of Sodom and Gomorrah were not tormented by it, but were destroyed, going into death.

These cities and their people, however, were not forever destroyed. Jesus taught that in the day of judgment it would be more tolerable for Sodom and Gomorrah than for the Jewish cities which rejected him. (Matt. 10:15) Sodom is mentioned by the Prophet Ezekiel, who gives assurance that her people will be restored to their “former estate.” —Ezek. 16:55

What, then, did Jude mean by saying that those cities suffered the “vengeance of eternal fire”? They were “set forth,” he says, “for an example.” Fire is used in the Scriptures to symbolize destruction, and everlasting destruction will be the punishment of all willful sinners. What Jude meant was that the Sodomites were used by the Lord as an illustration of those who will suffer everlasting death. Because both Ezekiel and Jesus clearly taught that they will be raised from the dead, we know that the Sodomites themselves were not everlastingly destroyed.

In verse 21 Jude says, “Keep yourselves in the love of God, looking for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ unto eternal life.” Then he adds, “And of some have compassion, making a difference.” (vs. 22) Throughout his short epistle, Jude is very outspoken against those who oppose the Truth. He spares no words of condemnation, but now he tempers his remarks with the admonition that the brethren should deal with the situation in keeping with the love and mercy of God. He realized that

there were some who had been ensnared by the devil and were not willful opposers of truth and of righteousness. So they were to make a difference, and endeavor to “save with fear” by pulling them “out of the fire,” those who gave the slightest evidence of wanting to do right.—Jude 23

Appropriately, in view of the subject matter discussed, Jude concludes his epistle by commending the brethren to God. “Now unto him that is able to keep you from falling, and to present you faultless before the presence of his glory with exceeding joy, To the only wise God our Saviour, be glory and majesty, dominion and power, both now and ever. Amen.”—vss. 24,25 ■