

St. Ignatius of Antioch

Letter to the to the Trallians

Translated by Cyril Richardson

Full hearty greetings in apostolic style, and every good wish from Ignatius, the “God-inspired,” to the holy church at Tralles in Asia. You are dear to God, the Father of Jesus Christ, elect and a real credit to him, being completely at peace by reason of the Passion of Jesus Christ, who is our Hope, since we shall rise in union with him.

1 Well do I realize what a character you have — above reproach and steady under strain. It is not just affected, but it comes naturally to you, as I gathered from Polybius, your bishop. By God’s will and that of Jesus Christ, he came to me in Smyrna, and so heartily congratulated me on being a prisoner for Jesus Christ that in him I saw your whole congregation. I welcomed, then, your godly good will, which reached me by him, and I gave thanks that I found you, as I heard, to be following God.

2 For when you obey the bishop as if he were Jesus Christ, you are (as I see it) living not in a merely human fashion but in Jesus Christ’s way, who for our sakes suffered death that you might believe in his death and so escape dying yourselves. It is essential, therefore, to act in no way without the bishop, just as you are doing. Rather submit even to the presbytery as to the apostles of Jesus Christ. He is our Hope, and if we live in union with him now, we shall gain eternal life. Those too who are deacons of Jesus Christ’s “mysteries” must give complete satisfaction to everyone. For they do not serve mere food and drink, but minister to God’s Church. They must therefore avoid leaving themselves open to criticism, as they would shun fire.

3 Correspondingly, everyone must show the deacons respect. They represent Jesus Christ, just as the bishop has the role of the Father, and the presbyters are like God’s council and an apostolic band. You cannot have a church without these. I am sure that you agree with me in this.

In your bishop I received the very model of your love, and I have him with me. His very bearing is a great lesson, while his gentleness is most forceful. I imagine even the godless respect him.

While I could write about this matter more sharply, I spare you out of love. Since, too, I am a convict, I have not thought it my place to give you orders like an apostle.

4 God has granted me many an inspiration, but I keep my limits, lest boasting should be my undoing. For what I need most at this point is to be on my guard and not to heed flatterers. Those who tell me... they are my scourge. To be sure, I am ever so eager to be a martyr, but I do not know if I deserve to be. Many people have no notion of my impetuous ambition. Yet it is all the more a struggle for me. What I need is gentleness by which the prince of this world is overthrown.

5 Am I incapable of writing to you of heavenly things? No, indeed; but I am afraid to harm you, seeing you are mere babes. You must forgive me, but the chances are you could not accept what I have to say and would choke yourselves. Even in my own case, it is not because I am a prisoner and can grasp heavenly mysteries, the ranks of the angels, the array of principalities, things visible and invisible — it is not because of all that that I am a genuine disciple as yet. There is plenty missing, if we are not going to be forsaken by God.

6 I urge you, therefore — not I, but Jesus Christ's love — use only Christian food. Keep off foreign fare, by which I mean heresy. For those people mingle Jesus Christ with their teachings just to gain your confidence under false pretenses. It is as if they were giving a deadly poison mixed with honey and wine, with the result that the unsuspecting victim gladly accepts it and drinks down death with fatal pleasure.

7 Be on your guard, then, against such people. This you will do by not being puffed up and by keeping very close to God, Jesus Christ, and the bishop and the apostles' precepts. Inside the sanctuary a man is pure; outside he is impure. That means: whoever does anything without bishop, presbytery, and deacons does not have a clear conscience.

8 It is not because I have heard of any such thing in your case that I write thus. No, in my love for you I am warning you ahead, since I foresee the devil's wiles. Recapture, then, your gentleness, and by faith (that's the Lord's flesh) and by love (that's Jesus Christ's blood) make yourselves new creatures. Let none of you hold anything against his neighbor. Do not give the heathen opportunities whereby God's people should be scoffed at through the stupidity of a few. For, "Woe to him by whose folly my name is scoffed at before any."

9 Be deaf, then, to any talk that ignores Jesus Christ, of David's lineage, of Mary; who was really born, ate; and drank; was really persecuted under Pontius Pilate; was really crucified and died, in the sight of heaven and earth and the underworld. He was really raised from the dead, for his Father raised him, just as his Father will raise us, who believe on him, through Christ Jesus, apart from whom we have no genuine life.

10 And if, as some atheists (I mean unbelievers) say, his suffering was a sham (it's really *they* who are a sham!), why, then, am I a prisoner? Why do I want to fight with wild beasts? In that case I shall die to no purpose. Yes, and I am maligning the Lord too!

11 Flee, then, these wicked offshoots which produce deadly fruit. If a man taste of it, he dies outright. They are none of the Father's planting. For had they been, they would have shown themselves as branches of the cross, and borne immortal fruit. It is through the cross, by his suffering, that he summons you who are his members. A head cannot be born without limbs, since God stands for unity. It is his nature.

12 From Smyrna I send you my greetings in which the churches of God that are here with me join. They have altogether raised my spirits — yes, completely. My very chains which I carry around for Jesus Christ's sake, in my desire to get to God, exhort you, "Stay united and pray for one another!"

It is right that each one of you and especially the presbyters should encourage the bishop, in honor of the Father, Jesus Christ, and the apostles.

Out of love I want you to heed me, so that my letter will not tell against you. Moreover, pray for me. By God's mercy I need your love if I am going to deserve the fate I long for, and not prove a "castaway."

13 The Smyrnaeans and Ephesians send their greetings with love. Remember the church of Syria in your prayers. I am not worthy to be a member of it: I am the least of their number. Farewell in Jesus Christ. Submit to the bishop as to law, and to the presbytery too. All of you, love one another with an undivided heart. My life is given for you, not only now but especially when I shall get to God. I am still in danger. But the Father is faithful: he will answer my prayer and yours because of Jesus Christ. Under his influence may you prove to be spotless.