

CHURCH HISTORY LITERACY

Lesson 6

Martyrs – Part Three

Ignatius

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.”¹

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 a witness who holds their testimony though it costs them their own life. A martyr has never been one 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 21st 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 two martyrdoms, Ignatius of Antioch’s and Polycarp’s. 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

¹ 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,² 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. Three of the letters were written to churches that he would have visited on his death march, had not the soldiers opted to take him by a more northerly route. These churches were at Ephesus, Magnesia, and Trallia. Ignatius also wrote ahead to the church at Rome so it might expect him soon.³

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

³ Ignatius had not visited these churches. Had his guards taken the southern route through Turkey, these would have been towns visited by Ignatius on his way to Rome. Because a Northern route was taken, Ignatius instead went through Philadelphia and Smyrna.

A bit later in the journey, Ignatius and the soldiers stopped at Troas before crossing the sea into Europe. In Troas, Ignatius sent off 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. We will address Bishop Polycarp more fully next week.

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 110 A.D. adds a final picture on an early church that was subject of at least two letters in our New Testament (Paul’s Ephesian letter and John’s Ephesian letter from the Revelation, written about 15 years before Ignatius’s letter).⁴

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 4th 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.”

This brings to note the observation readily made that Ignatius was very conversant with Paul’s writings. Most scholars recognize that by this time,

⁴ Additionally, we have the insight we glean from John’s gospel that was most likely written from Ephesus late in the first century.

Paul's letters were already in 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 the Onesimus was the same that was 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 would be one and the same. 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.⁵ That makes Ignatius's 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 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 out 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.⁶

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 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.

⁵ 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 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 letter, would he have left his own out? Not likely!

⁶ 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.

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!

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).

Magnesian Letter

In this letter, we get 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 in stead “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 both 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 advancement 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 over 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 hearing the words of Jesus and John while in his chains off 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. This letter we will save until next week when we deal with Polycarp in more detail.

POINTS FOR HOME

1. When God calls you, set your face to the wind and walk (a/k/a - when you put your hand to the plow, don't look back! Lk 9:62).
2. God gives you strength for your path whether you win or lose in the world's eyes (Ps 37:39).
3. We do not live for this world. We are in this world on our way home (Jn 17:14).
4. Our faith is in a real man, a real God, a real crucifixion, a real resurrection, and a real promise (Heb 12:2-3).