

## THE THIRD EPISTLE OF JOHN

### Introduction

*“Altogether this last glimpse of Christian life in the apostolic age is one on which the student may well linger. The state of things which is disclosed does not come near an ideal, but it witnesses to the freedom and vigour of a growing faith.”*

—B. F. Westcott

### Date

As in the case of 1 and 2 John, two general dates have been proposed. If John was writing from Jerusalem before the destruction of that city, a date in the 60's is likely. More commonly, scholars see the Letter as from a later period when John lived and served in Ephesus. Thus a date of 85–90 has been widely accepted.

### Background and Theme

The historical backdrop of this little Letter gives us a vivid glimpse into church life in the latter half of the first century.

With just a few concise strokes of the pen the apostle sketches in three characters: Gaius the hospitable and spiritual, Demetrius the commendable, and Diotrephes the self-seeking and unloving.

Diotrephes may illustrate the strong self-willed personality that can show up in *any* church structure. On the other hand, he may show the trend toward one elder gaining precedence and rule over a formerly equal eldership.

### Greetings

#### **3 John 1 The Elder, To the beloved Gaius, whom I love in truth: 2**

As in his Second Epistle, John speaks of himself as **the elder**. He addresses the Letter to the **beloved Gaius, whom** he loves **in truth**. 12

Although we do not know if this is the Gaius mentioned in Romans 16:23 or the one in Acts 20:4, it is surprising how much we do learn about him in these few verses. First of all, we gather that he was a much **beloved** believer, a man whose whole life commended him to his fellow Christians.<sup>22</sup>

#### **3 John 2 Beloved, I pray that you may prosper in all things and be in health, just as your soul prospers. 5**

But apparently he was not too well in body, since John wishes that his physical **health** might correspond to his spiritual vigor. 15

When John says **I pray that you may prosper in all things** it is doubtful that he is thinking of wealth or material prosperity. Rather he is speaking of physical well-being, as suggested by the next phrase—**and be in health**.<sup>25</sup>

Would we want *our* physical condition to correspond to our spiritual? Is it not sadly true that we take better care of our bodies than of our souls? 35

F. B. Meyer wryly remarked: “It would not be desirable to express the wish of verse 2 to all our friends, because if their bodies were to correspond to the condition of their souls, they would suddenly fall into ill-health.”<sup>45</sup>

Verse 2 flatly contradicts what is taught by many so-called “faith-healers.” They contend that all sickness is a result of sin in the life, and that if a person isn’t healed, it’s because of a lack of faith. This certainly wasn’t true in Gaius’ case. His spiritual condition was good, but his physical condition was not so good. This shows that one’s spiritual state cannot be argued from the bodily one. What are your thoughts?<sup>55</sup>

### **3 John 3 For I rejoiced greatly when brethren came and testified of the truth that is in you, just as you walk in the truth. 4**

It is good to have the truth in us but it is better to manifest the **truth** in our lives. 14

We should not only hold the truth, but allow the truth to hold us. 24

Men would rather see a sermon than hear one.<sup>34</sup>

Nothing counts more for God in an age of fact than a holy life.<sup>44</sup>

### **3 John 4 I have no greater joy than to hear that my children walk in truth. 4**

Perhaps most of us think of soul-winning as the greatest joy of the Christian life, and it is wonderful indeed to see men and women translated from the kingdom of darkness into the kingdom of the Son of His love. 14

But who can measure the heartache to see those who professed to be saved, returning to their former life; like a sow returning to her wallowing in the mire and a dog to its vomit. 24

On the other hand, what a thrill it is to see one’s spiritual children going on for the Lord, from grace to grace. 34