

# CHURCH HISTORY LITERACY

## *Lesson 7*

### Martyrs – Part Four

#### Polycarp

In 1672, a French scholar named Jean Cotelier published two volumes of early church writings. Cotelier termed a number of these writings as those of the “Apostolic Fathers.” While he was the first to use this term, the usage has now become commonplace. Traditionally, the term has been used to reference the core writings that occurred immediately after the apostolic writings that we have in our New Testaments. None of these writings are from Apostles. They are called the Apostolic Fathers because they were the “fathers” of the church who were appointed by or found their place immediately after the Apostles.

So far in class, we have covered several of these fathers. We have studied Clement of Rome (his letter to the Corinthian church in lesson 2), the Didache (lesson 3), and the writings of Ignatius (lesson 6).

This morning, we look at another “Apostolic Father,” a man named Polycarp. Three “Apostolic Father” writings pertain to Polycarp. First, we have the one letter from Ignatius of Antioch that we did not cover last Sunday. It was written to Polycarp. We also have a letter from Polycarp to the Philippian church. Finally, we have an accounting of Polycarp’s martyrdom appropriately called, “The Martyrdom of Polycarp.”<sup>1</sup>

We also have information about Polycarp from a few other early Christians in their own writings, notably Iranaeus and Eusebius. We know, for example, that Polycarp was a representative of the churches of Asia Minor before the Bishop of Rome sometime in the 10 years or so before his martyrdom in discussions about the appropriate date for Easter celebration. In this class, we will focus on the three direct Polycarp-related writings. We will study the other writings that mention Polycarp as they become relevant in other classes (on Gnosticism and on celebrations of Christian holy days in the early church).

---

<sup>1</sup> Generally, scholars ascribe four additional writings to the grouping of “apostolic fathers” that we have not spent time on in this class. They are The Epistle of Barnabas (written by an anonymous author between 70 and 130 A.D.); The Shepherd of Hermes (written by a relatively unknown “Hermes” between 70 and 150 A.D.); The Epistle to Diognetus (unknown author, written between 117 and 320 A.D.); and The Fragment of Papias (Bishop of Hierapolis and contemporary of Polycarp, written around 130 A.D.) Of course, this list is arbitrary and while these are the generally accepted “Apostolic Fathers,” arguments are made to include other writings in the list or even exclude some (at least The Epistle to Diognetus).

## IGNATIUS'S LETTER TO POLYCARP

Last week, we covered six of Ignatius of Antioch's seven letters written while on his way to Rome and martyrdom. Ignatius wrote his seventh letter to Polycarp, the Bishop of the church at Smyrna.<sup>2</sup> Polycarp was likely in his 30's or early 40's at the time. We base this upon Polycarp dying after "serving the Lord" for 86 years in about 167 A.D. That means by 81 A.D, Polycarp was "serving the Lord." If Ignatius wrote around 110 A.D, then this places Polycarp in God's service for about 30 years when he received this letter.

The letter itself indicates that Polycarp was new to the Bishopric. Ignatius speaks to Polycarp as an older and wiser man to someone relatively new in his post. Ignatius gives good and wise counsel to this young church leader.

Because we will see Polycarp's character through his words and actions 57 years later, it is particularly instructive to see the kind of person Polycarp was as a young church leader. Does Ignatius push Polycarp to find humility? Does Ignatius seek to reign in Polycarp's ambition? Does Ignatius prod Polycarp to greater knowledge? Does Ignatius challenge Polycarp's church growth plans?

Ignatius spends most of his last words with young Polycarp expressing encouragement and love. Ignatius starts his letter saying, "So approving am I of your godly mind, which is grounded as it were, upon an unmovable rock, that my praise exceeds all bounds, inasmuch as I was judged worthy of seeing your blameless face" (1:1). Polycarp must have been an exceptional man of God. This is not surprising in light of what we will find in the events surrounding his death.

Ignatius also gave good instructions for living and teaching to Polycarp. He urges Polycarp in unceasing prayer to ask God for greater understanding (1:2-3). Ignatius urges Polycarp to make it a life work to increase his diligence, watching for strange doctrines, and waiting expectantly for "the Eternal" who "is above time" – the "Invisible, who for our sake became visible" (3:1-2).

Ignatius also gives good pastoral advice to Polycarp. He taught Polycarp to know everyone by name (4:2), to preach sermons about wicked practices and how husbands and wives should love each other (5:1). Ignatius asks Polycarp to circulate his letters and to write others to the churches for their benefit (8:1).

What did Polycarp do with this advice? How did his life proceed from his encounters with Ignatius? We get more insight that helps answer these questions as we move through other early church writings.

---

<sup>2</sup>Smyrna received one of the other letters of Ignatius as well as one of John's seven letters contained in Revelation.

## POLYCARP'S LETTER TO THE PHILIPPIANS

We noticed above that Ignatius wrote Polycarp and specifically told him, “Since I have not been able to write to all the churches...as the divine will commands, you must write.” We know this is an instruction Polycarp must have taken to heart. While we do not have an exhaustive list of churches Polycarp wrote to, we do have his letter to the Philippian church.

The Philippian letter was written after Ignatius had not only written Polycarp, but had also passed through Philippi on his way to his Roman martyrdom. Enough time had passed where Ignatius's martyrdom was complete, but not so much that the details were well known. There are references in this letter to Ignatius being martyred (1:1; 9:1). But, Polycarp still asks the Philippians for any more knowledge they may have about the events: “As for Ignatius himself and those with him, if you learn anything more definite, let us know” (13:2).<sup>3</sup> For this reason, scholars generally date the letter around 110 A.D., the approximate time of Ignatius's death.

When reading Polycarp's letter, one is immediately impressed with his use of scripture, both Old and New Testament. In the first four verses alone, Polycarp quotes or references Acts 2:24, 1 Pet. 1:8, Eph. 2:5, 8-9, 1 Pet. 1:13, Ps. 2:11, 1 Pet. 1:21, 1 Cor. 15:28, Phil. 2:10, 3:21, Acts 10:42, and Luke 11:50-51. Among the New Testament books, Bruce Metzger lists Polycarp's letter showing more or less direct contact with Matthew, Luke, Romans, 1 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, 2 Thessalonians, 1 and 2 Timothy, Hebrews, 1 Peter and 1 John.

Polycarp has great respect for the writings we call the New Testament. Polycarp quotes Paul from Ephesians 4:26 and Psalms 4:5 claiming, “Only, as it is said in these scriptures, ‘be angry but do not sin,’ and ‘do not let the sun set on your anger’” (12:1). Now the first part of the quote is from the Old Testament, Psalm 4:5, what we would expect Polycarp to call “scripture.” Paul quoted the same Psalm in the same way in Ephesians 4:26. But, the second part of the quote (“do not let the sun set on your anger”) is not from the psalm. It quotes the rest of the passage from Ephesians. Scholars recognize that this may be the first reference outside of the New Testament to a New Testament writing as scripture.<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup> The translation we are using is that of Lightfoot and Harmer, edited and revised by Holmes (Baker 1992).

<sup>4</sup> We say it is the first reference outside of the New Testament to a New Testament writing as scripture because 2 Peter 3:16 references the writings of Paul and compares them to the “other scriptures.”

Polycarp was, of course, writing to a church that had received its own letter from Paul just 50 short years earlier. It likely had other Pauline letters as well. Understandably, we read Polycarp esteeming Paul and his letters when he says, “I am writing you these comments about righteousness, brothers, not on my own initiative but because you invited me to do so. For neither I nor anyone like me can keep pace with the wisdom of the blessed and glorious Paul, who, when he was among you in the presence of the men of that time, accurately and reliably taught the word concerning the truth. And when he was absent, he wrote you letters; if you study them carefully, you will be able to build yourselves up in the faith that has been given to you...” (3:1-2)

It seems clear that by 110 A.D., a number of Paul’s letters were accumulated into a body and were being used by the churches of that area for study and teaching. In our Bibles today, Paul’s letters are still grouped together in our New Testament. It follows a practice and order whose origins are lost in antiquity, but it is an order set up very early.<sup>5</sup>

Not only were letters accumulated as precious treasures, but they were also copied and distributed to the churches. In fact, one of the reasons the Philippians wrote to Polycarp was to get their own set of Ignatius’s writings. In 13:2 Polycarp writes, “We are sending to you the letters of Ignatius that were sent to us by him together with any others that we have in our possession, just as you requested. They are appended to this letter; you will receive great benefit from them, for they deal with faith and patient endurance and every kind of spiritual growth that has to do with our Lord.”

Polycarp’s personal counsel to the Philippians does not break any new ground beyond basic Christian teaching. He does emphasize the importance of the good deeds that flow from loving hearts. He writes about the needs for elders to be “compassionate, merciful to all, turning back those who have gone astray, visiting all the sick, not neglecting a widow, orphan, or poor person” (6:1). They are also to avoid “all anger, partiality, unjust judgment, staying far away from all love of

---

<sup>5</sup> Starting with Romans, the letters in the New Testament go through 1 and 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, 1 and 2 Thessalonians, 1 and 2 Timothy, Titus and Philemon. It is immediately recognizable that Paul’s letters to the churches are in the first part of the group, followed by his personal letters (1 and 2 Timothy, Titus and Philemon). Within those groups, scholars offer two main ideas behind the groupings. First, with one slight exception, the church letters and personal letters are in descending order of length, longest to shortest. A second reason offered is that the letters are in order of church priority and importance at the time (Rome, followed by Corinth, Galatia, Ephesus, etc.) That opinion seems less likely (e.g. Ephesus likely “outranked” the churches of Galatia) and it makes no sense of the ordering of the personal letters.

money, not quick to believe things spoken against anyone, nor harsh in judgment, knowing we are all in debt with respect to sin” (6:1).

## THE MARTYRDOM OF POLYCARP

Polycarp was Bishop of Smyrna for a long time. We know from Ignatius that Polycarp was Bishop by 110. We also are able to see when he died. The church at Smyrna wrote of Polycarp’s martyrdom shortly after it happened. In a letter we call The Martyrdom of Polycarp, the Smyrnaeans wrote to the church at Philomelium<sup>6</sup> (another town in what is now Turkey) an eyewitness account of the martyrdom.

While we do not know the precise year of Polycarp’s death (scholars generally date it within a year or two of 167), we get pretty close to the actual day! The account tells us “Polycarp was martyred on the second day of the first part of the month Xanthicus, seven days before the calends of March...about two o’clock P.M.” (21:1) (in other words, February 22, or maybe 23).<sup>7</sup>

The detail of the martyrdom account is quite touching and, in places, quite graphic. The letter certainly does not “blame God” for the tragedy of the martyrs and their deaths, but it does recognize that the martyrdoms “have taken place in accordance with the will of God (for we must reverently assign to God the power over all things)” (2:1).

Before divulging the particulars of Polycarp’s death, the letter speaks of other martyrs and their quiet endurance of such horrible deaths that the bystanders “had pity and wept” even as the martyrs in “bravery” would not “utter a cry or groan” and they were “so torn by whips that the internal structure of their flesh was visible as far as the inner veins and arteries” (2:2). Many of these martyr accounts held that the martyrs were able to see and converse with Jesus at the time of their misery and deaths, much like Stephen in Acts 7. The letter does make note of a

---

<sup>6</sup> The letter is addressed to the church in Philomelium “and to all the communities of the holy and catholic church sojourning in every place.” This uses the Greek word καθολικη (“*katholica*”), first used by Ignatius among the church fathers as a description of the church. The word actually means “universal” or “general.” It is used in this sense to describe our salvation or resurrection. By the year 200, it becomes a technical term for the churches of orthodoxy as opposed to the heretical sects. Interestingly, of the seven letters of Ignatius, the one where he first uses the term for the church is the letter to the church at Smyrna (8:2).

<sup>7</sup> There are two different dating systems used in this passage. The “second day of the first part of the month of Xanthicus” is a Greek/Macedonian calendar date. The phrase, “seven days before the calends of March” is a Roman system of dating. The “calends” of each month was the first of each month. Seven days before the calends would therefore be February 22 unless it was a leap year, in which event it would be February 23.

man named Quintus who recanted his faith and swore an oath to Caesar, offering a pagan sacrifice in the face of death. Interestingly, Quintus had evidently turned himself in as a Christian as opposed to being discovered and brought in by the law. Quintus is isolated as the exemplary reason that Christians should not turn themselves in for punishment (Chapter 4).

The community had been crying out for Polycarp's martyrdom. While the cries neither scared nor disturbed Polycarp, the church imposed upon him to withdraw from town to a nearby farm. At the farm, Polycarp spent his time "doing nothing else night and day except praying for everyone and for the churches throughout the world, for this was his constant habit" (5:1). While so praying, Polycarp had a vision that he would be burned alive. The vision did not seem to particularly scare or concern him.

Those searching for Polycarp found two slave boys that, after being tortured, told the authorities where Polycarp was hidden (6:1). So "on Friday about suppertime" the mounted police and horsemen, taking all their weapons with them, set out to find and arrest this old Christian man. In the late evening, they found Polycarp lying in a bed upstairs in the farmhouse. The letter notes that Polycarp had enough warning to escape, but opted to stay saying, "May God's will be done" (7:1).

Upon hearing that the police had arrived, Polycarp went down and started visiting with them. Those present were amazed not only at his advanced age, but also at his calm composure in the face of what was to come. Polycarp immediately ordered that a table be set and his captors be given the supper they must have missed by chasing him at that hour. Polycarp also asked his captors for permission to pray for an hour before they left. The captors agreed, and to everyone's wonder, he stood for two hours praying out loud for everyone "who had ever come into contact with him" (7:2-8:1).

His captors and those with them regretted coming after "such a godly old man" (7:2), but they still took him! They set Polycarp on a donkey and brought him into the city. The police captain (ironically noted to be named "Herod") and the Captain's father came out to meet Polycarp. Transferring Polycarp to their carriage, they started to counsel and attempt to persuade him to state, "Caesar is Lord" followed by an offering of incense. The Captain and his father explained that Polycarp could return to business as normal and live if he would do those two minor things. Polycarp sat silent and wouldn't answer the Captain. As the Captain and his father persisted, Polycarp finally responded, "I am not going to do what you are suggesting to me." At this point, things got a bit nastier. The Captain and his father started threatening Polycarp and forced him out of the carriage so rapidly that the old man hurt his shin fairly badly. Rather than giving in to the obvious leg injury, Polycarp tried to move on quickly as if nothing had

happened. Polycarp went straightway into the stadium where the crowd noise rose so high that “no one could even be heard” (8:1-3).

Polycarp and the Christians with him heard a voice from heaven as he entered the stadium. The voice said, “Be strong, Polycarp, and act like a man.” And then, Polycarp was brought before the proconsul in the middle of the stadium. The Proconsul asked Polycarp whether he was indeed the legendary and wanted man, and Polycarp confirmed he was. The Proconsul then tried to persuade Polycarp to recant. Using phrases like, “Have respect for your age,” the Proconsul urged Polycarp to “Swear by the genius of Caesar.” Thinking of the Christians as atheists (for not believing in the deity of Caesar and other gods of the Roman pantheon), the Proconsul asked Polycarp to say, “Away with the atheists!” Now that was something Polycarp could do, although not meaning the Christians. So, Polycarp “solemnly looked at the whole crowd of lawless heathen who were in the stadium, motioned toward them with his hand, and then (groaning as he looked up to heaven) said, “Away with the atheists!” Not quite what the magistrate intended!

The magistrate then persisted even more offering, “Swear the oath and I will release you; revile Christ.” To this Polycarp responded, “For eighty-six years I have been his servant, and he has done me no wrong. How can I blaspheme my King who saved me?” (9:1-3)

The Proconsul kept at Polycarp with wave after wave of persuasion and offers to save his life by recanting his faith. But Polycarp never faltered. Instead, Polycarp explained, “If you vainly suppose that I will swear by the genius of Caesar, as you request, and pretend not to know who I am, listen carefully: I am a Christian. Now if you want to learn the doctrine of Christianity, name a day and give me a hearing.” The Proconsul stated that Polycarp had an assembly there shouting for his death, he ought to persuade them of his faith. Polycarp refused, noting the people would not be persuaded (10:1-2).

As time was wearing on, the Proconsul moved into the final stage of confrontation. Polycarp was told that the wild beasts were coming unless he repented from his Christian faith. Polycarp again refused noting that no one would repent from what is right, to do something that is wrong. Polycarp urged the magistrate to end it, saying, “call for the wild beasts.” The Proconsul then said instead of wild beasts, he would have Polycarp burned. To this threat, Polycarp mentioned that he would rather burn in the stadium than in Hell’s fires for eternity. Polycarp added, “Why do you delay? Come, do what you wish.” (11:1-2).

The eyewitnesses saw Polycarp filled with courage and joy and Polycarp’s face was “filled with grace.” Even the Proconsul was astonished. Meanwhile, the

crowd itself was emphatically shouting and chanting for Polycarp's death. The cries eventually turned into demands that Polycarp be burned (12:1-3).

Then things "happened with such swiftness, quicker than words could tell" as the wood and kindling was gathered. As the pyre was built, Polycarp took off his own clothes for the death. As they started to nail Polycarp to the pyre, Polycarp stopped them. He explained he did not need to be nailed. "Leave me as I am; for he who enables me to endure the fire will also enable me to remain on the pyre without moving, even without the sense of security you get from the nails" (13:1-3).

So instead of nailing Polycarp, they tied him up. Polycarp looked to heaven and offered a prayer of praise to God testifying to God's love through Jesus. And as Polycarp declared, "Amen!" the fire was lit. (15:1).

The fire itself did not consume Polycarp at first. It seemed to burn in an arc around him, but his flesh remained unsinged. So the authorities then sent an executioner in to stab and kill Polycarp. After this incredible event, there arose among the authorities fear over whether more might become Christians after this impressive set of events demonstrating great faith in the face of death and persecution. The Captain's father urged the proconsul to keep the body of Polycarp lest Polycarp become a new Jesus worshipped even more than Christ himself (To this, the Christian letter writers added, "they did not know that we will never be able either to abandon the Christ who suffered for the salvation of the whole world of those who are saved, the blameless on behalf of sinners, or to worship anyone else.") (17:1-3).

Ultimately, the church was allowed the bones of Polycarp after the cremation by the authorities and "deposited them in a suitable place" (18:2).

And "such is the story of the martyrdom of Polycarp" (19:1). Many everywhere spoke of his death, "even by pagans" (19:1). Early in the 200's, the Christian writer Tertullian would say that the blood of the martyrs were the seed of the church. More and more people were inspired and further convinced by a faith that people would gladly die for, than by the paganism that would kill those believers.

In reflection, it is worth noting that this wonderful man put to death by the hands of the state had, in his letter to the Philippians, urged the church to pray for the "kings, powers and rulers." Yet even as he did so, he added, somewhat prophetically, "and for those who persecute you and hate you, and for the enemies of the cross, in order that your fruit may be evident among all people" (12:3).

And so it was with Polycarp.

## POINTS FOR HOME

Because he was Bishop of Smyrna, we are reminded again of the letter written to Polycarp and his church set out in Revelation 2:8-11:

*To the angel of the church in Smyrna write:*

*These are the words of him who is the First and the Last, who died and came to life again. I know your afflictions and your poverty—yet you are rich! I know the slander of those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan. Do not be afraid of what you are about to suffer. I tell you, the devil will put some of you in prison to test you, and you will suffer persecution for ten days. Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you the crown of life. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. He who overcomes will not be hurt at all by the second death.*

1. Actions speak louder than words, both to God and to man (Mt 7:15-24).
2. Live right, and the world will see a difference (Mt 5:14-16).
3. Have confidence in what God is doing in your life. All things will find their right place before God (Phil 3:12-16). He will work them together for good (Rom 8:28).