

The Epistle of Ignatius to Polycarp

Ignatius of Antioch

Patristic · Ante-Nicene · Letter

STROMATA 112

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INTRODUCTION

Written under armed guard on the road to martyrdom in Rome around 107 AD, this letter from the bishop of Antioch to his younger counterpart at Smyrna is the only one of Ignatius's seven epistles addressed to an individual. The counsel is practical and urgent, how to shepherd difficult souls, how to handle false teachers, how to attend to widows and slaves, and it carries the weight of a man who knew he was writing from the edge of his own death. Polycarp would himself be martyred decades later, having preserved and circulated these letters, which became foundational to later reflection on episcopal authority and Christian martyrdom. Read it as a charge passed from one condemned bishop to another: terse, affectionate, and shadowed throughout by the nearness of the arena.

Greeting

Ignatius, who is also called Theophorus, to Polycarp, Bishop of the Church of the Smyrnæans, or rather, who has, as his own bishop, God the Father, and the Lord Jesus Christ: [wishes] abundance of happiness.

Chapter 1. Commendation and exhortation

Having obtained good proof that your mind is fixed in God as upon an immovable rock, I loudly glorify [His name] that I have been thought worthy [to behold] your blameless face, which may I ever enjoy in God! I entreat you, by the grace with which you are clothed, to press forward in your course, and to exhort all that they may be saved. Maintain your position with all care, both in the flesh and spirit. Have a regard to preserve unity, than which nothing is better. Bear with all, even as the Lord does with you. Support all in love, as also you do. Give yourself to prayer without ceasing. 1 Thessalonians 5:17 Implore additional understanding to what you already have. Be watchful, possessing a sleepless spirit. Speak to every man separately, as God enables you. Bear the infirmities of all, as being a perfect athlete [in the Christian life]: where the labour is great, the gain is all the more.

Chapter 2. Exhortations

If you love the good disciples, no thanks are due to you on that account; but rather seek by meekness to subdue the more troublesome. Every kind of wound is not healed with the same plaster. Mitigate violent attacks [of disease] by gentle applications. Be in all things wise as a serpent, and harmless as a dove. Matthew 10:16 For this purpose you are composed of both flesh and spirit, that you may deal tenderly with those [evils] that present themselves visibly before you. And as respects those that are not seen, pray that [God] would reveal them unto you, in order that you may be wanting in nothing, but may abound in every gift. The times call for you, as pilots do for the winds, and as one tossed with tempest seeks for the haven, so that both you [and those under your care] may attain to God. Be sober as an athlete of God: the prize set before you is immortality and eternal life, of which you are also persuaded. In all things may my soul be for yours, and my bonds also, which you have loved.

Chapter 3. Exhortations

Let not those who seem worthy of credit, but teach strange doctrines, 1 Timothy 1:3, 1 Timothy 6:3 fill you with apprehension. Stand firm, as does an anvil which is beaten. It is the part of a noble athlete to be wounded, and yet to conquer. And especially, we ought to bear all things for the sake of God, that He also may bear with us. Be ever becoming more zealous than what you are. Weigh carefully the times. Look for Him who is above all time, eternal and invisible, yet who became visible for our sakes; impalpable and impassible, yet who became passible on our account; and who in every kind of way suffered for our sakes.

Chapter 4. Exhortations

Let not widows be neglected. Be, after the Lord, their protector and friend. Let nothing be done without your consent; neither do anything without the approval of God, which indeed you do not, inasmuch as you are steadfast. Let your assembling together be of frequent occurrence: seek after all by name. Do not despise either male or female slaves, yet neither let them be puffed up with conceit, but rather let them submit themselves the more, for the glory of God, that they may obtain from God a better liberty. Let them not long to be set free [from slavery] at the public expense, that they be not found slaves to their own desires.

Chapter 5. The duties of husbands and wives

Flee evil arts; but all the more discourse in public regarding them. Speak to my sisters, that they love the Lord, and be satisfied with their husbands both in the flesh and spirit. In like manner also, exhort my brethren, in the name of Jesus Christ, that they love their wives, even as the Lord the Church. Ephesians 5:25 If any one can continue in a state of purity, to the honour of Him who is Lord of the flesh, let him so remain without boasting. If he begins to boast, he is undone; and if he reckon himself greater than the bishop, he is ruined. But it becomes both men and women who marry, to form their union with the approval of the bishop, that their marriage may be according to God, and not after their own lust. Let all things be done to the honour of God. 1 Corinthians 10:31

Chapter 6. The duties of the Christian flock

Give heed to the bishop, that God also may give heed to you. My soul be for theirs that are submissive to the bishop, to the presbyters, and to the deacons, and may my portion be along with them in God! Labour together with one another; strive in company together; run together; suffer together; sleep together; and awake together, as the stewards, and associates, and servants of God. Please Him under whom you fight, and from whom you receive your wages. Let none of you be found a deserter. Let your baptism endure as your arms; your faith as your helmet; your love as your spear; your patience as a complete panoply. Let your works be the charge assigned to you, that you may receive a worthy recompense. Be long-suffering, therefore, with one another, in meekness, as God is towards you. May I have joy of you for ever!

Chapter 7. Request that Polycarp would send a messenger to Antioch

Seeing that the Church which is at Antioch in Syria is, as report has informed me, at peace, through your prayers, I also am the more encouraged, resting without anxiety in God, if indeed by means of suffering I may attain to God, so that, through your prayers, I may be found a disciple [of Christ]. It is fitting, O Polycarp, most blessed in God, to assemble a very solemn council, and to elect one whom you greatly love, and know to be a man of activity, who may be designated the messenger of God; and to bestow on him this honour that he may go into Syria, and glorify your ever active love to the praise of Christ. A Christian has not power over himself, but must always be ready for the service of God. Now, this work is both God's and yours, when you shall have completed it to His glory. For I trust that, through grace, you are prepared for every good work pertaining to God. Knowing, therefore, your energetic love of the truth, I have exhorted you by this brief Epistle.

Chapter 8. Let other churches also send to Antioch

Inasmuch as I have not been able to write to all the Churches, because I must suddenly sail from Troas to Neapolis, as the will [of the emperor] enjoins, [I beg that] you, as being acquainted with the purpose of God, will write to the adjacent Churches, that they also may act in like manner, such as are able to do so sending messengers, and the others transmitting letters through those persons who are sent by you, that you may be glorified by a work which shall be remembered for ever, as indeed you are worthy to be. I salute all by name, and in particular the wife of Epitropus, with all her house and children. I salute Attalus, my beloved. I salute him who shall be deemed worthy to go [from you] into Syria. Grace shall be with him for ever, and with Polycarp that sends him. I pray for your happiness for ever in our God, Jesus Christ, by whom continue in the unity and under the protection of God. I salute Alce, my dearly beloved. Fare well in the Lord.