

8. IGNATIUS, THE BISHOP OF ANTIOCH

Rome has a new emperor again. Who is he? Is he another barbarian like Nero or Domitian?

After the death of Domitian, another emperor ruled briefly. But if I mention all the names of the emperors who sat on Rome's imperial throne, it will become too complicated. So, we will only tell you about the most important ones.



Emperor Trajan 53-117 AD

Emperor Trajan was now the ruler of the Roman world empire. He was not a cruel man; oh no, Trajan was a just emperor, who worked for the wellbeing of his country and people. The Romans respected him, they loved their emperor, and yet Trajan persecuted the Christians.

Why? Well, paganism was rapidly losing its influence. In many cities, the pagan temples were abandoned. However, Trajan was not happy about that. No, no, their religion may not disappear! Paganism, the ancient worship of idols, must be retained.

But the Christians did not want to acknowledge the emperor as a god. They did not partake in emperor worship. They submitted to the authority of the emperor; they submitted to the laws, but they refused to revere him as a god. They refused

to sacrifice to the statue of the emperor. Therefore, though Trajan was fair in other ways, he did persecute the Christians.

During his reign, the first law against the Christians was passed. The emperor banned Christianity, and those who still were or became Christian were punishable. Trajan's rule was a dark time for God's Church. The blood of martyrs flowed again. Christians were not safe for a moment.

Persecution flared, first in one city, then in another. The pagan priests, who were furious because their temples were almost empty, stirred up the people and the rulers against the despised Christians.

One ruler *would* listen to the accusations, and bloody persecution would follow. Another ruler would *not* listen to the vicious slander, and in his area, the church had some peace. So, during Trajan's reign, there was no persecution throughout the entire nation, but the Christians were persecuted in certain areas.

GOVERNOR PLINY OF BITHYNIA

During emperor Trajan's reign, the Roman ruler Pliny governed Bithynia, a province of Asia Minor. Very many Christians lived in that province.

This prompted the pagan priests to go to the governor and say:

"Pliny, you must have the Christians persecuted, for the current situation is desperate. Hardly anyone worships the gods anymore. Our temples are almost deserted. If you do not do something, the worship of the gods is going to collapse."

Yes, this makes it difficult for the ruler. They were forcing him to persecute, and if he refused, they would tell the emperor. He did not want that either. That's how persecution also began there. But there were so many Christians, that Pliny did not know where to start. Christians were not only found among the poor, but even wealthy and prominent people had turned away from paganism to Christianity. Should he track down all

those people and put them to death? ... He did not know.



Pliny, the younger. Politician, judge, author and governor of Bithynia. 61-113 AC

Guess what? He decided to ask the emperor. He wrote a letter to Trajan in which he asked for advice. "What must I do," he asks. "I have summoned several Christians. I asked them repeatedly if they were Christians, and when each

time they frankly admitted it, I finally had them put to death. One day I also received a note which listed the names of some people. According to that note, they were Christians. But when I had summoned those people, they solemnly declared that they were not Christians. They called upon the gods. They sacrificed to your statute and spoke scornfully about Christ. So, I let them go because they were not Christians. However, I have never been able to compel true Christians to deny their faith. They would rather die than curse their Christ. They stubbornly *refuse* to call upon the gods. True Christians will never do such a thing."

In that same letter, he also wrote that he had tortured two women to find out what the Christians did at their meetings. "They told me that some days they came together before sunrise to sing songs to the glory of God." Pliny sent this letter to Rome.

After some time, he receives a response from emperor Trajan. Pliny quickly opened the letter and read:

"You have acted appropriately. You need not track down the Christians, but if they are charged and delivered to you, then you must investigate the matter. If they repent from their errors and worship the gods, you may set them free. But if they stubbornly refuse to do so, they must be severely punished and put to death."

That was the emperor's response. Do not track them down but wait until the Christians are betrayed and charged by others. That's why in one city the persecution raged, but in another, the Christians were left in peace. But altogether, through all those regional persecutions, there were still many victims.

SIMEON THE MARTYR

An old man stumbles through the streets of Jerusalem. His hair is grey because of his great age. His hands are shackled, and pitiless soldiers are roughly pushing him along. His knees tremble, but he must keep moving onwards. He is not allowed to rest, even for a moment. Soon he stands before the Roman governor.

Roughly the governor asks him:

"Are you a Christian?"

The prisoner raises his old head and answers confidently and with joy:

"Yes, I am a Christian."

Who is this grey-haired man? His name is Simeon. He is a minister in Jerusalem. The congregation at Jerusalem was entrusted to his care. Simeon is 120 years old already! He is a relative of the Lord Jesus. The Bible says he was a son of Cleophas and Mary. This Mary was a sister of Mary, the mother of the Lord Jesus.

This very old man was taken prisoner, and he openly confesses to the governor that he is a Christian. The face of the haughty Roman flushes red with anger, and he thinks:

"I will soon see if this old fool will still say 'Yes' so cheerfully."

He commands to have the old man whipped. Soon, the whip mercilessly lashes Simeon's bare back. It is not limited to just one beating. Day after day, that aged Simeon is whipped. The governor tries to make him renounce his faith.

But no matter how much the old man is tortured, he does not deny his Saviour. The governor marvels at the perseverance of the old Simeon. Finally, he commands to have him crucified. With devilish pleasure, his soldiers obey.

Soon Simeon hangs between heaven and earth on the tree of shame. Only a few more hours of

severe torture, then this grey-haired man is delivered from his suffering and sings praises before God's throne.

Simeon is only one of the many martyrs put to death during the reign of emperor Trajan.

IGNATIUS

North of the land of Canaan, on the edge of the Mediterranean Sea, lies the beautiful city of Antioch. Paul's missionary journeys began from this city with its many beautiful buildings and temples. Antioch also had a flourishing Christian church. It was there that the followers of Jesus of Nazareth were first called 'Christians'.

During the reign of emperor Trajan, that beautiful city was devastated by a terrible earthquake. The ground heaved, and houses and temples creaked and collapsed. The inhabitants ran screaming into the streets. In mortal fear, everyone tried to save themselves. Many perished in that calamity. They were either buried by the collapsing houses or trampled by those who fled in utter panic. That terrible earthquake destroyed a third of that beautiful city. What a terrible catastrophe! Emperor Trajan visits Antioch soon after that destructive earthquake. He is travelling east with his soldiers, as war has broken out between the Romans and Parthians. While the east prepares for the approaching conflict, emperor Trajan pays a visit to that severely devastated city.

The Christians are blamed for that terrible disaster.

Why?

The gods have become angry because Christians do not sacrifice to them! Therefore, their vengeance struck the city, and an earthquake destroyed Antioch. That is the malicious rumour the pagan priests spread to stir up the population.

When Trajan visits the pagan temple to sacrifice to the gods, the priests also stir up the emperor against the Christians. The Christians are blamed for all that has happened. Trajan believes it and becomes furious. He commands that the old bishop of the congregation at Antioch be arrested and brought before him. That aged bishop is...Ignatius.

Ignatius has been the minister and teacher of the congregation at Antioch for many years. His labour was richly blessed during this time. As a youth, Ignatius received instruction from the apostle John; he was one of John's students.

During the reign of Domitian, the Christian church at Antioch was not persecuted. They had left Ignatius in peace. But now he stands before Trajan as a prisoner. The emperor glares at the faithful preacher and eventually says:

"Who are you, evil spirit, who dares to risk transgressing my

laws? What is more, you are to blame for the disobedience of other people as well!"

Fearlessly, Ignatius looks at the angry emperor and answers, "I am no evil spirit, a servant of the most high God has nothing in common with evil spirits. I am a temple of the Holy Spirit!"

"What is that?" Trajan asks searchingly.

Ignatius answer is clear: "A temple of the Holy Spirit is a person in whose heart Christ lives".

"Our gods live in our hearts as well", says Trajan, and he adds: "The gods help us in the wars against our enemies".

Boldly Ignatius answers: "Oh no, you are mistaken, your gods are not gods. There is but one God Who created heaven and earth, there is but one Christ".

Contemptuously the emperor asks: "Do you mean that cursed One, Who was crucified by Pontius Pilate?"

Ignatius calmly answers, "Yes, I mean Him!"

"Is that so," the emperor sneers "and does that crucified One live in your heart?"



Ignatius. 35 AD-108 AD

Fearlessly Ignatius answers:

“Yes, *that* Christ lives in my heart. I wholeheartedly serve *that* Christ. He suffered for my sins. He died for me so that He could deliver me from Satan.”

Trajan’s lips curl in a scornful smile.

“Well then,” he declares sternly, “I command that Ignatius, who claims that Christ lives in his heart, be taken to Rome and be thrown to the wild animals”. That’s how Trajan pronounces the death sentence on Ignatius.

What is Ignatius' response?

Does he turn pale when he hears that horrific sentence? Does he fall on his knees before that mighty emperor, trembling and shaking, and beg for forgiveness? Oh no, on the contrary! A radiant smile covers his wrinkled face. He folds his hands, lifts his eyes heavenward, and cries out: “I thank You, Lord, that I, as Paul, will be bound and sent to Rome.”

This prayer clearly shows that Ignatius does not fear death for he knows that his Saviour has forgiven his sins. He knows that his Saviour has, with the price of His blood, prepared a place for him in eternal glory.

Some days later Ignatius leaves the city of Antioch for good, where he had preached for so many years. Ten Roman soldiers carefully guard him. Those arrogant Romans provoke and torment that old man continually. Later, Ignatius described it as being among leopards.

On his way to Rome, he writes letters to the various churches in the area. They travel by ship, and it appears that they had to battle many storms and headwinds. Whenever they dock in a harbour, Christians stream in from the whole district to farewell their beloved preacher. Many cry when they shake his hand for the last time here on earth, but Ignatius does not cry. His eyes shine with heavenly joy.

He earnestly tells them:

“I am God's wheat, and the teeth of the wild animals will grind me.” He longs for death.

When the boat docks at Smyrna, Polycarp also arrives to bid him farewell. Polycarp was also a

student of the apostle John and is bishop or minister of the congregation at Smyrna. I will tell you about Polycarp in the next chapter.

Everywhere, Ignatius' many friends come to farewell him. His journey to Rome resembles a triumphal march. They finally arrive in Rome, the great metropolis. Immediately, Ignatius is taken to the amphitheatre. The roar of wild animals is heard far and wide. People shudder at the sound of it. However, Ignatius does not shudder. He is happy that finally, the end is near. The Christians from Rome also come to farewell Ignatius.

They want to try to free him, but Ignatius pleads: “Oh no, please do not try that! I long for my Saviour. Let the wild animals come. I do not fear them.”

They bring him into the arena, the open space in the centre of the amphitheatre. Thousands of spectators fill the benches. There he stands, the grey-haired servant of the Lord. He looks around quietly and calmly, as death rapidly approaches. Would we also face death so calmly? It becomes very quiet in the amphitheatre. Everyone holds their breath. The peaceful, even royal bearing of Ignatius commands respect from friend and foe.

With a grinding noise, some steel doors are drawn up, and the arena echoes with the roar of the lions who come stalking out. Ignatius calmly observes those bloodthirsty predators. With leaps and bounds, they approach the preacher. Then they have him. Just one awful moment, and then?

Ignatius is in heaven. His body is torn to pieces by the starved animals, but he does not feel it, because his soul is with Jesus his Saviour.

The spectacle is over. The thousands of spectators return home.

Only a few bones are left on the ground. The lions are driven back into their cages.

But look, several men sneak into the arena.

Cautiously, and with respect, they gather up those bones and leave with tears in their eyes. Who are they? They are some of Ignatius' friends from Antioch who had travelled with their minister to



The death of Ignatius. 35 AD-108 AD

Rome. Now they return to Antioch with the few remains of their beloved bishop. Those few bones are buried in Antioch, and there they remain till the Lord Jesus appears on the clouds of heaven. Then Ignatius will rise from the grave. Then with body and soul, he shall forever praise and glorify his Saviour.

Happy Ignatius! For him, death was not a punishment but a blessing. For him, death was simply a passage into eternal glory. Although the devil could kill his body, he could not keep his soul out of heaven.

Boys and girls, how shall death find you? Will it be a blessing for you?

If you want to die like Ignatius, you must also live like Ignatius. Never forget that! Seek the Lord in your youth, so that death will not surprise you!

QUESTIONS

1. List two reasons why Trajan opposed Christianity.
2. Why is emperor-worship a serious sin?
3. What is the difference between a universal and a local persecution?
4. Was the persecution local or universal during the reign of Trajan?
5. Identify Pliny.
6. What was Pliny's dilemma and what did he resolve to do?
7. What answer did Trajan give?

8. Identify Simeon.

9. What reason did the Romans give for the earthquake in Antioch?

10. Identify Ignatius.

11. How did Ignatius react to the death sentence?

FOR FURTHER STUDY

1. Read Acts 12.

a) What ruler was worshipped as a god?

b) Why was he smitten by the angel of the Lord?

2. How are we to regard rulers?