

Ignatius of Antioch, *Letters* (c. 115)

Ignatius was bishop of Antioch in Syria at the beginning of the second century and was taken to Rome to be martyred, around the year AD 115. On the way he wrote seven letters, addressed to five churches in Asia Minor (at Ephesus, Magnesia, Tralles, Philadelphia and Smyrna), to the Roman church and to Polycarp, bishop of Smyrna. Polycarp went on to collect the letters and wrote one of his own as a covering letter for the collection. Ignatius's personality shines clearly through the letters and they are a most important source for our knowledge of the Christian church at this early and formative stage.

Ignatius is one of those who acquired a considerable posthumous literary heritage. Over the years further letters were added to the seven and these in turn were interpolated. Towards the end of the nineteenth century J.B. Lightfoot and other scholars managed to reconstruct the original texts and the authentic historical Ignatius again became visible. There do, however, remain minor uncertainties in detailed points of the text.

There are a number of themes that recur regularly in the letters:

- Ignatius saw two great threats facing the fledgling church, disunity and heresy, and warns repeatedly against them. In particular, he warns against Docetism, the belief that Jesus was human in outward appearance only.
- Ignatius is the first writer clearly to present the threefold pattern of ministry: one bishop in a church with his presbyters and deacons. He argues vigorously in defence of this pattern, an indication that it was not yet fully established. His letter to Rome is conspicuously silent about a single (monarchical) bishop there, showing that the threefold pattern had not yet reached the West. Ignatius's main concern is with the unity of the church. The bishop is seen as the focus of unity against both schism and heresy.
- He also sees the Eucharist as a focus of unity. He sees it as spiritual nourishment – 'breaking one bread, which is the medicine of immortality and the antidote to death, that we should live for ever in Jesus Christ' (Ignatius's *Letter to the Ephesians* 20).
- Finally, his own impending martyrdom preyed heavily on his mind and he welcomed it as the seal upon his discipleship. Through it he would become a true disciple, an imitator of Christ, and reach God. In places Ignatius's preoccupation with and longing for martyrdom can appear to be evidence of a mental instability, but it is unreasonable to expect someone facing up to being eaten by wild beasts to display a calm objectivity. In his letter to the Romans, most of which is found below, he repeatedly begs them not to work for his release whether by prayer or through political influence. At a time when many Christians are unwilling to make any significant sacrifices for their faith Ignatius's willingness to surrender his life comes as a stirring challenge.

The Letter to the Romans

1. Through prayer to God I have obtained the privilege of seeing your most worthy faces, and have been granted even more than I asked, for it is as a prisoner in Christ Jesus that I hope to greet you – if indeed it be God’s will that I be counted worthy of reaching the end. For the beginning has been well ordered, if I may obtain grace to cling to my lot without hindrance unto the end. But what worries me is that your love may do me an injury, for it is easy for you to do what you please but difficult for me to reach God, unless you spare me.

2. My desire is not to please men, but God, even as you please him. I shall never again have such an opportunity as this of reaching God and nor will you ever be entitled to the honour of a better work, just by keeping quiet. For if you keep quiet and leave me alone, I shall become God’s; but if you show your love to my flesh, I shall have to run my race again. Pray, then, do not seek to confer any greater favour upon me than that I be sacrificed to God while an altar is still prepared. Then, being gathered together in love, you may sing praise to the Father through Christ Jesus, for deeming me, the bishop of Syria, worthy to be summoned from the east to the west. It is good to set [in the west] from the world unto God, that I may rise again to him [in the east].

3. You have never envied any one; you have taught others. All I want now is for you to put into practice what you have taught. Just pray that I may have both inner and outer strength, that I may [genuinely] desire what I speak of and that I may not merely be called a Christian, but truly be found to be one. For if I be truly found [a Christian], I may also be called one and be deemed faithful at the point when I am no more visible to the world. Nothing visible is eternal. ‘For the things which are seen are temporal, but the things which are not seen are eternal’ [2 Corinthians 4:18]. For our God, Jesus Christ, is the more plainly visible now that he is with the Father. Christianity is not a matter of silence only, but also of [manifest] greatness.

4. I am writing to all the churches and assuring them that I shall die for God of my own free will – so long as you do not hinder me. I beg you not to show me an unseasonable kindness. Let me become food for the wild beasts, for it is through them that I can reach God. I am God’s wheat so let me be ground by the teeth of the wild beasts, that I may become the pure bread of Christ. Rather entice the wild beasts that they may become my tomb and may leave no part of my body behind, so that I may be no bother to any one after my death. It is when my body

shall be no longer visible to the world that I shall truly be a disciple of Christ. Entreat Christ for me, that through these beasts I may become a sacrifice to God. I am not commanding you, as Peter and Paul did. They were apostles, but I am a mere convict. They were free, but I am a slave to this very hour. But when I suffer, I shall be the freed-man of Jesus, and shall rise again free in him. Now that I am a prisoner I am learning not to desire anything worldly or vain.

5. From Syria as far as Rome I am fighting with wild beasts, by land and sea, by night and day, being bound to ten leopards – I mean a band of soldiers, who only grow worse when they are kindly treated. Their injuries are training me to be a disciple of Christ, ‘yet am I not justified by that’ [1 Corinthians 4:4]. May I enjoy the wild beasts that are prepared for me and I pray that I will find them eager to rush upon me. Indeed I will entice them to devour me speedily rather than not touch me out of fear, as they have done to some. If they are unwilling to attack me, I will force them to do so. Bear with me. I know what is expedient for me. It is now that I am beginning to be a disciple. Let no power, visible or invisible, envy me reaching Jesus Christ. Come fire and cross, come crowds of wild beasts, come tearing, breaking and dislocation of bones, come hacking off of limbs, come crushing of my whole body and come the cruel tortures of the devil. Only let me reach Jesus Christ!

6. All the pleasures of the world, and all the kingdoms of this earth, shall profit me nothing. It is better for me to die for Jesus Christ than to reign over all the ends of the earth. ‘For what shall it profit a man, if he gain the whole world but lose his own soul?’ [Matthew 16:26] Him I seek, who died for us. Him I desire, who rose again for our sake. The pangs of a new birth are upon me. Bear with me, brethren. Do not hinder me from living, do not desire my death. I desire to belong to God, so do not give me over to the world. Allow me to receive pure light. When I have gone there, I shall indeed be a man of God. Allow me to be an imitator of the passion of my God. If any one has God within himself, let him understand what I desire and let him have sympathy with me, knowing how I am straitened.

7. The prince of this world would happily carry me away and corrupt my disposition towards God. Let none of you [Romans] therefore help him; rather be on my side, that is on God’s side. Do not speak of Jesus Christ and yet set your desires on the world. Give no room to envy. Even though I myself, when I am with you, should exhort you to do so, do not listen to me then but rather give heed to what I am now writing to you. For though I am alive while I write to you, yet I am eager to die. My lust has been crucified and there is no fire of material desire in me, but only a living water that speaks to me within saying, ‘Come to

the Father'. I have no delight in corruptible food, nor in the pleasures of this life. I desire the bread of God, the heavenly bread, the bread of life, which is the flesh of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, who became afterwards of the seed of David and Abraham. And I desire the drink of God, namely his blood, which is incorruptible love and eternal life.

8. I no longer wish to live after the manner of men, and this my desire shall be fulfilled if you consent. Consent, then, that your desires may also be fulfilled. I entreat you in this brief letter; believe me. Jesus Christ will reveal these things to you, [so that you shall know] that I am speaking the truth. He is the mouth altogether free from falsehood, by which the Father has truly spoken. Pray for me, that I may reach [the object of my desire]. I have not written to you according to the flesh, but according to the will of God. If I shall suffer, it will be because you wished me [well]; but if I am rejected, it will be because you hated me.