

3 John 1:13

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

I had many things to write, but I will not with ink and pen write unto thee:

Analysis

I had many things to write, but I will not with ink and pen write unto thee.

John explains his brevity. "I had many things" (πολλὰ εἶχον, polla eichon) indicates abundant material he could address—likely further instruction about handling Diotrephes, guidance for the church, or theological teaching. The imperfect tense εἶχον (eichon, "I had/was having") suggests ongoing possession of these topics in mind.

"But I will not with ink and pen write unto thee" (ἀλλ' οὐ θέλω διὰ μέλανος καὶ καλάμου γράφειν σοι, all' ou thelō dia melanos kai kalamou graphein soi). "Ink" (μέλας, melas, literally "black") was typically carbon-based; "pen" (κάλαμος, kalamos) was a reed stylus cut to allow ink flow, similar to a fountain pen. John's reference to writing instruments emphasizes the medium's limitations—writing cannot fully substitute for personal presence and face-to-face communication.

This verse reflects wisdom about communication methods. While writing preserves teaching, allows careful composition, and reaches distant audiences, it lacks personal warmth, immediate feedback, and relational depth of direct conversation. John recognized that complex church issues (like confronting Diotrephes) and delicate pastoral care (like encouraging Gaius) require personal presence. Some matters can't be adequately addressed through correspondence alone. This principle appears elsewhere in John's writings (2 John 12) and Paul's letters (Romans 1:11-12, 1 Thessalonians 2:17-18), where apostles express longing for personal visits to supplement written instruction.

Historical Context

Letter-writing in the ancient world was common but expensive and time-consuming. Papyrus (made from Egyptian reeds) or parchment (treated animal skins) provided writing surfaces; ink was made from soot or metallic compounds mixed with gum; and reed pens required regular cutting to maintain function. Professional scribes often wrote letters dictated by others (see Romans 16:22 where Tertius identifies himself as Paul's scribe), though some wrote their own correspondence.

Postal systems existed for official government communication but not for private citizens. Personal letters depended on travelers, merchants, or dedicated messengers carrying them. This made correspondence irregular and uncertain—letters could be lost, delayed indefinitely, or intercepted. Consequently, letters were typically brief, addressing only essential matters, with detailed communication reserved for personal visits. The New Testament epistles we possess were often substantial compared to typical ancient letters, suggesting their importance warranted the expense and effort.

The apostles' advanced age (John was likely in his 80s or 90s) added urgency to personal visits. Aware of limited time remaining, they prioritized face-to-face ministry where possible. Travel was difficult—roads were dangerous, sea voyages risky, and journeys exhausting for elderly men—yet apostles considered personal presence worth the hardship. This reflects the high value placed on personal discipleship and relational ministry versus mere information transfer.

Related Passages

Romans 2:1 — Judging others

Matthew 25:31 — Final judgment

Study Questions

1. Do you rely too heavily on digital communication when important matters require face-to-face conversation?
2. How are you prioritizing deep, personal relationships over broad but shallow digital connections?
3. What steps can you take to invest more in personal, in-person discipleship and spiritual friendship?

Interlinear Text

Πολλὰ	εἴχον	γράψαι	ἀλλ'	οὐ	θέλω	διὰ	μέλανος	καὶ
many things	I had	to write	but	not	I will	with	ink	and
G4183	G2192	G1125	G235	G3756	G2309	G1223	G3188	G2532
καλάμου	σοι	γράψαι						
pen	unto thee	to write						
G2563	G4671	G1125						

Additional Cross-References

2 John 1:12 (Parallel theme): 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.

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