

# A letter to a sister

by: Jeffrey Brett

## 2 John

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### Greeting the elect lady

The second epistle of John is addressed to 'the elect lady', but it gives us no intimation as to who she was. There are some who suggest that this could read: 'To Kyria the elect', making the Greek word for lady a proper noun. Whether this is the case or not, this is the only epistle in the New Testament that is written to a woman. This gives it a peculiar force, as we shall see. She is warned against receiving in any way those who did not bring a true doctrine of Christ.

The author's name is not mentioned, as is true of the first and the third epistle, but there is no doubt that the Apostle John is the writer. The style is identical with the Gospel of John, which does bear his name. It is remarkable that John does not mention his name in his writings apart from the Revelation where he names himself in the first chapter. I think we can understand this when we consider the subject of John's Gospel and letters is to bring before us the glory of the Lord Jesus Christ. God revealed in One who is no less than 'the Son of the Father' (2 John 1:3). So the human writer is not noticed in the glory of that Person.

For any who would serve the Lord Jesus in ministering to His people, this is a good example to follow. In speaking or writing of Him, whose glory is far above every other, we need to lose sight of ourselves. It is not that there have not been many faithful servants of Christ, and, indeed there still are, but let it never be that we give more attention to the servant than we do to the Master. The writer of this epistle gloried simply in the fact that he was 'the disciple whom Jesus loved' (John 13:23; 19:26; 20:2; 21:7,20); not suggesting in any way that he was loved more than the others, but that he had a deep impression of the love of Christ for himself.

This second epistle of John is really an appendix of the first. It seems to be a private letter to a certain lady and her family. It has been included by the Spirit of God in the pages of Scripture, because it supplies very needful instruction that is not found anywhere else in the Bible. The fact that it is to a woman is remarkable when we consider that, in Eastern lands, women are often looked down upon, as is still the case. But in Christianity women are given their true place in the sight of God and, as such, are expected to maintain the truth of God just as much as men are. The idea that 'I am only a

woman' is no excuse! If this standard is expected of a woman, how vital that all of us give attention to it!

### Defending the truth

In verses 1 and 2 great emphasis is laid upon truth: 'The elder unto the elect lady and her children, whom I love in the truth; and not I only, but also all they that have known the truth; for the truth's sake, which dwelleth in us, and shall be with us for ever'. This epistle gives us instructions as to how we should act in the defence of the truth. The first thing mentioned is about Christian relationships and affections. It is necessary that they are based on the truth and are controlled by it. John tells us in his first epistle that 'we are in Him that is true' (1 John 5:20). This is because we have been born of God. This has given us a nature, which will express itself in actions that are according to truth. The word of God teaches us that everything in our lives should be controlled by the truth that is in us as born of God. It is important that in our families and in all our relationships with men and women, this relationship is based on the truth of God. We need to love 'in the truth'. Often our love may be mere sentiment. But if we love a person 'in the truth', we will seek that that person will be blessed by the truth as we have been. If we apply this standard, it will make a great difference to the sort of persons we associate with and make our friends. We can love all people, but this is to try to bring them to a knowledge of the Lord Jesus as their Saviour.

The love that John bore to the elect lady and her children had its origin in the truth, but it also found expression 'for the truth's sake'. The world is full of error and delusion, so we may have to suffer for the truth's sake. Here it is not a question of suffering for the truth, but loving for the sake of the truth. So our love must be sincere and without partiality, which is so natural to us, but it must also be intolerant of evil, because truth and error can never go on together.

## The Holy Spirit

The Holy Spirit is not actually mentioned in this short epistle, but He is implied in the words about the truth 'which dwelleth in us'. We are told in the first epistle that 'the Spirit is truth' (1 John 5:6), so it is by the Spirit that the truth abides in us. The Holy Spirit does not speak from Himself but always seeks to glorify the Lord Jesus. He does this by making the truth subjectively real in us. It is an immense privilege and a preservative, that every Spirit indwelt believer has the truth dwelling in him. So in an evil world it is not a matter of intelligence or intellect by which we are preserved from the error that is all around us. But the truth being made good in us by the Holy Spirit will give us a spiritual instinct so that we can detect the evil. Sadly most of the wrong teaching that has come into Christendom has been brought there by so-called intellectual men, but many simple and earnest believers have been preserved and kept true to Christ. We may not always be able to quote Scripture and verse when confronted with error, although it is good when we can, but sometimes we just feel that it is not right. I think this is the Holy Spirit working in our lives.

## Christ is always the test

Not only does the truth dwell in us, but it 'shall be with us for ever'. Christ is the truth objectively. Remember He said in John 14:6, 'I am the way, the truth, and the life'. When the Lord Jesus came into this world, He brought grace and truth in a way that it had never been seen before (John 1:17). The truth of God in all its completeness was seen in Him and shone forth on every one that came into His presence. It not only revealed how sinful man was, but also the grace of God that had come forth in Him and was available to those who had faith in Him. As Christians we shall never be separated from the Lord Jesus, so the truth that is in Him will be with us for ever.

His being the truth makes Him the test for everything. The more we learn of Him and the words that He spoke, the more we shall be able to detect what is error. Also all the error of which Satan is the originator is aimed either directly or indirectly at the Lord Jesus. So we can understand that in verse 3 His glory is fully unfolded: 'Grace be with you, mercy, and peace, from God the Father, and from the Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of the Father, in truth and love'. This is the only time that we have this expression in Scripture. He is not only Lord and Christ, but He is 'the Son of the Father'. This glory is His alone and that from eternity.

## Walking in the truth

In verse 4 the Apostle greatly rejoiced that he found some of the elect lady's children walking in the truth, especially as this was the commandment of the Father. Not simply that they had confessed the truth, or even that they were holding fast to it, but they were walking in it. This is the grand aim of the Gospel coming to us while we are still in this world, not only that we should be saved eternally, but that the truth should be so held by us that it becomes the controlling influence in our lives. What a joy it is when we can see our children walking in the truth! How many of us, sadly, have to confess like David did in 2 Samuel 23:5, 'Although my house be not so with God'.

Now John turns to what seems to be the reason for writing this letter. Some had turned away from the truth. Error, particularly concerning the person of the Lord Jesus, had come in. In order to combat this, it is necessary to abide in that which was from the beginning. The very first moment that the light of the truth of God shone into this world, bringing to us the knowledge of the love of God, it became necessary that those who received it by faith should be characterised by it. Verse 5 says: 'And now I beseech thee, lady, not as though I wrote a new commandment unto thee, but that which we had from the beginning, that we love one another'. This became a commandment, as verse 6 says: 'And this is love, that we walk after His commandments. This is the commandment, that as ye have heard from the beginning, ye should walk in it'. It is not enough to just know the truth. We need the truth to form us and so to become part of us. The Apostle rejoiced that the elect lady's children were walking in the truth, not only confessing and holding it but walking in it. Their ways and their activities were governed by it. Only this can please the Lord and be a safeguard against the error that some were now were propagating. The danger that was threatening was, that under various specious pretexts some should be moved away to follow and obey ideas which were foreign to that which had been from the beginning.

## The danger of deceivers

Verse 7 says: 'For many deceivers are entered into the world, who confess not that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh. This is a deceiver and an antichrist'. The apostle had warned against such in the first epistle; he said 'they went out from us' (1 John 2:19). They gave up all pretence of being connected to the church and went forth into the world as missionaries of greater 'light' than any that the church had. They were influenced by powers of darkness and became skilful heralds of a blend of heathen philosophies and Christian terms. They still talked about Christ, but it was not the Christ of the Scripture. They denied both His deity and His manhood. The fact the Lord Jesus came 'in flesh' shows

that He was indeed truly a man. The fact that He existed so as to 'come' in that way shows that He was more than man, even God. Sadly, there are many that say the same thing today. We need to be on guard against such, because to deny the deity and manhood of Christ destroys the foundation of Christianity. Anyone who denies this cannot be a real Christian.

We read more about these people in verse 9: 'Whosoever transgresseth, and abideth not in the doctrine of Christ, hath not God'. Sadly, many treat Christianity as if it is a science and so it cannot stand still but must progress. This is tantamount to saying that the Scriptures are not inspired but are the words and thoughts of men, so they need updating. This updating may take various forms, and we do not have to look far to find it. The whole idea of 'going forward' is wrong. If we allow development as to some of the details of the faith, why not as to all? This is a very dangerous error and its end is to make Christianity a religion that is suitable to men, to the exclusion of what is right in the sight of God. We need to abide in that which was from the beginning. Truth needs no modification!

The warning in verse 9 is very severe. I believe the expression 'hath not God' means that such a person is not a true believer at all. It is not simply that such a person is not thinking right as to certain truths, but that he has not got God in any way at all. The Holy Spirit seals every true believer. 'Hath not God' could not apply to one who is sealed by the Spirit of God. He has neither the Father nor the Son, for it is impossible to have one without the other. He who abides in the doctrine — that is, in the truth — has both.

In order that we may be obedient to the commandment, 'that as ye have heard from the beginning, ye should walk in it' (v. 6), there must be a clear-cut refusal of all that denies or does not confess the truth as to Christ. Verse 10 makes this very plain: 'If there come any unto you, and bring not this doctrine, receive him not into your house, neither bid him God speed'. This may seem a harsh thing to expect this lady to do, but the refusal of evil and error is not inconsistent with divine love. It is rather an expression of it! We may think that such an action would be out of character with a lady, but the fact that the apostle enjoined her to act in this way shows that it is a responsibility that rests upon all of us as individuals.

We are not asked to judge as to what sort of a person this one may be, but we are to judge the doctrine that he brings. He may be well instructed as to details, dispensational and prophetic truth, but the question is, does he or does he not bring the doctrine as to the Person of the Lord Jesus? The Scriptures assume that

the very youngest believer should be capable of discerning this and acting accordingly.

When a man or woman who preaches a false Christ comes to our door, the refusal of him or her and their doctrine cannot be too complete. Even to bid them God speed is to partake of the evil that they bring. We should have nothing to do with them at all. We may think we can convert them to the truth and try to reason with them. But this evil doctrine is taking away the very foundation stone of Christianity. To be wrong as to the Person of Christ is to be wrong in everything! One is reminded of an old piece of poetry that says,

*'What think ye of Christ?' is the test,  
to try both your state and your scheme.  
You cannot be right in the rest,  
unless you think rightly of Him.*

This should teach us how exceedingly precious and valuable a thing is the doctrine of Christ! It is the corner stone of our most holy faith and, if that be shaken, all will collapse in ruin. It must be guarded at all cost.

### A future visit

Verse 12 seems to suggest that the Apostle looked forward to a time when he would be able to visit this lady and her family: 'Having many things to write unto you, I would not write with paper and ink: but I trust to come unto you, and speak face to face, that our joy may be full'. There were evidently many things that he wanted to communicate to them, but wished to do so in person when visiting them. He obviously felt that the things that he had written were so important that they could not wait until then. So he wrote this letter.

Lastly, the epistle furnishes us with an example of the kind of service an elder should be occupied in. John does not mention his own name, but begins the epistle as from 'an elder'. Such should exercise a spiritual oversight. They should give guidance and practical directions to those who are less instructed in the ways of the Lord. They shepherd the flock of God. There are many wolves about today who will ravage the flock. We need to be on our guard all the time lest their evil doctrines and practices should take from us the joy of Christianity. The only way we can do this is to walk in the truth and hold fast to that which is from the beginning.