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A Letter to a Lady

Postcards from John, Part 1

II John 1

Discussion Guide

Main Idea:

Our character can often be seen through the personal letters written to family and friends. We share our hopes, dreams, and fears, but also can use these opportunities to encourage, exhort, and even to confront. The esteemed Apostle John took a moment out of his day to reach out and touch this chosen woman's life. He sought to remind her that she belonged to Christ and that He cares for her burdens. He sought to remind her of the truths she had in Christ and that she could stand on the promises of God.

Discussion Points:

The recipient of John's letter was described as chosen. Ephesians tells us that *we* were chosen before the foundation of the world.

- In what ways does being chosen by God matter in your day-to-day life?
- How could and should this knowledge impact our relationships around us?
- What are some characteristics that should be evident of one who is chosen of God?
- How does having the title 'chosen' influence choices and perspectives in your daily life?

Paul reminds his readers in I Thessalonians that we are to speak truth with our neighbor. Our Bible is filled with truth-sharing through the writing of letters.

- How can reading truths affect a reader?
- In our technologically driven world, sometimes truths can be misrepresented and twisted. What are ways that we can preserve and demonstrate spiritual truths to those in our sphere of influence?
- What are some life situations that would appreciate a personal letter or another type of personal connection in order to share truths of Scripture?

Discussion Guide Cont.

Taking care to pay attention to what is happening in others' lives around you opens up many opportunities to be used by God.

- Why would taking the time to write a letter or chat with a friend over coffee be able to take our eyes off of ourselves and onto God and others?
- What are some of the fruits of the Spirit that can be used to make an impact for another?
- What are some spiritual truths that would be encouraging to those under life's burdens?

Galatians 6 encourages believers to restore those caught in transgression and to bear one another's burdens.

- How can we help restore another believer into a fruitful walk with God?
- In what ways has Christ shown us how to bear one another's burden?
- What do you find most helpful, encouraging, and inspiring from others when you are burdened?

Gospel Connection:

Knowing that we have a personal relationship with a loving Savior should encourage us to live a life for Him. Jesus has lifted our burdens upon Himself, and since He is our example, we should seek to help others as well. His message of love and forgiveness gives hope to those in despair and offers mercy to those who are lost. Jesus is the anchor for the soul.

Practical implications:

Think: How does knowing Jesus, our Savior, encourage you?

Pray: Ask God to help you serve and obey Him in all areas of life. Ask Him to bring to mind ways to help those in your path that may need spiritual encouragement.

Do: Seek Jesus and share His love with others.

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It has been said that nothing reveals a person's character and disposition and outlook on life more perhaps than private correspondence.

Whether it is a letter, or an email, or a quick text, how we write and what we write has a way of revealing who we are. And what we really want.

Like the little girl who wrote President Gerald Ford in the late 70's – his letter was kept in the library of President Ford as one of his favorites. I love this . . . it reads:

Dear Mr. Ford,
Mothers and fathers get to have Mother's Day and Father's Day, so why can't we have a kid's day? PLEASE let us have a kid's day.
Yours truly,
Stacy

Another handwritten note to a president arrived – written to President Franklin Delano Roosevelt from a 12 year boy living in Cuba. He wrote asking for an American ten dollar bill . . . and he promised he would then tell the president where the iron mines were located on the island in order to help Roosevelt build his war ships. Roosevelt didn't respond. Nineteen years later that twelve-year-old boy took over the country of Cuba . . . his name was Fidel Castro . . . and by the way, he never got his \$10 dollar bill.

Further back in history, a little girl by the name of Grace wrote Abraham Lincoln who was, at the time, running for the presidency. She was urgent and on a mission. Her brief letter read:

Dear Sir,
I am only 11-years-old, but I want you to be the President of the United States. I have four brothers and some of them will vote for you, but if you will let your

whiskers grow, I will try and get the rest of them to vote for you.

You would look a great deal better with whiskers because your face is so thin. All the ladies like them and they would convince their husbands to vote for you too . . . I must not write any more . . . answer this letter right away.

We do not know if her letter made a difference; what we do know is that Lincoln kept the letter, and a few weeks later, he grew a beard.

There is something personal . . . and powerful . . . and touching – even in our day of email and texts and twitter – to a handwritten, personal letter.

I invite you to turn to one of them, preserved by God's Spirit and located near the Book of Revelation. We call it, The Second Letter of John.

This is a private letter from the Apostle John, written to an anonymous woman. In fact, the letter is so private and so personal, that the Apostle does not even begin by naming himself or by giving us the name of this woman.

It simply begins,

The elder to the chosen lady . . . (2 John 1a)

There is little doubt that John the Apostle is the author. In fact, eight of these 13 verses in this postcard are almost identical to verses found in 1 John.¹

This is John's vocabulary and style.

At this point, John is the last surviving Apostle – one of the twelve men originally chosen by the Lord as His disciples and then commissioned as an Apostle to lead the early church.

By the time John writes this letter, this term translated, elder, from presbuteros, has

been used for church leaders for the past 30-40 years.ⁱⁱ

He is writing this postcard when he is around the age of 90 – and he will live for nearly a decade longer.ⁱⁱⁱ

John would not have been the only elder serving the church in Ephesus, where he was living out the remainder of his life after returning from exile on the Island of Patmos, but his eldership – his pastoral role – stretched way beyond Ephesus.

By the way, do not miss the obvious. What amazes me about this opening line is that John is still writing to encourage people when he is 90 years of age.

He might not have been strong enough to stand to preach or travel, but he could still write . . . and write he did! He never stopped serving the Lord in whatever way he could.

The other observation that strikes me is that John did not announce himself as the Apostle. Why not begin, “The Apostle . . . to the chosen lady”? He could have underlined and put it in all caps in all of his correspondence . . . something like, “The Last Living Apostle” or “One of the Original Twelve” or “The Founding Leader of the Church in Ephesus and Beyond”.

Why not? Because John is not into throwing his weight around. Instead of growing self-centered or self-important or self-promoting, John is satisfied with being known by the simple designation of elder.

Evidently that title has been given to him by the church at large – a description that has become his nickname . . . a title of endearment that emphasized his pastoral love and his wisdom and his availability to guide and teach and direct pastors and congregations alike.^{iv}

Available enough to write a postcard of encouragement to one person.

And look, I really don’t think John had any idea we would be dissecting and analyzing and expounding on every word and every phrase of his brief note. Like Paul’s private letter to Philemon, I don’t think John had any idea of the encouragement and the reach this postcard

would have around the world for centuries to come.

But even if that’s as far as it went – if it had never gotten past this one woman’s house – as far as God was concerned – and the Apostle John as well – this one person would have been worth the effort.

She would have been worth it.

What if Roosevelt had written Fidel Castro back? What if Roosevelt had been a committed believer and he wrote a quick note back and said something like: “Dear Fidel, I’m sending you that \$10 dollar bill you wanted along with a Bible. I’ve underlined a number of verses for you to find. Your discovery will be far more important than me discovering the largest iron mines in the world. Write me back if you want to know more.

Who are *we* missing?

Take this example from 2 John to heart.

If you are prone to listen to the lie whispered in your heart that you are not all that important *in* the church or *to* the church because you don’t have a position, or a title or a podium . . . in fact, all you seem to do well these days is write people notes of encouragement . . . and that voice whispers, “C’mon, is that it?”

If that’s the lie from the Serpent that troubles your spirit . . . take another look at the Apostle John who had every title, every accolade . . .

He has preached to multitudes, performed miracles with supernatural power; he was uniquely used by God at the launching of the church age as the Holy Spirit moved upon thousands of people on the Day of Pentecost to repent and believe the gospel. He was one of the few who led, orchestrated, and organized the development of the first mega church in church history.

He has written much of the New Testament –the Gospel of John, The Book of Revelation, and these three letters. He has been given a personal tour of the stunning beauty of God’s throne and the glories of the Celestial City of gold . . .

Now . . . what great thing are you doing for God, John? What great thing are you doing now?

“I’m writing a note to a mother in need of guidance and encouragement.”

Beloved, you are never too big to do something little; you are never too great to write something small. And just think about this – God did not preserve for us even one of John’s sermon outlines or manuscripts . . . but God did preserve for us John’s little note to an anonymous believer.

And it simply begins, *The elder to the chosen lady*.

Just who was the recipient of this first century postcard?

Would you believe there are at least six different opinions on who she was; you can’t imagine the time I spent reading 49 different authors and experts in the field, sifting through the evidence of these six opinions. At one point I was hoping it would snow today – and I could take a break.

I won’t bury you with all the details, but it is important to answer this question, lest our faulty interpretation lead us to faulty application.

Here are the differing viewpoints:

The first two views are that this lady is either a metaphor representing the universal church or that she is a metaphor representing an unnamed local church

The problem with these views are found in the personal comments that only make sense if written to a real woman. John refers to her children, her house, her hospitality, her sister, and her sister’s children.

To stretch this letter into a long metaphor also requires us to make her children become references to believers in the church.

In the New Testament, while the church is referred to in feminine terminology and as *the bride of Christ (Ephesians 5:25 & Revelation 21)* – the church is never even hinted at or called the mother of believers. Christians are never considered children of the church.

The church can’t give spiritual birth to spiritual children – in fact, the church cannot produce spiritual life – only God can do that. Those who receive Christ, John writes in his Gospel, they are given the right to become children of God (*John 1:12*)

The third view is that this lady was a real woman and her name was Mary.

Early church leaders got that rather ingeniously because the word translated *chosen* can be translated eminent, and since there was no woman more eminent than Mary, the mother of Jesus, it was obviously a letter to Mary.

For John to be in his 90’s, it is highly unlikely that Mary, much older than John, would still be alive. She has long since disappeared from any record in scripture.

The fourth view is that she was a real woman and her name was Martha.

Again, early church fathers knew that the word translated lady, in the Aramaic language, is also a proper name for Martha. But John knew that, too, and the major problem with that view is that John is not writing this note in the Aramaic language.

A fifth view is that she was a real woman named Electa.

Again, going back to the word *chosen*, eklektes, -this word could form the proper name Electa, so some hold this was written to a lady named Electa.

The problem with this view is that, in the Greek text, the word *chosen* is an adjective, not a proper noun – and John evidently understood grammar.

This view, I thought, was actually funny. . . in *verse 13*, John ends this letter by saying, *the children of your chosen sister greet you.* (2 John 13)

And he uses the same word – eklektes – chosen – for her too, which means Electa’s sister’s name would also have to be Electa. Which means their mother either really liked the name Electa, or she had a really bad memory - “I know I named your older sister Electa, but I like that name so stop complaining.”

Like I said, I thought that was funny.

Finally, the sixth view is that she was an anonymous faithful woman.^v

In other words, the word chosen is to be taken as an adjective and it can mean excellent or eminent or faithful; and the word lady is to be taken as lady.

We've spent enough time on these six opinions, so let me just give you the right one.

In fact, let me give you a literal translation of this opening phrase which answers the question . . . you might want to get a pencil and write it down . . . here is how it should read:

The elder to the chosen lady . . . (2 John 1a)

In other words, she is an unnamed, yet faithful believer.

The word ***chosen*** here would have encouraged her to know that she has not only not been forgotten as a widow – as a mother who raised children, perhaps on her own - she has not only *not* been forgotten, she has been chosen by God from before time began.

And what's more, what has happened in her life has been chosen for her by her sovereign Lord, before time began.

In fact, the only other time in the New Testament the use of this word ***chosen*** is attached in the same manner to an individual, is in ***Romans 16:13*** where Paul writes,

Greet Rufus, a choice man in the Lord.
(Romans 16:13)

The word *eklektos* is to be understood as someone with an excellent reputation; a faithful, choice servant of Christ.^{vi}

So whoever this anonymous mother was, in 2 John -in some unnamed church somewhere in the world - she was known as a choice servant of Christ. We are not even told anything about what she did that made her have that kind of reputation . . . we are only told that is who she was.

A woman known for her faithful testimony; a mother who tried to pass on her godly influence to her children; the implication is that she is now a widow.

We'll learn later on that some of her children were walking with God and some of them were not.

So, when we view the recipient correctly, we see that John is writing:

- to a literal woman – a literal mother – with literal children (v. 1 & v. 4).
- to a real woman with a real house (v. 10).
- who has a real sister and real nieces and nephews (v. 13).

When we get all that in the right perspective, the lessons the Lord can apply to our own lives will be understood in the right way.

This is a brief letter written to a godly woman and her children.^{vii} And John wants them to know that he loves them all.

Notice the rest of this opening phrase –
The elder to the chosen lady and her children, whom I love in truth. (2 John 1)

John is not being indiscreet here – he is not crossing a boundary here; he tells her he loves her, but he includes her children as well – all of you.

He writes, ***whom I love in truth.*** That expression, ***in truth***, is like us saying today, “in the Lord.” I love you, in the Lord . . . I love you because we belong to the Lord . . . we are family.

And John further encourages her by reminding her – and this evidently was a needed reminder – as the verse continues:

The elder to the chosen lady and her children, whom I love in truth; and not only I, but also all who know the truth. (2 John 1)

In other words, John is reminding this Christian lady and her children that they are not alone. They are members of the family of God.^{viii}

Now let me wrap up our study by giving you two principles of application . . . let's tie up some loose strings and put a period here for now.

First, some things can remain steadfast and never need to change with time.

John reminds her – and us – of unchanging truths like God's sovereign

choosing of her; of His sovereign plan for her; of the truth which never changes; of the love that undergirds the community of the redeemed. These are things that never change with time.

Secondly, some things can remain hopeful even when time changes everything.

Imagine how her world had changed. Imagine what she thought life would be like as a wife and a mother and how much had changed over time. Imagine her culture around her. It was changing as fast as quicksand around her, wanting to bury her and everything in her life that mattered.

- Raising godly children? That would be an impossible task!
- Heading up a busy household without a husband by her side? That would be exhausting and discouraging.
- Putting bread on the table? That would be a daily challenge.
- Making ends meet and finding hope for the future? That would be a never ending battle.

And here comes a knock on the door . . . and a postcard is dropped into her hands . . . from none other than the elder statesman of the church . . . an old, wise, elder John.

Man, would she read this note over and over and over again.

Mary Cushman would be reminded of these same truths. The Depression of the 1930's had devastated her family. Her husband's average paycheck was \$18 dollars a week, but he had grown ill and most often could not work. In addition to caring for their five children, dressing them in Salvation Army clothing, she couldn't make ends meet. She added to her already tiring day, taking in laundry and ironing to earn nickels and dimes. The local grocer finally stopped loaning them food when their bill reached \$50 dollars. And then her son was caught stealing from that grocery store.

With that, her last strand of hope was gone.

She wrote: I couldn't see any hope. I took my youngest, my little five-year-old daughter into my bedroom with me. I plugged up the

windows and cracks with paper and rags. Then I turned on the gas heater we had in the bedroom – but I didn't light it. As I lay down on the bed with my daughter besides me, I told her we were going to take a little nap.

Then I closed my eyes, listening to the gas escape from that little heater. I will never forget the smell of that gas. I began to fall asleep.

Suddenly I thought I heard music. I stirred and listened. I had forgotten to turn off the radio in the kitchen. I heard someone singing an old hymn – and I heard the lyrics:

Oh, what peace we often forfeit,
Oh, what needless pain we bear,
All because we do not carry
Everything to God, in prayer.

As I listened to that hymn, I realized the tragic mistake I was making. I had tried to fight my terrible battles alone; I jumped up, turned off the gas, opened the door and raised the windows . . . just in time.

I began to thank God for all that He had given me . . . all that I'd taken for granted. Poorly fed and poorly clothed children – but I had been given children; a husband ill and unable to work – but a husband to share life with; a future without answers and financial resources - but a future where God would keep His promises to see us through.^{ix}

I had been standing on my problems with God . . . instead of standing on the promises of God . . . with God. John's opening lines encourage this anonymous woman – his sister in Christ – look, you belong to Christ; take your needs and your burdens and your longings and your hopes and your future . . . to the truth you know in Christ.

We are not going to ignore your problems . . . just don't stand on them . . . stand on the promises of God.

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 01/13/2019 by Stephen Davey.

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