

Two Letters to the Same Christian: Which One Would You Like to Receive?

By Paul R. Blake

Many years ago, I had a Bible study with a conscientious prospect who obeyed the Gospel of Jesus Christ after a few classes together. He was full of interest and zeal, but at the same time was very aware of his own weaknesses and lack of knowledge. We continued to study and pray together for some time until he seemed to be grounded and secure in his faith. This first letter was written to him within a few weeks after his baptism, as he had been fretting about his slow rate of growth and the pressure he felt from his past bad habits. He told me that he often weathered the storm of temptation by taking this letter out of his Bible and reading it from time to time. He went on to become active in the work of the local church and an example to other young folks.

(First Letter) "I hope this letter finds you prospering in health and in the Lord. It was a joy to see your faith in God and understanding of His will recently. Your obedience to the gospel of Jesus Christ was an encouragement to us all.

"Now that you have had a moment to catch your breath, I would like to say a few things that might be of help to you in your journey toward heaven. It appeared to me that you are concerned that you may not be able to grow in grace, knowledge, and wisdom fast enough to be pleasing to the Lord. Such a fear is unnecessary. You have studied the Bible intently for some time now; you have questioned other devout persons regarding their faith and understanding of Holy Writ; and, you have come to the conclusion that you needed to be made whole in Christ. Dear One, God did not ask more from you than that at the time.

"Now that you are a child of the King,, He, in His benevolent kindness, does not demand of you more than you are physically, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually capable of doing. Press ever onward in your growth and development at a steady pace. Expect too much from yourself and you will become discouraged; instead, select a level that will challenge you to greater faith and stability. Spend time in prayer. Talking about your troubles in prayer with the universe's most powerful Being has both a calming and a fortifying effect, aside from the assurance we have that He will answer our prayers.

"Continue your study of the word of God. It has brought you this far; it will carry you the rest of the way. Please know that the Bible is not a book of do's and don'ts, but rather it is a book of renewal. By implementing its precepts, our lives are transformed from a focus on mundane, physical existence to a view of life from a higher, spiritual perspective. When I meditate on the sweeping panorama of the Bible from beginning to end, seeing God's infinite, perfect plan unfold throughout time, I get the feeling of standing on a high mountain looking across an enormous valley. It feels as if I must draw in a sharp breath of vertigo from standing at the edge of a cliff. Viewed from that point, my life and its trials, troubles, and temptations seem very small and easy to live with. And so will yours in time.

"Heaven will be worth it all. I know a little of the burdens you must bear, striving to fill your life with Christ, while at the same time the forces of the world are working hard to pull you back into sin. I have been remembering you in my prayers to the Lord since hearing of your trials. Do not try to bear your burdens alone; Christians surround you who desire to help you hold up your load of care until such time as you are strong enough to bear it alone. Call on them for help. They will help you through this hurdle; and then, on down the road, you can pass on their love by helping out others who are groaning beneath their burdens.

"You just keep on with the spirit that you showed when you obeyed the Gospel, and we'll see each other again in heaven. I am sure of it! The Lord bless you and keep you, Dear One."

Several years passed. He took a job that required that he miss a lot of services. He no longer had time to study, or visit, or to prepare to participate in services. His job put him in close,

unsupervised contact with members of the opposite sex. Eventually, he destroyed his marriage and influence with his behavior. All the while, concerned disciples tried to encourage and admonish him to restore his life to Christ. All he needed to do was return to the same attitude he had when he first gave himself in faith and obedience to God. But he rebuffed all caring visits and expressions of love. In sorrow, I wrote the following letter to him.

(Second Letter) “We hope this letter finds you prospering in health. We send with it our prayers offered to God on your behalf. We wish that it were possible for this correspondence to be joyful and that it would bring mutual happiness to us all. Sadly, we fear that it will not. We spent much time deliberating over the Bible's instructions for the church with regard to members who depart the faith. We have studied this matter deeply, prayed about it, discussed it at great length, lost sleep over it, and even wept about it. Many of the disciples here have frequently endeavored to encourage you to come back and be restored to our fellowship and companionship; but, you have not come home. Our hearts are made to grieve that we must inform you that the following announcement was read to the church after services:

“In accordance with the instructions of the Lord Jesus Christ in Matthew 18 and the inspired apostle Paul in 2Thessalonians 3, we are bringing this matter before the church. For some time now, a beloved fellow Christian has chosen to abandon fellowship with the Lord through His Church that meets in this place. Abundant prayer has been offered on his behalf. He has been pleaded with earnestly, and gently reprovved often, in the hope that he would be reunited with us in devotion and fellowship.’

“The church that meets here dearly misses his wandering soul, and it would give us great joy to see his restoration. But the church here also loves the Lord and is striving to keep His word. Therefore, it is with great heaviness of heart that we must state that he is no longer recognized as a member of this Church of Christ. Do not consider him to be an enemy, but continue to care about his soul and to admonish him toward repentance. May God bless him with time to return to His favor.”

“Even though this letter was read to the church, it does not mean that you are without hope, nor that we have withdrawn our love. We plead with you, Dear Brother, to come back and be restored to the Lord and to our fellowship. You have a home with us when you are ready to return to the family of God and repent of the sins that have separated us.”

All true children of God love to write the first kind of letter. All true children of God dread to pen the second. Search your heart: which letter would you prefer to receive? You will determine which letter will come to you by the present course of life you've chosen to live.