

# CHURCH HISTORY LITERACY

## *Lesson 5*

### Martyrs: Ignatius and Polycarp

Abdur Razzak spoke from a hospital bed in Bangladesh. He was injured in a bomb blast that killed one and injured over 30 more, including police, lawyers, journalists, and others. Abdur survived, but had he died, he would have considered himself a “martyr.” That was his word as he lay in the hospital bed. Over the last two weeks, we have looked at early Christian martyrs and the causes of martyrdom. This week, we will look closely at two early Christian martyrs. But, the Christian martyrs are a world apart from Abdur Razzak, for Abdur himself **WAS** the bomber. He was a member of the suicide squad of Jamaatul Mujahideen Bangladesh, a banned Islamist outfit. After his arrest, Abdur said, “I joined the suicide squad and wanted to be a martyr to establish the law of Allah.”<sup>1</sup>

Most around the world would never agree to the term “martyr” for people like Razzak. Instead, the word “terrorist” is appropriate. As we saw in the first martyr lesson, the word is appropriate for witnesses who hold their testimony though it costs them their own lives. A martyr has never been one who dies while trying to kill others for their faith!

We do have real martyrs today. We have heard of some like Casey Bernal. Others are more obscure. A recent book, *Lives Given, Not Taken*, by Erich Bridges sets out the stories of 21<sup>st</sup> century Southern Baptist Missionaries who have lost their lives for their faith.

Last week, we probed various reasons why Christians were killed in the early church. This week and next, we look in more detail at the martyrdoms of Ignatius of Antioch and Polycarp. From these lessons, we should draw strength and inspiration from the mindset of these two Christians from centuries back.

### IGNATIUS OF ANTIOCH

Ignatius of Antioch was the Bishop of the church at Antioch, one of the early centers of Christianity outside Jerusalem and also one of the four most prominent cities in the Roman Empire. Somewhere around the year 110, during the reign of

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<sup>1</sup> The Financial Express, January 30, 2006, has an article by Dr. Habib Siddiqui challenging Razzak’s actions as murder, not martyrdom under Islamic law and tradition.

Emperor Trajan,<sup>2</sup> Ignatius was arrested for his faith. One of the main charges levied against Christians in such cases was that of “atheism.” This centered on the principal that Christians refused to worship Caesar as god and also refused to worship the other appropriate deities. We do not know how the specific charges were brought against Ignatius beyond the fact he was arrested for his Christian faith.

The sentence for Ignatius’s crime was execution. While the arrest was in Antioch, Syria, the execution was set for Rome. To get Ignatius from Antioch to Rome was a journey of several weeks, over both land and sea. Ignatius was sent in the company of ten Roman soldiers (whom Ignatius called “leopards”).

This small band traveled north and west out of Syria into modern Turkey. They proceeded through Turkey and into Macedonia, most likely catching a boat for the journey from Greece to Italy.



While traveling through modern Turkey, Ignatius and the soldiers made a stop in Smyrna. During this stop, Ignatius wrote four quick letters. One of the letters was to the Ephesian church, a church Ignatius would have visited had the soldiers taken the southern road rather than a more northerly route. Similarly, had the soldiers taken a different route Ignatius would have visited the Magnesian church. Ignatius also wrote ahead to the church at Rome so it might expect him soon.

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<sup>2</sup> This is the emperor we studied last week who had traded correspondence with Pliny about killing Christians.

A bit later in the journey, Ignatius and the soldiers stopped at Troas before crossing the sea into Europe. In Troas, Ignatius sent letters back to the churches he had previously visited on this trek at Philadelphia and Smyrna. He also sent a personal letter to Polycarp, who was the Bishop of the church at Smyrna when Ignatius had stopped there.

The church has saved these seven letters through the many centuries since Ignatius wrote them. We still have these seven letters today. These letters are the last thoughts of a Christian man set to die within weeks for his faith. As a sort of “Last Will and Testament,” the letters set forward his most compelling concerns for the church as well as his personal perspectives on his impending martyrdom. Although certainly no one can imagine Ignatius’s stress and reflection at this point in his life, it is compelling to read how that translated into action and words.

Another interesting aspect to these letters is the reflection on the church at Ephesus. This picture of the Ephesian church around 110AD adds a final picture of an early church that was the subject of at least two letters in our New Testament (Paul’s letter and John’s letter in Revelation 2:1-7, written about 15 years before Ignatius’s letter).<sup>3</sup>

There is no magic to the order of the seven letters except that the group written first is followed by the three written at a later stage in Ignatius’s journey. We will use the order given by the 4<sup>th</sup> century church historian, Eusebius.

### *Ephesians*

One cannot start reading Ignatius’s letter to the Ephesians without immediately recognizing strong echoes of Paul’s letter to the Ephesian church. Ignatius writes to the church, “blessed with greatness through the fullness of God the Father, predestined before the ages for lasting and unchangeable glory forever.” This same church, just some 50 years earlier, heard from Paul that they were “blessed with every spiritual blessing.” They were “predestined” and “chosen before the creation of the world” (Eph. 1:3-5). Ignatius tells the Ephesians they “took on new life through the blood of God” echoing Paul’s words that they were redeemed “through his blood” and forgiven of sins “in accordance with the riches of his grace.”

The observation is readily made that Ignatius was very conversant with Paul’s writings. Most scholars recognize that by this time, Paul’s letters were already in

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<sup>3</sup> Additionally, we have the insight we glean from John’s gospel that was most likely written from Ephesus late in the first century.

a collection and shared among many churches. It is apparent that Ignatius knew these letters. Some scholars recognize Ignatius's letters as conveying some key information on this issue.

A careful reading of Ignatius's Ephesian letter offers an intriguing possibility on the accumulation of Paul's writings. We need to remember that Ephesus was the major city of the region that included Colossae, the recipient church of not only Paul's Colossian letter, but also Philemon. Philemon was the letter Paul wrote from his Roman confinement to Philemon, the owner of a runaway slave named Onesimus. Paul sent Onesimus back to his owner Philemon with the letter bearing Philemon's name and likely the Colossian letter as well (Col 4:9). It seems likely that Onesimus was bearing an extra copy or two of these letters. When the letters were to be read in multiple towns and churches (Col 4:16), one could fairly assume that each church would make and keep a copy. So, one may fairly assume that Onesimus arrives "home" in the country outside Ephesus near Colossae with several of Paul's letters.

Now, Onesimus was a fairly common slave name, but more unusual as the name of a freeman. The name itself means "useful," a concept important for a slave, but a bit derogatory for a freeman. Paul wrote Philemon asking (without asking) for Philemon to grant Onesimus his freedom, treating him like family as a Christian brother rather than as a runaway. We do not have within the confines of scriptures whether Philemon granted freedom to Onesimus, but we do have the follow-up letter of Ignatius, written 45-50 years later.

Time after time in Ignatius's letter, Ignatius names Onesimus as the Bishop of the Ephesian church. Now, what was a fellow with a slave name doing as Bishop of one of the three largest and core churches in Christianity in 110? Lightfoot and others advocate that this Onesimus was the same as Paul's letter carrier set free by Philemon. Certainly as a letter carrier, as one used by Paul, as one from the region, as one who was set free by personal request of the Apostle Paul, it makes sense that this Onesimus might become this Bishop. We can fairly surmise that when Onesimus first ran away 50 plus years before, he would have been a young man, likely a teenager (It's hard to imagine an old fellow hitting the road escaping slavery; likewise, it is less likely that a pre-teen would runaway and make it all the way to Rome!). So the age, name, and past all give good reason to suspect that Bishop Onesimus was one and the same as the New Testament slave Onesimus.

Would this Bishop be the collector of Paul's letters that many scholars believe happened in this time period at Ephesus? It seems likely.<sup>4</sup> That makes Ignatius's

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<sup>4</sup> Another indicator is the presence of the letter/book we call Philemon in the New Testament. While there is no doubt that the slave would have kept the letter of his liberty, many scholars

letter to the Ephesians even more interesting. Not only does Ignatius repeatedly use Onesimus's name in the letter, but Ignatius also does so while making apparent references to Paul's letter to Philemon. For example, in chapter three, Ignatius imitates Paul's manner of "asking without asking" found originally in Philemon. In Philemon, Paul wrote, "although I could be bold and order you to do what you ought to do, yet I appeal to you on the basis of love" (Philemon 8-9). Ignatius would write, "I am not commanding you...but since love does not allow me to be silent...I have taken the initiative to encourage you" (Chapter 3).

Onesimus came north to meet Ignatius once it was clear Ignatius would not be coming through Ephesus. Ignatius took Onesimus's report on the church at Ephesus, and reminded the Ephesians that they were "fellow initiates of Paul" who "in every letter remembers you in Christ Jesus" (Chapter 12). We can at least be certain that Ignatius was aware of "fellow initiates" of Paul and with the letters of Paul himself.<sup>5</sup>

Ignatius wrote about church harmony, emphasizing the role of the Bishop in some ways similar to the New Testament teaching about church leaders. Ignatius, however, goes a bit further. Ignatius emphasizes that the Bishop is to be followed ("act in harmony with the mind of the Bishop" Ign 4:1) which is consistent with the New Testament admonition to submit to the church's leaders (1 Pet 5). But, the Ephesians are also told to "regard the Bishop as the Lord himself" (6:1). Rather than oppose their Bishop, they are to harmoniously unite with him, realizing the power of his prayers for the church (5:1-3).

On a personal level, Ignatius gives practical, godly advice on living. He tells them to "pray continually for the rest of mankind." Specifically, "in response to their anger, be gentle; in response to their boasts, be humble; in response to their slander, offer prayers; in response to their errors, be steadfast in the faith; in response to their cruelty, be gentle; do not be eager to retaliate..." (10:1-2). Those words carry greater power when coming from a man doomed to die for no reason beyond faith.

One more passage that puts Christian practice into good words is found in 15:1. Ignatius tells the Ephesians, "It is better to be silent and be real, than to talk and not be real" and "It is good to teach, if one does what one says." For that was our Jesus. One who not only taught, but also perfectly modeled his teaching!

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have wondered why this one personal letter was put into Paul's collection that then came into our New Testament. If Onesimus as Bishop put together the collection of Paul's letters, would he have left his own out? Not likely!

<sup>5</sup> Throughout, Ignatius will reference or quote multiple writings of Paul. See Ign 10:2 and Col. 1:23; Ign 16:1 and 1 Cor 6:9-10; Ign 18:1 and 1 Cor. 1:20.

Even at this early date, we see the seed of what will later become faith issues for the church. Ignatius is very Biblical as he writes of “Jesus the Christ” as “our God...conceived by Mary according to God’s plan, both from the seed of David and of the Holy Spirit” (18:2). Ignatius will add that Mary was a virgin when giving birth to Jesus (19:1).

The later church will find it important that Ignatius saw the Lord’s Supper (communion bread) as “the medicine of immortality” (20:2). This is seen as an early indication that the communal element was seen as a sacrament that brought specific blessings in that it is “the antidote we take in order not to die but to live forever in Christ Jesus” (20:2).

Ignatius closes his letter asking for prayer for his home church in Syria and continues on in his movement to death saying, “Farewell in God the Father and in Jesus Christ, our common hope” (21:2).

### *Magesian Letter*

In this letter, we see some of the distance that has spread between Judaism and Christianity. Ignatius writes of Judaism as an “antiquated practice” differing from our faith and the “newness of hope” in Jesus (9:1). The antiquated practice included “keeping the Sabbath,” but the newness of hope honors instead “the Lord’s day” (9:1). Ignatius said it was “utterly absurd to profess Jesus Christ and to practice Judaism.” For in Ignatius’s mindset, “Christianity did not believe in Judaism, but Judaism in Christianity” (10:3).

Ignatius stresses unity among the church in a passage reminiscent of Paul’s letter to the Ephesians. Paul wrote, “Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit – just as you were called to one hope...one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all” (Eph 4:3-6). Ignatius writes, “let there be one prayer, one petition, one mind, one hope, with love and blameless joy, which is Jesus Christ...run together as to one temple of God, as to one altar, to one Jesus Christ, who came forth from one Father and remained with the One and returned to the One” (7:1-2).

Ignatius ends this letter appealing for the prayers of the church for himself personally and for his home church. Ignatius tells them plainly “I need your prayer” (14:1). Then, he bids the church “farewell in godly harmony” (15:1).

### *Trallian Letter*

In this letter, as in the others, Ignatius clarifies that the church structure in these towns is that of a Bishop, a presbytery, and deacons. These three offices are considered core to the church (“without these, no group can be called a church”) (3:1). This thinking certainly shows a sophistication in church structure beyond that given in New Testament writings.

Ignatius urges the Trallians to purify their faith and walk. He wants them to guard against worldliness and heresy that in effect “mixes Jesus Christ with poison” (6:1). Ignatius then refutes some specific heresy about Christ and his work. Some were teaching denials of Jesus as a truly suffering Messiah. With Gnostic doctrines that we anticipate studying in more detail in a few weeks, it was taught that Jesus “suffered in appearance only” (10:1). Ignatius finds that absurd. If it were true, Ignatius says “why am I in chains? And why do I want to fight with wild beasts? If that is the case, I die for no reason; what is more, I am telling lies about the Lord” (10:1).

Because Ignatius was clear in his teaching on Christ. Jesus “was of the family of David” and was “the son of Mary.” What’s more, Jesus “really was born.” He “both ate and drank,” “really was persecuted under Pontius Pilate,” “really was crucified and died,” and “really was raised from the dead” (9:1-2). Ignatius believed this truth and believed it with all his heart. He was not just willing to die for it, but he was confident he would be raised from the grave.

As he closes his letter, Ignatius dedicates his spirit to those in the church noting God’s faithfulness in the face of his coming dangers.

### *Roman Letter*

The letter to the church at Rome was written in anticipation of Ignatius’s arrival. Ignatius wanted the church to know he was coming. Ignatius gives some insight into his thought processes as he writes almost poetically about his coming death in Rome. Ignatius notes that the Bishop from the “East” (Syria) fittingly dies in the “West” because in death he is setting (like the sun) from this world to rise again before God (2:2).

Ignatius does not want the church to try to free him. He insists, “I die for God of my own free will.” In what some may see as macabre, Ignatius says, “Let me be food for the wild beasts, through whom I can reach God. I am God’s wheat, and I am being ground by the teeth of the wild beasts, that I might prove to be pure bread” (4:1).

Ignatius tells the Romans that he is chained to ten Roman soldiers (“leopards”) who mistreat him more and more as Ignatius gets kinder and kinder. Yet, even in

this rough treatment that is accentuated with turning the other cheek, Bishop Ignatius wrote “because of their mistreatment I am becoming more of a disciple” (5:1).

Ignatius faces his death because, as Paul had written from a Roman imprisonment, it is better to die and be with Christ than to live on. In Paul’s words, “To live is Christ and to die is gain” (Phil. 1:21). For Ignatius, “It is better for me to die for Jesus Christ than to rule over the ends of the earth” (6:1).

Ignatius bids the Romans farewell “in the patient endurance of Jesus Christ” as they await his arrival and execution.

### *Philadelphian Letter*

Philadelphia is one of the churches that Ignatius visited on his way to Rome. When Ignatius wrote the church, it was after his visit, as he was drawing closer to Rome. The church impressed Ignatius. He found the church settled into God’s “mercy” and “firmly established in godly harmony.” The Bishop was a patient man who “accomplishes more through silence than others do by talking” (1:1). Ignatius also noted the Bishop’s holiness; “He is attuned to the commandments as a harp to its strings (1:2).

Ignatius reinforced the unity of the church. Again, in ways reminiscent of Paul in Ephesians and 1 Corinthians, Ignatius wrote of “one Eucharist (for there is one flesh of our Lord Jesus Christ, and one cup which leads to unity through his blood; there is one altar, just as there is one Bishop, together with the presbytery and the deacons)” (4:1).

Ignatius warned the church against Jewish teaching if the teaching did not “speak about Christ.” Those teachers were, to Ignatius, “tombstones and graves of the dead” (6:1).

Ignatius reminded the church of the need to follow the Bishop, presbytery, and deacons. This was critical at a time when there was no New Testament for the church membership. It was the assurance that the teaching was apostolic because these were the teachers set up by the apostles and their successors.

Even though the church was without the New Testament, the teaching followed by the church was not without scriptural moorings. The church held carefully to the authority of the Old Testament. They called it the “Archives.” In fact, when Ignatius was at the church teaching, Ignatius heard some people say, “If I do not find it in the archives [Old Testament], I do not believe it in the gospel.” When Ignatius would answer, “It is written,” the response from the church was, “That is



precisely the question!” Ignatius wanted the church to remember the preeminence of the gospel. So, he explained the “archives” are Jesus Christ. And “the inviolable archives are his cross and death and his resurrection and the faith which comes through him.” For these are the things that “justified!” (8:2)

Ignatius adds some personal notes including a message for his home church that he wishes sent. Ignatius then closes his letter with his final “Farewell in Christ Jesus, our common hope.”

### *Smyrnaen Letter*

This letter to the church at Smyrna is the second letter Ignatius wrote to a church already visited. The Church at Smyrna’s Bishop was Polycarp, who would get the last of Ignatius’s seven letters.

This church had clearly blessed Ignatius on his final journey. He speaks very highly of the church. No doubt this is a church that understood persecution. While the church didn’t have worldly riches, they were rich in their faith. We know these things from the letter John wrote to the church at Smyrna 15 years earlier. “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.” (Rev. 2:8-11)

Of course, it is fairly obvious that this precious letter from Jesus through revelation to John 15 years earlier would have been shared by the Smyrnaeans to Ignatius. In fact, it was after going through Smyrna that Ignatius wrote the Philadelphian letter just discussed. That was the letter where Ignatius echoed the concerns about false Jews and their teachings. It is also touching to consider the strength that Ignatius would have received from hearing the words of Jesus and John while in his chains about to perish a martyr’s death. The consolation that a crown was awaiting, that Jesus had foreseen this persecution, and that God had seen to a letter waiting for Ignatius and others who would see persecution, must have uplifted Ignatius.

So, it is that Ignatius mentions the Smyrnaeans as having “unshakable faith...totally convinced with regard to our Lord that he is truly of the family of David with respect to human descent, Son of God with respect to the divine will

and power, truly born of a virgin, baptized by John...truly nailed in the flesh for us under Pontius Pilate...in order that he might raise a banner for the ages through his resurrection” (1:1-2). Ignatius wrote these confirmations as he left to face wild beasts in death so the Smyrnaeans would be guarded “against wild beasts in human form” who would teach heresy on these points.

Ignatius held that wherever “Christ is, there is the church,” but Ignatius would not allow an agape feast or baptism without a Bishop (8:1-2).

Ignatius ends with his final farewell to that church “in the grace of God” (13:2).

In addition to the letters to the churches, Ignatius sent a seventh letter to Polycarp, Bishop of the church at Smyrna. We now consider Polycarp in more detail.

## 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. This would include Clement of Rome as well as Ignatius of Antioch.

Polycarp is also considered an Apostolic Father. Three Apostolic Father writings pertain to Polycarp. First, we have the letter from Ignatius of Antioch to Polycarp (not covered above). 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>6</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

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<sup>6</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). *The Didache* is also typically included in readings of the Apostolic Fathers.

Rome sometime in the 10 years or so before his martyrdom in discussions about the appropriate date for Easter celebration. Here we 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).

### *Ignatius's Letter to Polycarp*

Earlier we considered 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>7</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 167AD. That means by 81AD, Polycarp was "serving the Lord." If Ignatius wrote around 110AD, 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 wrote to Polycarp as an older and wiser man might write 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 to Polycarp for living and teaching. 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).

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<sup>7</sup>Smyrna received one of the other letters of Ignatius as well as one of John's seven letters contained in Revelation.

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.

### *Polycarp's Letter to the Philippians*

Notice 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 to which Polycarp wrote, 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>8</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, Philip. 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 had great respect for the writings we call the New Testament. Polycarp quoted 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

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<sup>8</sup> The translation we are using is that of Lightfoot and Harmer, edited and revised by Holmes (Baker 1992).

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>9</sup>

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 110AD, 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 the origins of which lost in antiquity, but it is an order set up very early.<sup>10</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

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<sup>9</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.”

<sup>10</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.

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 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>11</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 can 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>12</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

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<sup>11</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 (*katholika*), 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 became 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>12</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.

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 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 scare or concern him particularly.

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 unscinged. 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 was 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

1. *“Jesus said to him, ‘No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God’ (Lk 9:62).*

This is an amazing statement. It contains instructions and practical advice that, at certain times, I especially need. There are days that are easy to follow the Lord. Things fall into place. As the saying goes, the sun is out, and the wind behind me. But there are other days. Days of hassle, of stress, of uncertainty, of challenge. Those days are ones where as believers, we are to find the steps of life in Jesus’ teaching. There is no looking back. We plow. We work forward. The work may be easy, but the work may be hard. Either way, we move forward in faith, knowing there is one whose hand is upon us in love, in compassion, and with deliberateness. Our road is not random, nor is it walked alone. It is the road that God has prepared and we walk in his power, grace, and mercy.

I have yet to face a road as difficult as Ignatius’s or Polycarp’s. It makes me think twice before complaining!

2. *“And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose. For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified” (Rom 8:28-30).*

This goes part and parcel to the last point for home. This is the faith that sustains us day-by-day, difficulty-by-difficulty. May God be glorified by our ready demonstration of this faith.

3. *“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”* (Rev. 2:8-11).

John in the Revelation wrote this letter to the church where Polycarp was bishop. The letter must have made quite an impact on the bishop as he contemplated his martyrdom. It is amazing how God’s word provides what we need. The challenge for us is to store his Word up in our hearts and minds so that we can draw upon it as needed! Which brings up our memorization project!

### HOME WORK

To recap, we are memorizing 1 John this year in the English Standard Version. That amounts to two verses a week. To be current, we need to have memorized 1 John 1:1-8. This week we finish 1 John 1 adding the last two verses!

**1John 1:1** That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we looked upon and have touched with our hands, concerning the word of life— **2** the life was made manifest, and we have seen it, and testify to it and proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and was made manifest to us— **3** that which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you, so that you too may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. **4** And we are writing these things so that our joy may be complete.

**1:5** This is the message we have heard from him and proclaim to you, that God is light, and in him is no darkness at all. **6** If we say we have fellowship with him while we walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth. **7** But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin. **8** If we say

we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. <sup>9</sup> If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. <sup>10</sup> If we say we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us.