

40 Days with the Fathers

a daily reading plan

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First Edition

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Sample Chapter

About the Author

Luke has a BA (hons) in Biblical Studies and Theology and has been reading and studying the works of the Early Church Fathers for over five years.

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DAY 5

IGNATIUS OF ANTIOCH: LETTER TO THE EPHESIANS

Who: Ignatius converted at a young age and later became Bishop of Antioch. A friend of Polycarp and fellow disciple of John, there is a long standing tradition that Ignatius was the child that Jesus held in his arms and blessed in Mark 10:13-16

What: The letter has a strong call to and for unity within the church, along with respect for their bishop.

Why: Ignatius wrote a series of letters to the churches in Asia Minor whilst en route to Rome to face martyrdom by wild beasts in the Colosseum around 108 AD.

When: Around 107-108 AD

This is the third letter we have which was sent to the church in Ephesus. Other than Paul's letter to the Ephesian church, there was one other which is briefly mentioned in Revelation 2:1-7 as one of the seven churches in Asia to which Jesus sends a message to via John. The church was commended then for its perseverance and vigilance against false apostles and teachers, a virtue which appears to have been kept until Ignatius' time.

From the outset, there is a strong theme to this letter about having unity in the faith, something which Ignatius stresses. He repeatedly calls for this unity and commends the Ephesian church on it, especially for the fact that no sects have cropped up from within. Ignatius is also very pleased that the whole congregation came to visit him whilst en route to be executed — something which he was apparently looking forward to, *“so by martyrdom [he] may indeed become the disciple of [Jesus]”*!

Ignatius also has a lot of respect for Onesimus,¹ bishop of this church in Ephesus, and really sings his praises throughout the first few chapters. The man sounds quite something, but I especially liked this imagery that Ignatius uses to describe how well suited this man is for the position of bishop, “like strings to a harp” which makes the rest of the church sing in unity:

For your justly renowned presbytery, worthy of God, is

1 Possibly the same Onesimus mentioned by Paul in Colossians 4:9 and Philemon 1:8-10, though scholarship and tradition differ on this.

fitted as exactly to the bishop as the strings are to the harp. Therefore in your concord and harmonious love, Jesus Christ is sung.

Chapter six has warnings against false teachers, which, by the statement about Christ's nature that follows, would seem to be combating Docetism like Polycarp's letter also did. But whereas Polycarp referenced 1 John 4 as a defence, Ignatius gives us an early glimpse of the view of Christ's deity and dual nature:

There is one Physician who is possessed both of flesh and spirit; both made and not made; God existing in flesh; true life in death; both of Mary and of God; first passible and then impassible, even Jesus Christ our Lord ... God Himself being manifested in human form for the renewal of eternal life.

Considering the date of this letter, this in itself is a good apologetic against the more recent false claims that Jesus was only “made” divine at the Council of Nicea, when the gathered bishops and Emperor Constantine “decided” to alter centuries of Church doctrine and make Jesus into more than he supposedly was.² This is, of course, total nonsense and even a cursory reading of Church History and the documents *from* the Council would dispel this notion, but the internet being what it is makes these heresies survive. But I digress.

2 This modern heresy is perpetrated by a group called the *Hebrew Roots Movement*, which goes as far as denying the Trinity, deity of Christ and enforces the Law on its followers.

Towards the end of the letter, Ignatius also gives us an overview of the gospel, and from what I understand, one of the earliest extra-biblical accounts for the virgin birth:³

For our God, Jesus Christ, was, according to the appointment of God, conceived in the womb by Mary, of the seed of David, but by the Holy Ghost.

Along with more calls and praises for unity, Ignatius seems to have very clear views on Church structure and hierarchy in regards to obeying the presbyters and deacons, and imitating them as they imitate Christ; along with a similar encouragement found in Hebrews⁴ to meet regularly together in the same place because, as he says, “*the powers of Satan are destroyed ... by the unity of your faith*”.

The insight on Communion (or the Eucharist) which this letter gives us, is also quite interesting as Ignatius writes that the breaking of bread “*is the medicine of immortality, and the antidote to prevent us from dying*” which will enable us to “*live forever in Jesus Christ*”.

It's a very interesting letter, with some unique insights into the theology of the early church and the importance of unity amongst the believers. There is a

3 The very fact that Ignatius mentions this without any further explanation, along with the date of this letter, is a great witness and testimony in itself to the doctrine being accepted within the Church long before this letter was penned.

4 cf. Hebrews 10:25

lot of repetition though, where Ignatius really labours his point about unity. But in the face of persecution, heresy and false teachers trying to infiltrate and cause divisions in the church, it's understandable why he would get passionate about those within this congregation standing strong and together in the faith.

May we also have this same passion for our fellow brothers and sisters in Christ.

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