



SESSION 4: SIEGE OF JERUSALEM TO ST. IGNATIUS – READINGS

Excerpts from the Letters of Saint Ignatius Theophorus (God-bearer) of Antioch

I. On Bishops & Clergy.

A. Letter to Ephesians:

“But since love does not let me silent about you, I have undertaken to exhort you in accordance with God’s purpose. For Jesus Christ, our inseparable life, is the expressed purpose of the Father, just as the bishops who have been appointed throughout the world exist by the purpose of Jesus Christ. Therefore it is fitting for you to run your race together with the bishop’s purpose – as you do. For your presbytery – worthy of fame, worthy of God – is attuned to the bishop like strings to a lyre. Therefore by your unity and harmonious love Jesus Christ is sung. Each of you must be part of this chorus so that, being harmonious in unity, receiving God’s pitch in unison, you may sing with one voice through Jesus Christ to the Father, so that he may both hear you and recognize you, through what you do well, as members of his Son.”

B. Letter to Trallians:

“For when you subject yourselves to the bishop as to Jesus Christ, you appear to me to be living not in human fashion but like Jesus Christ, who died for us so that by believing in his death you might escape dying. Therefore it is necessary that, as is actually the case, you do nothing apart from the bishop... Those who are deacons of the mysteries of Jesus Christ must please all men in every way. For they are not ministers of food and drink but servants of the church of God; therefore they must guard themselves from accusations as from fire... Similarly all are to respect the deacons as Jesus Christ and the bishop as a copy of the Father and the presbyters as the council of God and the band of the apostles. For apart from these no group can be called a church... Use only Christian food and abstain from every strange plant, which is heresy. For they mingle Jesus Christ with themselves, feigning faith, providing something like a deadly drug with honeyed wine, which the ignorant man gladly takes with pleasure; and therein is death. Be on guard against such men. This will be the case for you if you are not puffed up but are inseparable from the God Jesus Christ and the bishop and the ordinances of the apostles. He who is within the sanctuary is pure; he who is outside the sanctuary is not pure – that is, whoever does anything apart from the bishop and the presbytery and the deacons is not pure in conscience.”

C. Letter to the Smyrnaeans:

“He who honors the bishop has been honored by God; he who does anything without the bishop’s knowledge worships the devil”

II. On Judaism.

A. Letter to Magnesians:

“It is absurd to talk of Jesus Christ and practice Judaism. For Christianity did not base its faith on Judaism, but Judaism on Christianity, in which ‘every language’ believing in God was ‘brought together’”.

B. Letter to Philadelphians:

“My brothers, I overflow with love for you, for I am exceedingly joyful to be watching out for your safety – not I, but Jesus Christ, for whom I am in bonds, though I fear all the more because I am still imperfect. But your prayer to God will make me perfect so that I may attain to the lot in which I was given mercy, fleeing to the gospel as to the flesh of Jesus and to the apostles as to the presbytery of the church. The prophets we also love because they made a proclamation related to the gospel and set their hope on him and were waiting for him, by believing in him they were saved, being united with Jesus Christ. Worthy of love and admiration, they are saints, attested by Jesus Christ and numbered together with us in the gospel of common hope. But if anyone interprets Judaism to you, do not listen to him. For it is better to hear Christianity from a man who has received circumcision than Judaism from one who has not. Both of them, if they do not speak of Jesus Christ, are tombstones to me and graves of the dead on which nothing but human names are inscribed. Flee, then, from the evil arts and snares of the prince of this age, lest you be afflicted by his scheming and grow weak in love. Come together, all of you, with an undivided heart.”

III. On Prayer & Forbearance.

Letter to Ephesians:

“And you must pray unceasingly for the others – for in them is hope for repentance – that they may attain to God. Therefore let them be instructed by you, at least by your deeds. With their wrath you be mild, with their boastful speech you be humble-minded, with their abuse you offer prayers, with their deceit you be firm in faith, with their cruelty you be gentle, not eager to imitate them. Let us be found their brothers in our forbearance; let us be eager to be imitators of the Lord, to see who can be the most wronged, defrauded, rejected – so that no plan of the devil may be found among you but that in complete purity and self-control you may remain in Jesus Christ, in flesh and in spirit.”

IV. On the Church.

Letter to Ephesians:

“Therefore be eager to meet more frequently for thanksgiving and glory to God. For when you frequently come together, the powers of Satan are destroyed and his destructive force is annihilated by the concord of your faith.”

On the Eucharist (and the Docetists).

Letter to Smyrnaeans:

“They abstain from Eucharist and prayer because they do not acknowledge that the Eucharist is the flesh of our Savior Jesus Christ which suffered for our sins, which the Father raised up by his goodness. Those who deny God’s gift are dying in their squabbles ;it would be better for them to love so that they may rise. It is fitting to keep away from such men and not to speak about them either privately or publicly, but to pay attention to the prophets and especially to the gospel, which in the passion has been explained to us and the resurrection has been accomplished.”

V. On Duties of the Bishop.

Letter to Polycarp:

“I exhort you, by the grace with which you are clothed, to press forward on your course and to exhort all men so that they may be saved. Vindicate your office with all care both fleshly and spiritual. Think upon unity, than which nothing is better. Lift up all men, as the Lord lifts you; put up with all in love, as you actually do. Be diligent in unceasing prayers; ask for more understanding than you have; watch with a sleepless spirit. Speak to each individual after the example of God; bear the sicknesses of all, as a perfect athlete. Where the labor is greatest, the gain is great.

If you have good disciples; it is no credit to you; instead, bring the more troublesome into subjection by gentleness. ‘Not all wounds are healed by the same plaster.’ ‘Relieve convulsions by moist applications.’

Be prudent as the serpent in every matter and sincere as the dove always. You are both fleshly and spiritual for this reason, that you may deal gently with what appears before your face; but ask that invisible things may be made manifest to you so that you may lack nothing and abound in every gift of grace. The occasion calls upon you to attain to God, just as pilots seek winds and the storm-tossed sailor the harbor. Be sober, as God’s athlete; the prize is imperishability and eternal life, as you have already been persuaded. In everything I am devoted to you – I and my bonds which you loved.

Do not let those who seem plausible but teach strange doctrine buffet you. Stand firm as a hammered anvil. Great athletes are battered, but yet they win. Especially for God’s sake we must endure everything so that he may put up with us. Be more diligent than you are. Understand the times. Wait for him who is above the moment of time...

Do not let the widows be neglected; after the Lord, you must be their guardian. Nothing is to be done without your approval, and you must do nothing without God – as indeed is your practice; stand firm. Meetings should be more frequent; seek out all individually...

Flee from evil arts, or indeed preach sermons about them. Tell my sisters to love the Lord and to be content with their husbands, both in flesh and in spirit. Similarly, in the name of Jesus Christ command my brothers to love their wives as the Lord loves the Church. If anyone is able to remain in purity, in honor of the Lord’s flesh, he must do so without boasting. If he boasts he is lost, and if it is made known to anyone but the bishop, he has been corrupted. It is fitting for men and women who

marry to be united with the bishop's consent, so that the marriage may be related to the Lord, not to lust. Everything is to be done in God's honor."

VI. On Martyrdom.

A. Letter to Ephesians:

“I am devoted to you and to those whom you sent in God’s honor to Smyrna, from which I write to you, thanking the Lord and loving Polycarp and you as well. Remember me, as Jesus Christ remembers you. Pray for the church in Syria, from which I am being led in bonds to Rome as the least of the faithful there, since I was judged worthy to serve God’s honor. Farewell in God the Father and in Jesus Christ, our common hope.”

B. Letter to Romans:

“I wish you not to please men but to please God, as you do please him. For I shall never have such an opportunity for attaining to God, nor do you, if you keep silent, have any better deed for which to be credited. For if you are silent about me, I am a word of God; but if you love my flesh, I shall again be only a voice. Grant me nothing more than to be poured forth to God while an altar is still ready... Only pray that I may have power, both within and without, so that I may not only be called a Christian but be found to be one. For if I am found to be one, I can also be called one, and then can be faithful when I disappear from the world... I am writing to all the churches and I command all men: I am voluntarily dying for God if you do not hinder me. I exhort you not to be an ‘inopportune favor’ to me. Let me be food for the wild beasts, through which I can attain to God. (I am the wheat of God and I am ground by the teeth of wild beasts so that I may be found pure bread of Christ.) Instead, entice the wild beasts so that they may become my tomb and leave no trace of my body, so that when I fall asleep I may not burden anyone. Then I shall be truly a disciple of Jesus Christ, when the world will not see my body at all. Pray to Christ for me that through these means I may be found a sacrifice to God... I would enjoy the beasts that have been prepared for me, and I pray that they may be found prompt for me; I will even coax them to consume me promptly – not as in the cases of some whom they were afraid to touch. Even if they are unwilling, I will force them. Indulge me; I know what is to my advantage; now I am beginning to be a disciple... My desire has been crucified and in me there is no matter-loving fire; there is water living and speaking in me, saying from within me, ‘Come to the Father’. I take no pleasure in the food of corruption or in the pleasures of this life. I desire the bread of God, which is the flesh of Jesus Christ (who was the seed of David), and for drink I desire his blood, which is imperishable love.”

The Creed of Saint Ignatius (recorded in 110AD):

“Turn a deaf ear to any speaker who avoids mention of Jesus Christ, who was of David’s line, born of Mary, who was truly born, ate and drank, was truly persecuted under Pontius Pilate, truly was crucified and died while those in heaven, on earth, and under the earth beheld it; who was also truly raised from the dead, the Father having raised him who in like manner will raise us also who believe in him. His Father, I say, will raise us in Christ Jesus, apart from whom we have not true life.”