

# St. Ignatius of Antioch

## Letter to the Ephesians

*Translated by Cyril Richardson*

Heartiest greetings of pure joy in Jesus Christ from Ignatius, the “God-inspired,” to the church at Ephesus in Asia. Out of the fullness of God the Father you have been blessed with large numbers and are predestined from eternity to enjoy forever continual and unfading glory. The source of your unity and election is genuine suffering which you undergo by the will of the Father and of Jesus Christ, our God. Hence you deserve to be considered happy.

**1** I gave a godly welcome to your church which has so endeared itself to us by reason of your upright nature, marked as it is by faith in Jesus Christ, our Saviour, and by love of him. You are imitators of God; and it was God’s blood that stirred you up once more to do the sort of thing you do naturally and have now done to perfection. For you were all zeal to visit me when you heard that I was being shipped as a prisoner from Syria for the sake of our common Name and hope. I hope, indeed, by your prayers to have the good fortune to fight with wild beasts in Rome, so that by doing this I can be a real disciple. In God’s name, therefore, I received your large congregation in the person of Onesimus, your bishop in this world, a man whose love is beyond words. My prayer is that you should love him in the spirit of Jesus Christ and all be like him. Blessed is He who let you have such a bishop. You deserved it.

**2** Now about my fellow slave Burrhus, your godly deacon, who has been richly blessed. I very much want him to stay with me. He will thus bring honor on you and the bishop. Crocus too, who is a credit both to God and to you, and whom I received as a model of your love, altogether raised my spirits (May the Father of Jesus Christ grant him a similar comfort!), as did Onesimus, Burrhus, Euplus, and Fronto. In them I saw and loved you all. May I always be glad about you, that is, if I deserve to be! It is right, then, for you to render all glory to Jesus Christ, seeing he has glorified you. Thus, united in your submission, and subject to the bishop and the presbytery, you will be real saints.

**3** I do not give you orders as if I were somebody important. For even if I am a prisoner for the Name, I have not yet reached Christian perfection. I am only beginning to be a disciple, so I address you as my fellow students. I needed your coaching in faith, encouragement, endurance, and patience. But since love forbids me to keep silent about you, I hasten to urge you to harmonize your actions with God’s mind. For Jesus Christ — that life from which we can’t be torn — is the Father’s mind, as the bishops too, appointed the world over, reflect the mind of Jesus Christ.

**4** Hence you should act in accord with the bishop’s mind, as you surely do. Your presbytery, indeed, which deserves its name and is a credit to God, is as closely tied to the bishop as the strings to a harp. Wherefore your accord and harmonious love is a hymn to Jesus Christ. Yes, one and all, you should form yourselves into a choir, so that, in perfect harmony and taking your pitch from God, you may sing in unison and with one voice to the Father through Jesus Christ. Thus he will

heed you, and by your good deeds he will recognize you are members of his Son. Therefore you need to abide in irreproachable unity if you really want to be God's members forever.

**5** If in so short a time I could get so close to your bishop — I do not mean in a natural way, but in a spiritual — how much more do I congratulate you on having such intimacy with him as the Church enjoys with Jesus Christ, and Jesus Christ with the Father. That is how unity and harmony come to prevail everywhere. Make no mistake about it. If anyone is not inside the sanctuary, he lacks God's bread. And if the prayer of one or two has great avail, how much more that of the bishop and the total Church. He who fails to join in your worship shows his arrogance by the very fact of becoming a schismatic. It is written, moreover, "God resists the proud." Let us, then, heartily avoid resisting the bishop so that we may be subject to God.

**6** The more anyone sees the bishop modestly silent, the more he should revere him. For everyone the Master of the house sends on his business, we ought to receive as the One who sent him. It is clear, then, that we should regard the bishop as the Lord himself. Indeed, Onesimus spoke very highly of your godly conduct, that you were all living by the truth and harboring no sectarianism. Nay, you heed nobody beyond what he has to say truthfully about Jesus Christ.

**7** Some, indeed, have a wicked and deceitful habit of flaunting the Name about, while acting in a way unworthy of God. You must avoid them like wild beasts. For they are mad dogs which bite on the sly. You must be on your guard against them, for it is hard to heal their bite. There is only one physician — of flesh yet spiritual, born yet unbegotten, God incarnate, genuine life in the midst of death, sprung from Mary as well as God, first subject to suffering then beyond it — Jesus Christ our Lord.

**8** Let no one mislead you, as, indeed, you are not misled, being wholly God's. For when you harbor no dissension that can harass you, then you are indeed living in God's way. A cheap sacrifice I am, but I dedicate myself to you Ephesians — a church forever famous. Carnal people cannot act spiritually, or spiritual people carnally, just as faith cannot act like unbelief, or unbelief like faith. But even what you do in the flesh you do spiritually. For you do everything under Christ's control.

**9** I have heard that some strangers came your way with a wicked teaching. But you did not let them sow it among you. You stopped up your ears to prevent admitting what they disseminated. Like stones of God's Temple, ready for a building of God the Father, you are being hoisted up by Jesus Christ, as with a crane (that's the cross!), while the rope you use is the Holy Spirit. Your faith is what lifts you up, while love is the way you ascend to God.

You are all taking part in a religious procession, carrying along with you your God, shrine, Christ, and your holy objects, and decked out from tip to toe in the commandments of Jesus Christ. I too am enjoying it all, because I can talk with you in a letter, and congratulate you on changing your old way of life and setting your love on God alone.

**10** "Keep on praying" for others too, for there is a chance of their being converted and getting to God. Let them, then, learn from you at least by your actions. Return their bad temper with gentleness; their boasts with humility; their abuse with prayer. In the face of their error, be "steadfast in the faith." Return their violence with mildness and do not be intent on getting your

own back. By our patience let us show we are their brothers, intent on imitating the Lord, seeing which of us can be the more wronged, robbed, and despised. Thus no devil's weed will be found among you; but thoroughly pure and self-controlled, you will remain body and soul united to Jesus Christ.

**11** The last days are here. So let us abase ourselves and stand in awe of God's patience, lest it turn out to be our condemnation. Either let us fear the wrath to come or let us value the grace we have: one or the other. Only let our lot be genuine life in Jesus Christ. Do not let anything catch your eye besides him, for whom I carry around these chains — my spiritual pearls! Through them I want to rise from the dead by your prayers. May I ever share in these, so that I may be numbered among the Ephesian Christians who, by the might of Jesus Christ, have always been of one mind with the very apostles.

**12** I realize who I am and to whom I am writing. I am a convict; you have been freed. I am in danger; you are safe. You are the route for God's victims. You have been initiated into the mysteries with Paul, a real saint and martyr, who deserves to be congratulated. When I come to meet God may I follow in his footsteps, who in all his letters mentions your union with Christ Jesus.

**13** Try to gather together more frequently to celebrate God's Eucharist and to praise him. For when you meet with frequency, Satan's powers are overthrown and his destructiveness is undone by the unanimity of your faith. There is nothing better than peace, by which all strife in heaven and earth is done away.

**14** You will not overlook any of this if you have a thorough belief in Jesus Christ and love him. That is the beginning and end of life: faith the beginning and love the end. And when the two are united you have God, and everything else that has to do with real goodness is dependent on them. No one who professes faith falls into sin, nor does one who has learned to love, hate. "The tree is known by its fruit." Similarly, those who profess to be Christ's will be recognized by their actions. For what matters is not a momentary act of professing, but being persistently motivated by faith.

**15** It is better to keep quiet and be real, than to chatter and be unreal. It is a good thing to teach if, that is, the teacher practices what he preaches. There was one such Teacher, who "spoke and it was done"; and what he did in silence is worthy of the Father. He who has really grasped what Jesus said can appreciate his silence. Thus he will be perfect: his words will mean action, and his very silence will reveal his character.

The Lord overlooks nothing. Even secrets are open to him. Let us, then, do everything as if he were dwelling in us. Thus we shall be his temples and he will be within us as our God — as he actually is. This will be clear to us just to the extent that we love him rightly.

**16** Make no mistake, my brothers: adulterers will not inherit God's Kingdom. If, then, those who act carnally suffer death, how much more shall those who by wicked teaching corrupt God's faith for which Jesus Christ was crucified. Such a vile creature will go to the unquenchable fire along with anyone who listens to him.

**17** The reason the Lord let the ointment be poured on his head was that he might pass on the aroma of incorruption to the Church. Do not be anointed with the foul smell of the teaching of the prince of this world, lest he capture you and rob you of the life ahead of you. Why do we not all come to our senses by accepting God's knowledge, which is Jesus Christ? Why do we stupidly perish, ignoring the gift which the Lord has really sent?

**18** I am giving my life (not that it's worth much!) for the cross, which unbelievers find a stumbling block, but which means to us salvation and eternal life. "Where is the wise man? Where is the debater?" Where are the boasts of those supposedly intelligent? For our God, Jesus the Christ, was conceived by Mary, in God's plan being sprung both from the seed of David and from the Holy Spirit. He was born and baptized that by his Passion he might hallow water.

**19** Now, Mary's virginity and her giving birth escaped the notice of the prince of this world, as did the Lord's death — those three secrets crying to be told, but wrought in God's silence. How, then, were they revealed to the ages? A star shone in heaven brighter than all the stars. Its light was indescribable and its novelty caused amazement. The rest of the stars, along with the sun and the moon, formed a ring around it; yet it outshone them all, and there was bewilderment whence this unique novelty had arisen. As a result all magic lost its power and all witchcraft ceased. Ignorance was done away with, and the ancient kingdom was utterly destroyed, for God was revealing himself as a man, to bring newness of eternal life. What God had prepared was now beginning. Hence everything was in confusion as the destruction of death was being taken in hand.

**20** If Jesus Christ allows me, in answer to your prayers, and it is his will, I will explain to you more about plan in a second letter I intend to write. I have only touched on this plan in reference to the New Man Jesus Christ, and how it involves believing in him and loving him, and entails his Passion and resurrection. I will do this especially if the Lord shows me that you are all, every one of you, meeting together under the influence of the grace that we owe to the Name, in one faith and in union with Christ, who was "descended from David according to the flesh" and is Son of man and Son of God. At these meetings you should heed the bishop and presbytery attentively, and break one loaf, which is the medicine of immortality, and the antidote which wards off death but yields continuous life in union with Jesus Christ.

**21** I am giving my life for you and for those whom you, to God's honor, sent to Smyrna. I am writing to you from there, giving the Lord thanks and embracing Polycarp and you too in my love. Bear me in mind, as Jesus Christ does you. Pray for the church in Syria, whence I am being sent off to Rome as a prisoner. I am the least of the faithful there — yet I have been privileged to serve God's honor. Farewell in God the Father and in Jesus Christ, our common hope.