

# James Philip Bible Readings

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THE BOOK of 2 John

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## **THE BOOK of 2 John**

**1) /**

It should become clear as we read this epistle that John's exhortations in it are consistent with the doctrines he has unfolded in the first epistle, and their inevitable expression and outcome. As the theme in the first epistle is fellowship with the Father and with the Son, here it is the practical outcome of that fellowship, in fellowship with one another. The first problem is to identify 'the elect lady'. There are two main schools of thought about this, one that it is a specific individual lady of his acquaintance that John refers to, the other that the reference is to a particular church of which John had the oversight. Some thought should surely make it clear that the latter is the more likely interpretation. For one thing, John's language in 1, 2 seems to be more appropriate with reference to a fellowship than to an individual. Furthermore, it is scarcely likely that he would speak of love for an individual as a commandment (5). Also, if we were to take John as writing to an individual, we would require to think of 'the elect lady' as having a large family of children, 'some of whom' (4) were walking in the truth, others not. It is also pointed out by commentators that John makes a transition from the second person singular (4, 5) to the plural in 6, 8 and 10, and this would seem to suggest that it is a community rather than an individual that he has in mind. All these factors, coupled with the thought of such references as 1 Peter 5:13 - 'She who is at Babylon' - where Peter obviously refers to a fellowship of believers, not an individual, make it highly probable, if not almost certain, that John is referring in this epistle to some local fellowship of Christians, probably in Asia.

**2) 1:1-2**

We should pay very close attention to the phrase John uses in 1 - 'love in the truth'. There is a whole theology involved in the phrase. What it teaches us is that truth - the truth of God and of the gospel - is the external, objective bond that binds believers together. This is the real common ground in Christian fellowship. It is not a question of like being drawn to like, and this is never what the New Testament means by fellowship. It is easy to feel drawn to those with whom we feel natural affinity or compatibility, when tastes, temperaments or cultural interests coincide, but this is far from the biblical conception of membership in the body of Christ, in which truth is the bond that binds us together, and begets love in our hearts for one another. Christian love is ever founded on Christian truth. This is something which it is of the first importance to keep in mind, particularly in relation to the constant concern which the Church is showing today for unity. We must realise, in our preoccupation with the ecumenical movement, that compromise of the truth for the sake of unity can never lead to unity, for love, which is the only possible basis for unity among believers, is begotten by truth, and when the eternal truth of the gospel is held at a discount, love is diminished and the very possibility of unity fades from sight. If it were realised that it is not possible to love in the Christian sense except 'in the truth', a great deal of misplaced zeal and earnestness might be avoided, and a more realistic and hopeful basis for discussion would be established.

**3) 1:2-3**

John's benedictory greeting in 3 reads very like Paul's in most of his epistles, but there is a significant difference that is obscured by the AV rendering. The Greek verb translated 'be' is in the future tense, and should read, 'grace, mercy and peace will be with you'. It is not so much a prayer that John utters, as an affirmation and an assurance. One cannot but feel that John is implying that when hearts are bound together by the bond of truth, grace and mercy and peace - aye, and all other rich blessings that God bestows upon His people - will be ours. This is very wonderful, and it bears witness to the central and supreme importance of holding the truth and holding to it, in Christian life. We may recall the words of the Psalmist, 'Thou hast magnified Thy Word above all Thy name' (Psalm 138:2), and realise that everything is imperilled when divine, revealed truth is assailed or brushed aside. As if to confirm this John adds at the end of 3 the words 'in truth and love'. This both safeguards against any loveless advocacy of the truth (cf Paul's words speaking the truth in love' (Ephesians 4:15) in which harshness, arrogance or censoriousness, because they are the antithesis of love, turn the truth of God into a lie; and also combines in a striking way the 'tests' John applies in the first epistle, truth - true believing, and love - true living. Finally, listen to the music of eternity in John's description of our Lord - the Son of the Father. With sublime simplicity John emphasises the mystery of the Godhead in these words, implicitly challenging the heretics' denial of Christ's deity and incarnation. Doctrine (truth) is never very far from John's mind, even in the most practical of exhortations!

**4) 1:4-6**

John's expression of thanksgiving is real though guarded in 4, for the wording of the sentence implies that not all the members of the fellowship were walking in the truth, and the news he has received concerning them would account in part at least for his writing this epistle to them. The additional phrase, 'as we have received a commandment from the Father' serves to remind us that 'walking in truth' is not, as the heretics maintained, an intellectual matter, but moral, and associated with keeping the commandments of God. Since this is so, we must understand that to fall into error is not merely a misfortune, but also sin, and not simply something to be deplored but repented of. But John does not only emphasise the truth; he links it, as we have already seen, with love. Together, truth and love form the great commandment which, as John twice emphasises in these verses, is from the beginning. The reference is probably to 'the faith once delivered to the saints', and speaks of the 'givenness' of the message of the gospel. No one therefore has any kind of right to use the Christian name for a system of teaching that evacuates it of its original meaning and content. This is something we would do well to remember today, when some theologians are intent on using the great words of the faith - atonement, reconciliation, resurrection - to express ideas that are often the exact antithesis of all that the apostles meant by these words. We should thank God for the once-for-all 'givenness' of the truth of God, and hold to it with all our hearts.

We may find ourselves asking once more, 'Can faith and love be commanded, then, that John should speak like this about them?' Again we must answer: In the biblical sense, yes. To love is a command, for it is to be undertaken by deliberate choice. It is the adoption of a certain attitude to others, as we saw in our studies in the first epistle. So it is also with faith, which is never to be thought of (in its biblical sense) as something that mysteriously develops in some people who happen to be made that way (it is this kind of misunderstanding that leads to the idea that being unable to believe is almost a constitutional or temperamental defect instead of a sin to be repented of) but rather as the obedience we give to the summons of God. Paul's response on the Damascus Road makes this abundantly clear, 'Lord, what wilt Thou have me to do?' God commands us to have faith, as He commands us to repent (Acts 17:30), and to love (John 15:17), and not to do so is disobedience, and therefore sin. A great deal of confusion would have been avoided if the Church had been more faithful to this biblical emphasis, and taught the true nature of the issues that the gospel presents to men. We should be grateful to John for rescuing the message of grace from the mystical, non-ethical misunderstandings of it that prevailed in his day (and are alas even more rife in our own!) and for so underlining its basic moral summons to our consciences and wills.

**5) 1:7**

In contrast to the previous verses, John now refers to the false teachers that were troubling the Church. 'Entered into' would be better rendered 'have gone out into'. The meaning is either that these deceivers had gone out from among the true believers, or that they had gone out on mission for anti-Christ. Commentators seem to favour the latter interpretation, and the meaning in this case would be that they had been claimed and commissioned by the prince of darkness to go out into the world as apostles of evil and destruction. This idea finds expression also in the Book of Revelation, where the trinity of evil - the dragon, the beast and the false prophet - 'apes' the Holy Trinity and parodies the gospel. The refusal to acknowledge that Christ has come in the flesh refers to the Corinthian heresy which is so much the subject matter of the first epistle. Here, the verb 'is come' is in form a present participle, and the commentators stress that this indicates the Incarnation to be not only an event in history, but 'an abiding truth', emphasising the permanent union of the divine and human natures in the person of the Son. The indefinite articles 'a' and 'an' are mistranslations in the AV, and would read 'the'. It is the arch-deceiver himself who is behind such a denial (see 1 John 2:18, 22, 26).

**6) 1:8-9**

The 'we' in 8 should read 'ye' throughout the verse. It is they, not the apostles, who were in danger of losing their reward. This thought is echoed elsewhere in the New Testament -1 John 2:28; 1 Corinthians 3:15; Revelation 3:11. (For the idea of full reward, see the parable of the sower - some thirty, some sixty, some an hundredfold). The thought is of course, not of winning or losing salvation, which is the free gift of God, but of reward for faithful service, in terms of our Lord's words in Matthew 25:21. In 9, the word translated 'transgressed' in the AV literally means 'goeth ahead' or (NEB) 'runs ahead too far'. The idea is that the heretics had 'advanced' so far in their 'avant-garde' views that they had left the truth of God, nay God Himself, behind. This is a timely warning to those in our own day who are so concerned to be 'with it' theologically that they have left the 'faith once delivered to the saints' far behind, and no longer 'abide' in the doctrine of Christ. It will not do to hold that such 'advance' is a necessary and desired evidence of the leading on of the Spirit Who, Christ promised, would lead us on into all truth, for the Spirit of Christ will never lead men away from the 'truth as it is in Jesus', which truth is ever anchored to the Scriptures and to the historic events of the Incarnation, Atonement and Resurrection. How could anything that denies these centralities of the Faith be of God, or inspired by His Spirit? The Church would be wise to heed John's words in 9 and learn to call the modern, bizarre ideas circulating in the 'new-look' theology of our day by their proper name.

**7) 1:10-11**

These verses have given rise to much heart-searching and dispute, some going so far as to repudiate John's teaching altogether. This, however, is not a helpful attitude, for as Alford says, we are not at liberty to set aside direct ethical injunctions of the Lord's apostles in this manner. Stott very helpfully suggests three things that need to be borne in mind in a balanced interpretation of John's words. In the first place, John is referring to teachers of false doctrines, not merely to those who have been taken in by them. There is nothing said about not entertaining people with wrong views. In the second place, John may well have in mind, not private hospitality at all, but an official welcome given to such teachers into the fellowship. If we think of this in such modern terms as opening our pulpits to a Mormon or Jehovah Witness evangelist, we may be near what John has in mind. In the third place, John has in mind a particular kind of heretic, one who denies the Incarnation, whom he has already designated in 7 as 'the deceiver and the anti-Christ'. These three considerations make it plain that John is very far from suggesting or advocating that we must withdraw from and ostracise anyone who does not happen to agree with us on some minor point of doctrine or interpretation. If we still think he seems harsh, we should remember that where the honour and glory of Christ and His gospel are at stake, tolerance, not intolerance, is the real sin. It is a Christian duty to be intolerant of anything that attacks the very heart of the gospel.

**8) 1:12-13**

How wise and human John is in 12! He knows, as we also know, that there are things that cannot be said adequately except face to face. We received a letter some time ago advocating a personal interview not so much that there were things that needed to be said face to face as that the things that were written would be more accurately and unmistakably said in fellowship. The letter added these words. 'The paper never smiles'. This is, at least in part, John's meaning here. How easy to misunderstand the tone of something that is written, even when several exclamation marks are added to indicate that you are smiling as you write, and have a twinkle in your eye! Not only so: fellowship by letter, though real and blessed (as we see expressed in 13) is a poor second-best to fellowship between persons face to face. Only when we meet can our joy be full. In this sense the separation of believers from one another, through the exigencies of Christian service and the providence of God, though sometimes hard to bear (the Scriptures recognise the reality of loneliness for Christ's sake), illustrates the longing in the hearts of believers for the coming of the King; as Paul says in 2 Corinthians 5:6, while we are at home in the body we are absent from the Lord. And the joy that we experience when believer meets believer after protracted absence is simply a reflection of the incomparably greater joy that will be ours when Christ returns and we shall see Him face to face. This is the ultimate beatitude for all who love Him, and all privation of whatever kind, and all pain, will be more than compensated when we are 'present with the Lord'.