

# Letters

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## Letters

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### Letters Are Reminders

We all experience the pleasure don't we of receiving a letter from a family member or a friend. And the first thing I do when I receive something like that is to look straight to the bottom and say, "who is it from?" and when I know who it's from then I can visualise them writing it and maybe even hear them as I go through the words. Now Myra sent me a nice letter, and she went a little bit further than she needed to: she reminded me that I was coming down here today, and then she ended up by saying, 'we very much look forward to seeing you and sister Hillary and wish you a safe journey down and back to your home'. Thank you. So it's nice, isn't it, when someone says something like that because it sort of seems warm and comforting and close and personal.

Letters can be a great source of comfort, can't they and encouragement, because they often display to you that somebody cares. Someone cares enough to remember us and share their thoughts with us, especially when we feel a bit down perhaps and life seems almost too much. Letters can help to brighten us up and restore our faith if this is ebbing a little and because we value these moments, it also reminds us that we can be a great help to others if we think about them and care about them and send them a letter or a note, and particularly when there unwell or in need of that special care. And so it surely for this reason that the letters in the New Testament have been preserved, so that we can learn from them, for whilst they may have been written with a specific purpose in mind, to an individual or to an eclesia in the first century, they still have a relevance, don't they, to all the faithful believers down through the centuries.

We have the letters, for example, to the churches in Revelation, with some having words of reprimand, and others giving praise for their faithfulness, and these are reminders again, aren't they that collectively, we can be a source of strength and encouragement to each other, or we can have the opposite effect can't we, we can be negative in the things that we say and the things we do, particularly with those we have close contact with, and so we need to remember, don't we, if you're going to say something negative, don't, if it's positive, carry

on. Jesus in these letters says that he's aware of our circumstances. Sometimes perhaps he's sad to see our faults, as we see in those letters in Revelation. At other times he's aware of our deeds, our good thoughts, our perseverance, and so we need to be aware of the fact that Jesus, I think probably knows us better than we know ourselves, and also reminds us of the way we can have influence on others.

### Letters Can Lead to Good

Well, this is very evident, isn't it, from the readings over this week, and particularly from Ezra and also in The Acts, when we read of some very specific and personal letters that were being sent to and fro. Now we won't look all these letters, but I just put some down like Ezra four Rehum and Shimshai, they wrote a letter to King Artaxerxes, a very negative letter. They said, Well, you've got to try and stop these people rebuilding and carrying on with the work in Jerusalem, this has always been a city that's ready to revolt and cause problems and you've got to stop it. And when Artaxerxes received that letter, he thought about it thought yes maybe you're right, so he sends a letter back, and says, no, you've got to stop this work straight away. The next chapter, chapter five, another letter being goes back to the King again, to say so well, we know you've told us to stop, but don't forget that Cyrus the king was the one who made the decree, which cannot be broken under Persian law, that this rebuilding should go ahead. So they turn up the annals and look through things and say, well is this correct and they find that it *is* correct, and so a letter comes back again, saying, right, well carry on with the work. And so we see this sort of quite nice dialogue going on to and fro, and of course, the king, when he then realises that the work *should* carry on, goes that extra bit further and he sends gold and silver and instructions and extra money from the treasury to help them with the work.

Then, of course, we could flick to Nehemiah, and so we've got the king now Artaxerxes, we know that he saw Nehemiah and asked him why he was so sad and he said, well, I'm sad because all these people have gone back to do this building work, many years have now passed, another I think it's ten or thirteen years or something, and it's not really going on as you should be, and the king says, well if I send you there, will you come back? And he said, oh yes, I will come back. So he then sends a letter with Nehemiah to the regional governors on the way through, saying make sure this man has safe passage, and you also sent a letter to Asaph, who was the keeper of the king's forest and said, well, if they need any timber and any trees, then you must cut them down from the royal forests and give them to him. So between this going and coming of correspondence and letters, good finally comes out of it.

### Other Examples of Letters

#### David's

But of course, letters are not always good, are they, I mean, if we think about David, for example, I mean, he sent a letter to Joab, which was true poison, wasn't it saying, you know, put Uriah in the front of the battle and make sure he gets killed, and the reason for that, of course, was David's adultery with Bathsheba.

### **Jezebel's**

Jezebel. She wrote a nasty letter, and she didn't even do it in her own name, she did it in the name of Ahab, and she wrote to the elders and the nobles, didn't she, and said well, sit next to Naboth and then afterwards say that he's been blaspheming and so on, and then take him out and kill him. The objective, of course, was to give Ahab Naboth's Vineyard, so that wasn't a very nice letter.

### **Jehu**

Jehu, he wrote to Ahab's sons to encourage them to fight for their inheritance on the throne of Israel. And of course, all these little bits and pieces all through here are letters that were sent, it's not *just* a historical record, although, of course it does turn out to be that in the end, we're talking about people sitting down, getting the scribe, writing a letter, saying things that they mean.

### **Sennacherib, Mordecai and Lycius**

Like Sennacherib, he sent a letter to Hezekiah and told him about his intentions to invade and capture Jerusalem, which of course, didn't happen. And then Mordecai at the time of Esther, he sent letters to the Jews in 127 provinces with words of goodwill and assurances and then to establish Purim which, of course, was in recognition of the saving of the Jews. And then yesterday well, in The Acts of the Apostles, we read that a letter was sent by Lycius to the governor Felix, who we've been reading about this morning, transferring Paul to Caesarea from Jerusalem. And ultimately, we know that this letter, which was taking Paul away, because there were plots to kill him in Jerusalem, was actually the first step in Paul going to Rome as he was told, that's where he would stand for the truth.

## **2 John**

So if you take any of these, letters are all about communication, aren't they. And obviously we hope that any letters we receive or we send, are written carefully and thoughtfully so they will be a pleasure to the recipient. Well we have two very good examples of this, two personal letters that John wrote and we're going to turn to those in the second, one was to a chosen lady and her children, which could be a family, or it could be a reference to some in the ecclesia. And the other letter was sent to Gaius, who was also a believer and probably a Roman, because that is a Roman name. So if we go to the second of John and chapter one, this is the letter which was sent to the chosen lady. It's a short letter, but it's quite a nice letter and it has some nice connotations. The second of John chapter one, verse one.

The elder to the chosen lady and her children, whom I love in the truth. Not I only, but also all who know the truth because of the truth which lives in us and will be with us forever. Grace, mercy and peace from God, the Father and from Jesus Christ the Father's son, will be with us in truth and love. It has given me great joy to find some of your children walking in the truth, just as the Father commanded us.

Now we can imagine this person receiving this letter and what an automatic glow would come, would she have done what I do and look straight to the bottom and thought, oh, this is from John, ah that's good, oh, he's so in love with the truth and he recognises the truth in us and what a nice lovely warm sort of feeling that is. And then, of course, he expresses his great joy.

It's given me *great* joy to find some of your children walking in the truth, just as the Father commanded us. And now, dear lady, I'm not writing to you a new command, but one we have had from the beginning

Yes, a lovely, warm letter, one that would be nice to receive. John loves them because he saw that the truth lives in them and says how they give him great joy because they walk in the truth. Yeah, he was interested in *that*, he wasn't interested in other things was he, he was just interested in the love which they had, the truth which they were upholding. And then we see in verse 12 that he says,

I've got a lot to write to you about...

And we can imagine, he's in full flow here and, there's so much I need to write to you, but no, I'd like to come and see you face to face it says

... but instead I hope to visit you and talk with you so that your joy, our joy, may be complete.

### **What Would John Write to Us?**

So I suppose the question to all of us is that if John was going to write us a short letter, would he be able to do the same to us? Would you be able to say, well, I know that everything you do is motivated by the love of the truth, and that of course, really, when we boil it down, is all about our interaction with people in the truth, with people outside the truth, whether they also would be able to recognise that this love of the truth is there. And sometimes that can be expressed with little things can't it, it doesn't have to be great big issues, it could be just little points here and there, which shows us that that's the way it is. And as we mature in the truth. So the Christ-like characteristics which are mentioned, should be there, and they should be there to show to each other the type of person we are. And of course, at the end of the day, just as John spoke about his love for the lady and her children, and he mentions the same in the next letter, so we realise that love, pure love, is so important and has many attributes which we should follow and of course, I thought immediately of the first Corinthians thirteen. It's quite a well known few verses, and I suppose as much as anything, it really came to a lot of people's knowledge because of the death of Diana, because it was read at that funeral, and I'm sure a lot of people we're very interested in following that service. First Corinthians 13 verse 4, now this is the sort of love that we're talking about:

Love is patient

so easy to be impatient, isn't it?

Love is kind

so easy to be unkind.

It does not envy. It does not boast. It's not proud. It's not rude. It's not self-seeking. It's not easily angered. It keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil, but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres

and those characteristics there, were the ones of course, which John was able to recognise in those that he sent these short letters to. These are the traits of character that should be there with true believers in love. And of course, in turn, that is a reflection, isn't it, of God to Jesus, and Jesus to us, and then us to each other. And if we can't show that degree of love and that aspect of love with those things well then really, we're doing them a disservice, aren't we? And of course, this love and this trust in the truth and all that it means, is what's underpinning the emblems, which is why we meet to remember Jesus in this way.

So I can say this is one of the reasons that Hillary and I like coming to Brighton, because of your faithfulness, you keep going, you're together, you need each other and you can still be a great source of strength and encouragement to other people, although sometimes you might feel well, we've got little to contribute now, we're just a small group down here in Brighton, we meet in this little house and you may feel well, all we can do is persevere and just keep going. But that's a great encouragement because other people recognise that *that's* what you're doing, and that's great, and you should be encouraged to know that others see it in that way.

### 3 John

Now when we come to the next letter of John, which is his third letter, we see from the first verse there, that he's now writing to a very dear friend. Well I was thinking about that and, we've got lots of friends haven't we? We've got friends all over the country, we can go abroad to a distant land: Canada, Australia, Ghana, India, and we can be met by somebody who we don't even know, we've never met, we don't know anything about them, and instantly we are *real friends*. And we're real friends because of the truth, because our love of the truth, because we've got the same outlook, we're going to the same point, and that's great. Verse 2:

Dear friend,...

So straight away the recipients say, that's lovely, this is a letter from John and he's my friend, and he's telling me that I'm his friend as well, that's good.

Dear friend, I pray that you may enjoy good health...

Well, we pray that for everyone, don't we

...and that all may go well with you even as your soul is getting along well. It gave me great joy...

what gave him great joy?

...to have some brothers come and tell about your faithfulness

did Gaius realise that, they probably didn't, and then someone comes along and they say to John, hey, we were with Gaius last week or last month and his faith strong, he's really firm in the truth, and it's lovely, and John is really overjoyed with this:

It gave me great joy to have some brothers come and tell me about your faithfulness to the truth and how you continue to walk in the truth. I have no greater joy than to hear that my children are walking in the truth. Dear friend, you are faithful in what you are doing for the brothers, even though they are strangers to you.

He's making the point here isn't he, that he's faithful to the brothers who he doesn't know. They're strangers, they're in another country, they're in another part of the country, they're somewhere else, but nevertheless they are encouraged by the faithfulness and others elsewhere realise that his faithfulness is exceptionally strong for him. Another heartwarming introduction, isn't it, of this short letter to Gaius, and again it ends with him wishing to be able to come and see him, he wants to be in his company, and we need each other, don't we, we need sometimes to be in each other's company, to be encouraged and to feel wanted and to be friends and also to be able to share our feelings about the truth and so on, with each other.

### **Be Clear**

Well, of course, we mustn't forget, must we, that there can be problems with letters, I think more so with emails and texts which tend to be short and to the point and can often be misunderstood. Words on a piece of paper can sometimes, make one question, well what is this message? and so we need to be very clear, don't we, when we're writing, and it just reminds us how careful we need to be in our contact with one another and our communications. But clearly John loves his dear friend Gaius, and no doubt mutual respect existed due to the close bond of fellowship between them, which, like the lady and her children, was based on love for the things of the truth.

John prayed that Gaius might have good health, and that is our prayer for each other isn't it, but it does go to remind us, doesn't it, that we must be thankful for each new day, the here-and-now is important, not yesterday or tomorrow, because we've got to show demonstrate our love for the truth, today, which takes me, of course, to my favourite verse in the Psalms:

This is the day the Lord has made. Let us rejoice and be glad in it.

Sometimes when we wake up in the morning, and we feel a bit grumpy or something, maybe we've got to remind ourselves about that, and think, hang on a minute this is another day, God's given you another day, now rejoice, be glad, think of good positive things rather than let the weather get you down or something like that. So, like John, we have great pleasure in seeing and hearing of others who are steadfastly walking in obedience in the truth, because we're very pleased for *them* aren't we, and also it gives us encouragement, to be zealous in our following as well, and so it was with Gaius. Now John's letter ends with a statement

peace to you

This of course, is the peace of mind we have in knowing that our lives are not spent in vain, it's not just a waste of time, we're not just trying to go from birth to death with no purpose and just let the whole thing go by. We have a 'peace of mind' knowing that there is a purpose in our lives. And in John 14, The Gospel of John 14 and verse 27, Jesus says:

peace I leave with you, my peace I give you

### **Be at Peace**

And that's what should be in our minds isn't it, Jesus said he left this almost like a deposit. I'm going to leave you with this peace, not peace in a worldly sense, because many people don't have that, and particularly in foreign countries. But this peace of knowing. And of course, I think if we go back to the very first verse of chapter 14, this says it all really:

Do not let your hearts be troubled, trust in God, trust also in me

Jesus said. So we need that trust, don't we, we need to display that trust, and of course, it's really all bound-up in the emblems, isn't it, because we're here because, yes we *do* trust God, we *do* trust Jesus, we *are* looking forward to Jesus' return, we know that the promises will be brought about, and everything that we stand for, in their faithfulness to the truth, is all, quite simply, etched in these two emblems of the bread on the wine.

And of course, we're going to now partake of those symptoms. With us just sitting here in this little room together, just a little flock, it sort of reminded me really of that upper room when they had that last supper together. It must have been a very touching moment, I know Judas was still there at the beginning, nevertheless they were there. They didn't fully understand, did they, what was going on and what was going to happen, but we *do* fully understand, we understand what happened, we understand what this bread and this wine means, and we understand what it is symbolic of, for the future.

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