

3 JOHN 2: A PROMISE OF HEALTH AND WEALTH?

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Abstract — Contextualizing the Bible for modern audiences requires knowledge of the cultural framework in which the original audience would have received and understood the text. Third John 2 has commonly been misinterpreted and misappropriated as a divine dictum or promise of God for every Christian’s health and wealth. However, reading 3 John 2 in light of ancient literary parallels demonstrates that John’s opening statement was commonplace in letter writing of his day and part of the formal greeting in the biblical culture.

General Research Topic(s) — The Letter of Third John, Faith, Promises of God, New Testament Studies, Exegesis/Hermeneutics, Prosperity Gospel.

I. TEXT & INTRODUCTION

3 John 2 ESV

Beloved, I pray that all may go well with you and that you may be in good health, as it goes well with your soul.

The letter of 3 John was written by the same author as 1 & 2 John. The writer identifies himself as the “elder” (v. 1), which is likely a self-ascribed title.¹ However, none of the Johannine letters actually reveal the name of their author. But, all of the early manuscripts as well as early church tradition identify “John” as the author of these letters. This John is presumed to be the Apostle John, the son of Zebedee,

who was known as “the beloved disciple” (i.e., “the disciple whom Jesus loved”).²

In verse 1, John (“the elder”) identifies his audience as “the beloved Gaius,” who was someone John confesses that he truly loved (“loved in truth”). In ancient letter writing, it was a customary practice to introduce a letter with the name of the sender and then identify the intended audience (recipient) of the letter. All of the NT letters, including those of Paul, Peter, James, and Jude, follow this paradigm. John also follows this pattern, identifying himself as “the elder” in 2 & 3 John (but interestingly not in 1 John), and then follows by identifying the person to whom he is writing (“the elect lady and her children,” 2 John; “beloved Gaius,” 3 John).

What John writes next in 3 John 2 has been the subject of much debate. He writes, “Beloved, I pray that all may go well with you and that you may be in good health, as it goes well with your soul” (ESV). What may not be well-known in Western culture according to modern letter writing techniques is that in the ancient culture it was customary to offer a prayer on behalf of the recipient(s) as part of the greeting. In order to understand why John writes this prayer for everything to “go well” with Gaius and for him to be in “good health,” one must know something about the form and style of Greco-Roman letter writing.

¹ The Apostle Peter also appears to have adopted this sort of terminology for himself and others in the church, see 1 Pet 5:1.

² John 19:26; 20:2; 21:7, 20.

II. GRECO-ROMAN LETTER WRITING

The custom of beginning a letter with an opening salutation is commonplace to modern and ancient letter writing practices. Even though salutations are a shared feature of most letter writing, the type of greeting in the Greco-Roman culture differs slightly from what we typically would say today. For example, the Apostle Paul opened nearly all his letters with the salutation: χάρις ὑμῖν καὶ εἰρήνη (“Grace to you and peace”).³ This is a more formal type of greeting that one would find in official letters and communication in antiquity but is also his own unique blend of Jewish and Greek greetings. However, the Apostle John opens his letters with a different sort of salutary greeting from what we find in other NT letters. Nonetheless, John still employs a well-known health-wish greeting that was commonly used in personal letters of his day.

With the recent discovery of a collection of papyri in the ancient city of Hermopolis in Egypt that contained many personal letters, scholars have identified that there are several standard variants for epistolary health-wish greetings in the ancient Greco-Roman world. While there is no single standard health-wish greeting formula in the Greco-Roman culture, there are common forms of health-wish greetings that were conventionally used.

This important discovery in Hermopolis consisted of a collection of 232 personal and official letters (~100 personal letters) of a man named Apollonios, who was the “strategos” (head of local administration) of the Apollonopolites Heptakomias in Upper Egypt. Throughout his tenure in that office, Apollonios had regular correspondence with his family in his hometown of Hermopolis, where live his wife Aline, his daughter Heraïdous, and his mother Eudaimonis. He was active as the strategos in Apollonopolites Heptakomias at the time when Hadrian succeeded Trajan as Roman emperor and

when the revolt of the Jews was taking place. And thus, several of his letters during AD 115-117 describe the danger and threat of this revolt in Egypt, especially since he would eventually take part in the battle against the Jews at Memphis during this period.⁴

There have been hundreds of private and public letters discovered from the Greco-Roman period. And in comparing the form and style of these letters, “the most common initial health wish in papyri of this period is πρὸ μὲν πάντων εὐχομαί σε ὑγιαίνειν [Before everything I pray that you are well].”⁵ This expression was typically combined with other sentiments in the greeting. For example, in one letter from Eudaimonis (Apollonios’ wife), she greets him by saying:

πρὸ μὲν πάντων εὐχομαί σε ὑγιαίνειν
καὶ [. . .] [.] καὶ ἀπρόσκοπον
εἶναι πάντοτε.

“Before everything I pray that you are well and ... and that you are always free from harm” (P. Alex. Giss. 60.3–4; TM 27582).⁶

While the collection of the letters from Hermopolis certainly substantiates this sort of personal greeting, it was a wide-spread custom of the time as attested by numerous other Greco-Roman letters.⁷ The chart below contains several examples of letters with a customary health-wish greeting that was common in the Greco-Roman culture. For comparison purposes, the opening

⁴ Roger S. Bagnall, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of Papyrology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 232.

⁵ Delphine Nachtergaele, “Variation in Private Letters: The Papyri of the Apollonios Strategos Archive,” *GRBS* 56 (2016): 140-163.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ Even in the Roman aristocracy and administration who wrote in Latin, this sort of an expression was so common that “it was customarily expressed by the use of initials, S V B E E (*si uales, bene est; ego ualeo*, ‘if you are well, that is good; I am well’). F. F. Bruce, *The Epistles of John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970), 147.

³ Rom 1:7; 1 Cor 1:3; 2 Cor 1:2; Gal 1:3; Eph 1:2; Phil 1:2; Col 1:2; 1 Thess 1:1; 2 Thess 1:2; Titus 1:4; Phm 3.

lines of 3 John 2 are positioned first. Common terms in all the letters are color-coded and underlined for the reader's convenience in pointing out similarities among them.

Table 1: Ancient Letter Writing

3 John 1-2 (1 st cent. AD)	Ὁ πρεσβύτερος Γαίῳ τῷ ἀγαπητῷ, ὃν ἐγὼ ἀγαπῶ ἐν ἀληθείᾳ. ² Ἀγαπητέ, περὶ πάντων <u>εὐχομαί</u> σε <u>εὐδοῦσθαι</u> καὶ <u>ὑγιαίνειν</u> , καθὼς <u>εὐδοοῦταί</u> σου ἡ ψυχή. (NA ²⁸)	The elder to the beloved Gaius, whom I love in truth. ² Beloved, <u>I pray</u> that all <u>may go well</u> with you and that <u>you may be in good health</u> , as <u>it goes well</u> with your soul. (ESV)
B. G. U. 2:632 - Letter of Antonios Maximos to His Sister Sabina (2 nd cent. AD) ⁸	Ἀντόνιος Μάξιμος Σαβίνη τῇ ἀδελφῇ πλεῖστα χαίρειν. πρὸ μὲν πάντων <u>εὐχομαί</u> σε <u>ὑγιανίνειν</u> , καὶ ἔγω γὰρ αὐτὸς <u>ὑγιαίνω</u> .	Antonios Maximos to Sabina his sister, very many greetings. Above all <u>I pray</u> that <u>you are healthy</u> , as I myself <u>am healthy</u> .
B. G. U. 27 - Letter of Irenaeus to His Brother Apollinarius (2 nd cent. AD) ⁹	[Εἰρηναῖος Ἀπολλινάριῳ τῷ φιλότατῳ] ἀδε[λ]φ[ῶ] πολ[λ]ὰ χαίρει[ν]. καὶ διὰ π[α]ντὸς <u>εὐχομαί</u> σε <u>ὑγιένειν</u> , καὶ ἐ[γὼ] αὐτὸς <u>ὑγιένω</u> .	Irenaeus to Apollinarius his dearest brother, many greetings. <u>I pray</u> continually for your <u>health</u> , and I myself <u>am healthy</u> .
P. Mich. 479 - Letter of Terentianus to Tiberianus (2 nd cent. AD) ¹⁰	Κλαύδιος Τερεντιανὸς Κλαυδίῳ Τιβεριανῷ τῷ πατρὶ καὶ κ[υρ]ίῳ πλεῖστα χ[α]ίρειν. πρὸ μὲν πάντων <u>εὐχομαί</u> σε <u>ὑγιαίνειν</u> καὶ εὐτυχεῖν, ὃ μοι εὐκταῖόν ἐστιν.	Claudius Terentianus to Claudius Tiberianus, father and lord, very many greetings. Before all else <u>I pray</u> for your <u>health</u> and prosperity, which are my wish.
P. Oxy. 1680 - Letter to Apollo From His Son (3 rd – 4 th cent. AD) ¹¹	- - - φίλ]τατε πάτερ, καὶ <u>ε[ὐχομ]αι</u> τῷ θεῷ ὀλοκληρεῖν σε καὶ <u>εὐοδο[ῦ]σθαι</u> καὶ <u>ὑγιαίνον</u> -τί σε ἀπολαβεῖν ἐν τοῖς ἰδίῳις.	...dearest father, and <u>I pray</u> to God that you are prosperous and <u>successful</u> and that we may receive you home in <u>good health</u> .

⁸ Adolf Deissmann, *Light From the Ancient East: The New Testament Illustrated by Recently Discovered Texts of the Greco-Roman World* (New York and London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1910), 172. English translation from Judith Lieu, *The Second and Third Epistles of John: History and Background* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1986), 38-51.

⁹ *Select Papyri: Private Documents* (trans. A. S. Hunt and C. C. Edgar; vol. 266; Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1932), 307 (Letter #113).

¹⁰ Peter M. Head, "The Letters of Claudius Terentianus and the New Testament," *TynBul* 65 (2014): 219-245.

¹¹ , *Select Papyri*, 367 (Letter #153).

While we see many commonalities among the salutations in these letters (including 3 John 1-2), there are definitely distinct differences. But this is to be expected as there was no mandatory, verbatim formula for greeting someone. Nevertheless, there are striking similarities and recurring elements in all of the letter openings. Moreover, we have the same type of recurring elements in our letter writing today. We typically first greet someone by name and then offer an introductory remark: “Hello So-and-so, How are you doing?” or “Dear So-and-so, I hope you are doing well.” These standard elements of letter writing also were active in governing letter writing practices in the Greco-Roman culture. But that is not to say everyone had to follow this structure exactly for there are many instances where a writer deviated from customary practice for the sake of brevity or another reason. However, deviations were the rare case and not the norm. In order to see how letter Greco-Roman letter writing practices followed a customary structure, two example letters are depicted in the chart below.

III. 3 JOHN 2 AND THE “WORD OF FAITH” MOVEMENT

In the mid-twentieth century, 3 John 2 became the centerpiece for a school of interpretation associated with what has been known as the “Word of Faith Movement” or the “Prosperity Gospel.” This movement espoused that God has promised perfect health and an abundance of wealth to his people and that such physical and material blessings are available to all who believe—they just need to be claimed by faith.

The pioneer of this movement was a man named Oral Roberts from Tulsa, OK. One day in 1947 Roberts opened his Bible and randomly read the first verse his eyes rested on. This verse was 3 John 2 where he read: “Beloved, I wish above all things that thou mayest prosper and be in health, even as thy soul prospereth” (KJV).

This verse grabbed his attention and he immediately shared it with his wife, Evelyn, and “they talked excitedly about the verse’s implications. Did it mean they could have a ‘new car,’ ‘a new house,’ a ‘brand-new ministry?’ In later years, Evelyn looked back on that morning as the point of embarkation: ‘I really believe that that very morning was the beginning of this worldwide ministry that he has had, because it opened up his thinking.’ Roberts testified that a shiny new Buick, acquired by unexpected means shortly after that experience, ‘became a symbol to me of what a man could do if he would believe God.’”¹²

Roberts interpreted 3 John 2 as prescribing God’s attitude toward his people how God “desires (*above all things*) that we have (*before we get to heaven*).”¹³ And in this way, Roberts “interprets ‘above all’ in a way that emphasizes physical health and financial prosperity over spiritual well-being.”¹⁴

As the son of a Pentecostal holiness preacher, Roberts grew up in a family that struggled financially. He and his siblings became well acquainted with abject poverty. He sometimes would go without food and was embarrassed by the appearance of his shabby clothing.¹⁵ In the early years of his schooling, Roberts delivered papers in the rain and snow to earn a few pennies in order to buy his pencils and paper for school, and even in junior high school, Roberts only had one pair of overalls to wear.¹⁶

Robert’s interpretation of 3 John 2 was heavily influenced by his desire to alleviate the tensions produced by his poverty stricken childhood. Therefore, Roberts’

¹² David E. Harrell, Jr., *Oral Roberts: An American Life* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985), 66.

¹³ Paul Yonggi Cho, *Salvation, Health and Prosperity: Our Threefold Blessings in Christ* (Altamonte Springs: Creation House, 1987), 7. (Emphasis original)

¹⁴ Heather L. Landrus, “Hearing 3 John 2 in the Voices of History,” *JPT* 11 (2002): 70-88.

¹⁵ Harrell, *Oral Roberts*, 28-31.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

“reaction to a poverty-dependent theology led to a philosophical construct more dependent upon prosperity.”¹⁷

Roberts’ “prosperity-promising” interpretation of 3 John 2 began a whole school of thought preoccupied with receiving financial and material blessings from God. Later preachers who would popularize the message of the Word of Faith Movement are Kenneth Hagin, Kenneth Copeland, Paul Yonggi Cho, and others. Each of these ministers were greatly influenced by Roberts’ theological framework that construed 3 John 2 as declaring God’s promise for the health and wealth of every Christian believer.

But this interpretation disregards the historical and social context of John’s letter and imposes a foreign meaning that John never intended. When Scripture is interpreted without attention to the context in which it was written and according to the writer’s intended purpose, it is assigned a meaning that is neither valid or faithful to the text.

In response to the Word of Faith Movement’s interpretation of 3 John 2, New Testament scholar Gordon Fee remarks:

“To extend John’s wish for Gaius to refer to financial and material prosperity for all Christians of all times is totally foreign to the text. John neither intended that, nor could Gaius have so understood it. Thus it cannot be the ‘plain meaning’ of the text. We might rightly learn from this text to pray for our brothers and sisters that ‘all will go well with them,’ but to argue from the text that God wills our financial prosperity is to abuse the text, not use it.”¹⁸

But what does Fee mean by the “plain meaning” of the text? As Fee explains, the plain meaning “has first of all to do with the author’s original *intent*, [and] it has to do with what would have been plain to those to whom the words were originally addressed.”¹⁹

The interpretation of the Word of God cannot be privatized or brought into submission to one’s personal inclinations and desires of what they think the Scriptures say or what they *want* them to say. The biblical reader must come to God’s Word to understand the meaning of the text according what the writer was trying to communicate and how the original audience would most likely have understood it. When God inspired John to write to Gaius, there was a reason he wrote a letter to him and there was a reason it was a letter and not something else. Therefore, in order to understand that letter, we must acknowledge and interpret his writing as such. Anything less would be to abrogate John’s meaning and supplant it with our own.

IV. THE MEANING OF 3 JOHN 2

In verse 1, John referred to Gaius as “the beloved,” the one whom he loves “in truth.” And now, here in verse 2, John begins with his third expression of love for Gaius (“beloved”).²⁰ What then follows is a unique expression only found here in the NT: “I pray that all may go well with you and that you may be in good health, as it goes well with your soul (ESV).

The Greek word for “pray” (εὐχομαι, *euchomai*) contains the same root as the typical word for religious prayer (προσεύχομαι, *proseuchomai*). While εὐχομαι was the common word for “prayer to deity” in early non-biblical Greek, it came to also have a more general secular meaning of “to wish” for something.²¹ And thus,

¹⁷ Landrus, “Hearing,” 82.

¹⁸ Gordon D. Fee, *The Disease of the Health and Wealth Gospels* (Vancouver: Regent College, 1985), 10. (Emphasis original)

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ John refers to Gaius as “beloved” two more times throughout the letter (vv. 5, 11).

²¹ TDNT, s.v. “εὐχομαι, εὐχη,” 2:775-78.

in its seven NT occurrences, εὐχομαι is used both in reference to prayers to God (Acts 26:29; 2 Cor 13:7, 9; Jas 5:16) as well as general wishes (Acts 27:29; Rom 9:3).

What John prays for is “that all may go well with” Gaius and that he “may be in good health.” One important difference in John’s salutation is his use of the phrase *περὶ πάντων* (*peri pantōn*), translated as “all,” but which literally means “concerning all things” or “in all respects.”²² The typical opening salutation for Greco-Roman letters uses the phrase *πρὸ μὲν πάντων* (*pro men pantōn*): “above all things.” But John specifies that rather than “above all things,” he prays for Gaius to be doing well “in all things.”

As stated previously, writers varied the terminology and phrasing in their opening salutations according to their own unique touch and personal reasons. In the example of Eudaimonis’ letter to her husband Apollonios, she expresses her concern for his safety in addition to her prayer for his health (“Before everything I pray that you are well and ... and that you are always free from harm”). Perhaps this was in light of the rising Jewish hostilities in the area that Apollonios was serving. But regardless of why Eudaimonis included that particular sentiment, the point is that letter writers adapted salutations to their own end in order to express what they desired for the recipient.

John includes two infinitives to express what he desires for Gaius: εὐοδοῦσθαι and ὑγιαίνειν. The latter word ὑγιαίνω (*hugaiainō*) is one of the most general and widely used salutary expressions in Greco-Roman letter writing (“to be in good health”).²³ However, John also includes a unique word (εὐοδόω, *euodoō*) when he writes that he wishes that all “may go well” with Gaius. The word εὐοδόω literally means “to be led along a

good road,” but is used here metaphorically, meaning “to have things turn out well, to succeed, to prosper.”²⁴ It can denote the successful completion of a task or journey (Rom 1:10), to be doing well in business affairs (1 Cor 16:2), but also just to indicate success in general (2 Chr 26:5; 32:30; Jer 2:37 LXX) as well as success in war (2 Chr 18:11; 20:20 LXX).

The question of what nuance with which to interpret εὐοδόω is of a secondary concern in comparison to the overall interpretation of 3 John 2 in the context of John’s letter. All interpretation must be guided by context, and the context of 3 John 2 is that of a prayer of John for his good friend Gaius. This salutary prayer-wish is for two aspects of Gaius’ life: his health and his success. To restrict εὐοδόω to mean only doing well with family, in business, in community, etc. is to miss the point John is trying to make. According to John’s use of the phrase *περὶ πάντων*, we should take John’s prayer for Gaius’ well-being to be all inclusive—every category. To put it simply, John desired that Gaius be doing well in every respect of life.

At the end of the salutation, John adds a qualifying final phrase. He says he prays for Gaius to be healthy and doing well, “as it goes well with your soul.” Here he repeats the word εὐοδόω (“it goes well”) linking it to the previous phrase. However, with the added term “soul” (*ψυχή*, *psuchē*), it seems that John is alluding to the well-being of Gaius’ internal life as a person. And therefore, John’s emphasis seems to be that he desires for Gaius’ earthly and physical well-being to match his personal and spiritual well-being.²⁵

The personal and spiritual well-being of Gaius is evident in the way John commends him for his faithfulness to provide lodging and support for fellow believers (v. 5). This faithfulness was reported to John

²² A. E. Brooke, *The Johannine Epistles* (ICC; Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1994), 182.

²³ BDAG, s.v. “ὑγιαίνω”

²⁴ BDAG, s.v. “εὐοδόω”

²⁵ D. Edmond Hiebert, “Studies in 3 John Part 1: An Exposition of 3 John 1-4,” *BSac* 144 (1987): 53-65.

by some believers (“brothers”) who testified of Gaius’ “faithfulness to the truth” (v. 3). And therefore, John’s prayer is that Gaius be in good health and be doing well in all aspects of life as he is doing well spiritually according to his ministering and caring for God’s people. And therefore, through this prayer, we see that John’s desire is for Gaius’ earthy and physical means to be provided so that he is able to continue serving and providing for believers. In addition, this prayer of John is likely offered in light of the antagonistic effort of Diotrophes, who was preventing the local congregation from fulfilling its part to support fellow believers (vv. 9-10). John does not specify, but it is likely that Gaius was one of few (if not potentially the only one) who was offering support and lodging for missionaries. Such circumstances were probably taxing on Gaius physically as well as financially.

Thus, from this context and the historical background explained above, the salutation of John in verse 2 is John’s prayer-wish for God to continue to bless Gaius with good health and success in life so that he may continue ministering and demonstrating his love to fellow disciples (v. 6).

John’s prayer-wish is not a divine dictum or promise that God will give health and wealth to every believer. There is no scriptural premise behind the popular slogan that believers should “name and claim” health and wealth. But this is not to say that God is not interested in the health or the physical needs of his people. God most certainly cares for and provides for his people. This is explicitly taught by Jesus himself when he said, “Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you” (Matt 6:33). Jesus said that God knows what we each need (Matt 6:32), and if God provides for the birds of the sky and the flowers of the field, how much more will he do for his people (Matt 6:30).

Therefore, as careful readers of Scripture, we must not impose our own meaning upon the text but endeavor

to understand the “plain meaning” of the Bible so we can know what God has revealed to those who trust in him.

3 John 2 is not a promise: it’s a prayer. Thus, like John, let’s pray for our brothers and sisters that they be in good health and are doing well so that they are able to continue fulfilling the calling of God in their lives to help and serve each other in love.

V. CONCLUSION

This study has sought to demonstrate the need to read and interpret the Bible within its historical and cultural framework in order to understand what the writer meant and how the original audience would have received it. This principle is valid for all interpretation of Scripture, but it has been shown to be essential for accurately interpreting passages like 3 John 2 that can be easily taken out of context and its proper meaning skewed to fit one’s personal agenda.

In summary, 3 John 2 is simply a customary health-wish of the Apostle John to Gaius, his beloved friend, representing a regular and expected part of an opening greeting for personal letters in the Greco-Roman period. John expresses his desire for Gaius’ physical bodily health and for all his life endeavors to be going well to the same degree that John knows Gaius’ himself is doing well personally.

Therefore, this passage is not a divine promise for material wealth and success for believers. Nevertheless, it does indicate John’s desire for Gaius to be doing well in all respects of his life, and it can be a model prayer for believers who want to offer similar encouraging prayers for each other. But to press the interpretation of this passage to mean that health and wealth are promised to everyone and that they simply need to “claim it by faith” is to inject a foreign meaning into the biblical text and falsely render for personal motives the words that God inspired John to write.

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