

Three Short Letters

In the New Testament, Philemon, 2 John and 3 John are probably the most read (and least understood) Scriptures. And they probably are the Scriptures that least affect us. Because they're so short, my guess is that we tend to read them often. And because they are so short, we probably don't reflect deeply on their text. And we probably suppose that we don't need to. Bible teachers say that 2,3 John are about hospitality, which in modern American society is almost meaningless, and that Philemon is about forgiveness. Well, maybe. But why are they here in the canon? There must be more to them. So we should look at them. Not verse-by-verse, but to grasp their message.

I. 2 John. This letter probably went to one of the churches ("the chosen lady") in what is now the western edge of Turkey, where John mostly ministered. It seems to be for the purpose of dealing with a situation that arose that needed apostolic input, viz., professing Christians who don't hold to Christ's teaching. Mostly though, John seems to be emphasizing what is central to following Christ to encourage the believers there ("her children") to stay focused. That is why we need to know this letter. We today especially need to stay focused because modernity has brought distractions galore into our lives.

We need to focus on the significance of love, truth, and obedience. Those are the three key words in this letter. Truth in this letter refers to Christ. Truth, in other words, is not an abstraction, but a Person. Everything and anything not related somehow to the Word of God is not true. Only what's biblical is truth. If I say it's raining, and it's raining, I have said something that's true in the sense that truth is what corresponds to reality. But there are also invisible truths, spiritual truths, and we can only know them by knowing Scripture. But more than that, the greatest reality that there is, is Jesus, a Person. "From Him, and through Him and to Him are all things" Paul wrote in Romans 11:36. So if we don't know Jesus, experientially, personally, intimately, we really don't know truth. We don't know what reality is. Our lives are spent chasing a lie. We can go further: Truth demands action! We cannot be passive and indifferent about truth, because if we are, we really don't believe truth. Truth is not only the Person of Christ, it's also all that He taught and commanded, not only in person in the four Gospels, but all that the N.T. writers gave us as Scripture. Therefore two things: (i) To know truth requires that we share it with others, that we serve it, that we apply it to our life – indeed, that we live it. If we allow distractions to keep us from living out truth, we're really serving a lie, which is wasting a life. And (ii) It's not easy to be a follower of Christ! But God called us to it and empowered us with His Spirit to enable it. We can do it if we want to. We MUST continue in the teachings of Christ (verse 9).

"Walk in love" (v.6c) means to walk in Christ. The indwelling Christ will love with His transcendent love through us if we're yielded to Him. Love isn't merely an emotion, a sentiment. In movies or on TV it is almost always only that, and if we walk in love there may be an affective component. But love is as love *does*. Love does righteousness. Love suffers loss for the sake of others, that others may be blessed or helped with respect to some need. Love is selfless, in other words. Paul wrote 1 Corinthians 13 to help us understand what love is. Jesus willingly suffered rejection by His own people, humiliation and the agonizing pain of flogging and the death of crucifixion so that we can receive pardon and eternal life and blessing from God. We're to have that same mindset. If we're absorbed with ourselves and our own needs and wants, we cannot walk in love. There needs to be cooperation; if we want to love others as Jesus did, Jesus through His Spirit will enable us to do that.

Obedience is at the center of this letter, "And this is love: that we walk in obedience to His commands" (v. 6a). He commanded us to walk in love. He commanded more, but walking in love is critical. If we know Jesus, we will love Jesus. So if we're in a personal relationship with Him, we'll love Him and His love will flow out of us to others. Out of gratitude to Him, we'll study His teachings and commands so that we do them. Obedience is not merely an option for those who want to go deeper into the Christian life. And obedience does not mean we're engaging in works salvation. And for us today, this especially: Attending church meetings does not substitute for obedience. Obedience to the words of Christ is a necessary component of faith, that is, of salvation. Think about it! To believe Christ *means* to obey Him. This may be why John wrote this short but compelling letter.

There's something else here, easily missed. In verse 4, John writes, "It has given me great joy to find some of your children walking in the truth . . ." Some! Not all? John is anticipating here what became a huge problem that Augustine recognized a couple of centuries later, a vast professing church within which only some gave evidence of walking in the truth, of love and obedience to Christ. Thus John writes verse 8, "Watch out that you do not lose what you have worked for . . ." Hey! Do we today even *know* what the teachings of Christ are?

II. 3 John. The purpose of this letter isn't clear. It may be here anticipating the warnings in the Book of Revelation, Chapters 2 and 3. It seems to have been provoked by the emergence in one of the churches of a self-absorbed person who sought to be preeminent at the expense of the Apostle John. He was pre-empting the authority of John by his own self-importance. This was in opposition to what Christ had ordained, viz., apostolic authority. (Apostolic authority today is the writings they gave us, namely, the New Testament.) Worse, he was acting as an arrogant tyrant, clearly not in love or humility. The lesson for us is, beware arrogating authority or power in the local body, but instead be submitted to the Word of Christ, that is, the N.T. Scriptures. In the church, there is to be peace and unity. John may have had in mind in penning this letter Jesus' teaching, "The greatest among you will be your servant. For whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted" (Matthew 23:11,12). Christ's will is for the assembly to be a radically new, unique entity, without hierarchical organization, of which He is the head. There's not to be in the Church anyone who lusts for power over others, who's proud, and self-seeking. The issue is not whether that person is saved (only God knows that). Such persons may suppose they are leading the local church (John seems here to be anticipating the emergence of a clergy), but if their character and behavior isn't Christ-like, they are condemned phonies.

III. Philemon. What a lovely letter this is! I suspect that's one reason why it's in the canon. The purpose of the letter is evident from the text. Paul more than pleads for Philemon to express grace toward Onesimus, he practically demands it. Yet he does it in a way that expresses love. Paul makes it very plain, Philemon received grace, so now Philemon is to show grace too. We can't read this personal, situational letter of Paul's, without realizing that we too must pursue lives of grace. Never mind cultural norms, and never mind society's rules of justice. Grace. That's how Paul opens this letter (v. 3) and closes it (v. 25). Once more, because it is *that* important: grace *must* characterize our lives. Yet, I suspect that there's something else here. It's between the lines, not explicit. It's this, the life of a follower of Christ is to be spent serving Christ. Onesimus the slave of Philemon became the slave of Christ. Although he had to go back to Philemon, he would be going back as a servant of Christ.

What give Paul's words, indeed, his entire plea, is the fact that he had brought Philemon to Christ as well as Onesimus. Paul expended his life evangelizing, planting churches, serving Christ. And so much of the New Testament is Pauline because his life is there as an example to us for how we should live. There's nothing higher in life that we can do, there's no way to make our life count more, than by serving Christ by sharing our faith.

Notice v. 6. What Paul writes is ambiguous. It could be, "that the fellowship [*koinonia*] of your faith may become effective in the knowledge of every good thing that's ours in Christ." Or it could perhaps better be translated putting the second clause first, thus: That the knowing or understanding of all that's ours in Christ *leads to* fellowship in our faith. Why did Paul include this? It subtly serves as an inducement to Philemon to be kind and forgiving when Onesimus appears. But more to the point: In Paul's thinking, fellowship, which is at the very heart of the Gospel, is closely connected with our having spiritual understanding. Spiritual understanding is something we all should greatly desire. And fellowship in love and unity is what God greatly desires in us. However the translation should be, Paul is saying this because it requires effort on our part. Neither fellowship nor spiritual knowledge comes automatically. We are to actively pursue spiritual maturity in our lives, because that's what the Gospel is all about.

But something else is here; it's not explicit but worth pondering. Paul was a prisoner of the pagan Emperor. Onesimus was a slave to Philemon. Which is worse, being a prisoner or a slave? Aren't both of these injustices? The Emperor who imprisoned Paul was really both prisoner and slave of Satan. Yet Paul and Onesimus were free, but voluntarily becoming servants of Christ. And Philemon was being tested: would he show kindness and grace to Onesimus, as a follower and servant of Christ would do, or would Philemon follow the prevailing culture and punish Onesimus, revealing he too was enslaved to Satan. Justice is Christ. Only in the risen, ascended Christ is there justice for anyone. As we lovingly and obediently live out the life of Christ and faithfully serve Him by proclaiming the Gospel, we reveal to the world what justice is. Otherwise, no one would ever know. And not knowing, remain enslaved forever to sin and self and Satan.

Two issues common to these three letters. It's really in all Scripture, but the brevity of these three makes it so much easier to recognize. First is the authority that God's Word has over us. "Authority" means we are obliged to do what it says, or else. God has delegated His authority to His Word. Scripture – whether penned by John or Paul or whomever – is really God Himself speaking to us. Shall we tell God, "No, I'm not interested, nor disposed to do as you command"? Shall we be like Adam in the Garden? A profession of faith notwithstanding, are we on the side of good, or on the side of evil? Two, the apostles' concern is how we live and what kind of person we are. That is central and critical to the Gospel. May we have a fresh understanding of our calling by knowing Christ and His teachings, and serving Christ as He commanded.