

0070-0156 – Polycarpus Smyrnaeus – Epistula ad Philippenses

The Epistle of Polycarp to the Philippians

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Polycarp



Introductory Note to the Epistle of Polycarp to the Philippians

[a.d. 65–100–155.] The Epistle of Polycarp is usually made a sort of preface to those of Ignatius, for reasons which will be obvious to the reader. Yet he was born later, and lived to a much later period. They seem to have been friends from the days of their common pupilage under St. John; and there is nothing improbable in the conjecture of Usher, that he was the “angel of the church in Smyrna,” to whom the Master says, “Be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee a crown of life.” His pupil Irenæus gives us one of the very few portraits of an apostolic man which are to be found in antiquity, in a few sentences which are a picture: “I could describe the very place in which the blessed Polycarp sat and taught; his going out and coming in; the whole tenor of his life; his personal appearance; how he would speak of the conversations he had held with John and with others who had seen the Lord. How did he make mention of their words and of whatever he had heard from them respecting the Lord.” Thus he unconsciously tantalizes our reverent curiosity. Alas! that such conversations were not written for our learning. But there is a wise Providence in what is withheld, as well as in the inestimable treasures we have received.

Irenæus will tell us more concerning him, his visit to Rome, his rebuke of Marcion, and incidental anecdotes, all which are instructive. The expression which he applied to Marcion is found in this Epistle. Other facts of interest are found in the Martyrdom, which follows in these pages. His death, in extreme old age under the first of the Antonines, has been variously dated; but we may accept the date we have given, as rendered probable by that of the Paschal question, which he so lovingly settled with Anicetus, Bishop of Rome.

The Epistle to the Philippians is the more interesting as denoting the state of that beloved church, the firstborn of European churches, and so greatly endeared to St. Paul. It abounds in practical wisdom, and is rich in Scripture and Scriptural allusions. It reflects the spirit of St. John, alike in its lamb-like and its aquiline features: he is as loving as the beloved disciple himself when he speaks of Christ and his church, but “the son of thunder” is echoed in his rebukes of threatened corruptions in faith and morals. Nothing can be more clear than his view of the doctrines of grace; but he writes like the disciple of St. John, though in perfect harmony with St. Paul’s hymn-like eulogy of Christian love.

The following is the original Introductory Notice:—

The authenticity of the following Epistle can on no fair grounds be questioned. It is abundantly established by external testimony, and is also supported by the internal evidence. Irenæus says (*Adv. Hær.*, iii. 3): “There is extant an Epistle of Polycarp written to the Philippians, most

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satisfactory, from which those that have a mind to do so may learn the character of his faith," etc. This passage is embodied by Eusebius in his *Ecclesiastical History* (iv. 14); and in another place the same writer refers to the Epistle before us as an undoubted production of Polycarp (*Hist. Eccl.*, iii. 36). Other ancient testimonies might easily be added, but are superfluous, inasmuch as there is a general consent among scholars at the present day that we have in this letter an authentic production of the renowned Bishop of Smyrna.

Of Polycarp's life little is known, but that little is highly interesting. Irenæus was his disciple, and tells us that "Polycarp was instructed by the apostles, and was brought into contact with many who had seen Christ" (*Adv. Hær.*, iii. 3; Euseb. *Hist. Eccl.*, iv. 14). There is also a very graphic account given of Polycarp by Irenæus in his Epistle to Florinus, to which the reader is referred. It has been preserved by Eusebius (*Hist. Eccl.*, v. 20).

The Epistle before us is not perfect in any of the Greek mss. which contain it. But the chapters wanting in Greek are contained in an ancient Latin version. While there is no ground for supposing, as some have done, that the whole Epistle is spurious, there seems considerable force in the arguments by which many others have sought to prove chap. xiii. to be an interpolation.

The date of the Epistle cannot be satisfactorily determined. It depends on the conclusion we reach as to some points, very difficult and obscure, connected with that account of the martyrdom of Polycarp which has come down to us. We shall not, however, probably be far wrong if we fix it about the middle of the second century.

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The Epistle of Polycarp to the Philippians³³⁷

Polycarp, and the presbyters³³⁸ with him, to the Church of God sojourning at Philippi: Mercy to you, and peace from God Almighty, and from the Lord Jesus Christ, our Saviour, be multiplied.

Chapter I.—Praise of the Philippians.

I have greatly rejoiced with you in our Lord Jesus Christ, because ye have followed the example³³⁹ of true love [as displayed by God], and have accompanied, as became you, those who were bound in chains, the fitting ornaments of saints, and which are indeed the diadems of the true elect of God and our Lord; and because the strong root of your faith, spoken of in days³⁴⁰ long gone by, endureth

³³⁷ The title of this Epistle in most of the mss. is, "The Epistle of St. Polycarp, Bishop of Smyrna, and holy martyr, to the Philippians."

³³⁸ Or, "Polycarp, and those who with him are presbyters."

³³⁹ Literally, "ye have received the patterns of true love."

³⁴⁰ Phil. i. 5.

even until now, and bringeth forth fruit to our Lord Jesus Christ, who for our sins suffered even unto death, [but] “whom God raised from the dead, having loosed the bands of the grave.”³⁴¹ “In whom, though now ye see Him not, ye believe, and believing, rejoice with joy unspeakable and full of glory;”³⁴² into which joy many desire to enter, knowing that “by grace ye are saved, not of works,”³⁴³ but by the will of God through Jesus Christ.

Chapter II.—An exhortation to virtue.

“Wherefore, girding up your loins,”³⁴⁴ “serve the Lord in fear”³⁴⁵ and truth, as those who have forsaken the vain, empty talk and error of the multitude, and “believed in Him who raised up our Lord Jesus Christ from the dead, and gave Him glory,”³⁴⁶ and a throne at His right hand. To Him all things³⁴⁷ in heaven and on earth are subject. Him every spirit serves. He comes as the Judge of the living and the dead.³⁴⁸ His blood will God require of those who do not believe in Him.³⁴⁹ But He who raised Him up from the dead will raise³⁵⁰ up us also, if we do His will, and walk in His commandments, and love what He loved, keeping ourselves from all unrighteousness, covetousness, love of money, evil speaking, false witness; “not rendering evil for evil, or railing for railing,”³⁵¹ or blow for blow, or cursing for cursing, but being mindful of what the Lord said in His teaching: “Judge not, that ye be not judged;”³⁵² forgive, and it shall be forgiven unto you;³⁵³ be merciful, that ye may obtain mercy;³⁵⁴ with what measure ye mete, it shall be measured to you again;”³⁵⁵ and once

341 Acts ii. 24. Literally, “having loosed the pains of Hades.”

342 1 Pet. i. 8.

343 Eph. ii. 8, 9.

344 Comp. 1 Pet. i. 13; Eph. vi. 14.

345 Ps. ii. 11.

346 1 Pet. i. 21.

347 Comp. 1 Pet. iii. 22; Phil. ii. 10.

348 Comp. Acts xvii. 31.

349 Or, “who do not obey him.”

350 Comp 1 Cor. vi. 14; 2 Cor. iv. 14; Rom. viii. 11.

351 1 Pet. iii. 9.

352 Matt. vii. 1.

353 Matt. vi. 12, 14; Luke vi. 37.

354 Luke vi. 36.

355 Matt. vii. 2; Luke vi. 38.

more, “Blessed are the poor, and those that are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of God.”³⁵⁶

Chapter III.—Expressions of personal unworthiness.

These things, brethren, I write to you concerning righteousness, not because I take anything upon myself, but because ye have invited me to do so. For neither I, nor any other such one, can come up to the wisdom³⁵⁷ of the blessed and glorified Paul. He, when among you, accurately and stedfastly taught the word of truth in the presence of those who were then alive. And when absent from you, he wrote you a letter,³⁵⁸ which, if you carefully study, you will find to be the means of building you up in that faith which has been given you, and which, being followed by hope, and preceded by love towards God, and Christ, and our neighbour, “is the mother of us all.”³⁵⁹ For if any one be inwardly possessed of these graces, he hath fulfilled the command of righteousness, since he that hath love is far from all sin.



Chapter IV.—Various exhortations.

“But the love of money is the root of all evils.”³⁶⁰ Knowing, therefore, that “as we brought nothing into the world, so we can carry nothing out,”³⁶¹ let us arm ourselves with the armour of righteousness;³⁶² and let us teach, first of all, ourselves to walk in the commandments of the Lord. Next, [teach] your wives [to walk] in the faith given to them, and in love and purity tenderly loving their own husbands in all truth, and loving all [others] equally in all chastity; and to train up their children in the knowledge and fear of God. Teach the widows to be discreet as respects the faith of the Lord, praying continually³⁶³ for all, being far from all slandering, evil-speaking,

356 Matt. v. 3, 10; Luke vi. 20.

357 Comp. 2 Pet. iii. 15.

358 The form is *plural*, but one Epistle is probably meant. [So, even in English, “letters” may be classically used for a single letter, as we say “by these presents.” But even we might speak of St. Paul as having written his Epistles *to us*; so the Epistles to Thessalonica and Corinth might more naturally still be referred to here].

359 Comp. Gal. iv. 26.

360 1 Tim. vi. 10.

361 1 Tim. vi. 7.

362 Comp. Eph. vi. 11.

363 Comp. 1 Thess. v. 17.

false-witnessing, love of money, and every kind of evil; knowing that they are the altar³⁶⁴ of God, that He clearly perceives all things, and that nothing is hid from Him, neither reasonings, nor reflections, nor any one of the secret things of the heart.

Chapter V.—The duties of deacons, youths, and virgins.

Knowing, then, that “God is not mocked,”³⁶⁵ we ought to walk worthy of His commandment and glory. In like manner should the deacons be blameless before the face of His righteousness, as being the servants of God and Christ,³⁶⁶ and not of men. They must not be slanderers, double-tongued,³⁶⁷ or lovers of money, but temperate in all things, compassionate, industrious, walking according to the truth of the Lord, who was the servant³⁶⁸ of all. If we please Him in this present world, we shall receive also the future world, according as He has promised to us that He will raise us again from the dead, and that if we live³⁶⁹ worthily of Him, “we shall also reign together with Him,”³⁷⁰ provided only we believe. In like manner, let the young men also be blameless in all things, being especially careful to preserve purity, and keeping themselves in, as with a bridle, from every kind of evil. For it is well that they should be cut off from³⁷¹ the lusts that are in the world, since “every lust warreth against the spirit;”³⁷² and “neither fornicators, nor effeminate, nor abusers of themselves with mankind, shall inherit the kingdom of God,”³⁷³ nor those who do things inconsistent and unbecoming. Wherefore, it is needful to abstain from all these things, being subject to the presbyters and deacons, as unto God and Christ. The virgins also must walk in a blameless and pure conscience.

Chapter VI.—The duties of presbyters and others.

364 Some here read, “altars.”

365 Gal. vi. 7.

366 Some read, “God in Christ.”

367 Comp. 1 Tim. iii. 8.

368 Comp. Matt. xx. 28.

369 Πολιτευσόμεθα, referring to the whole conduct; comp. Phil. i. 27.

370 2 Tim. ii. 12.

371 Some read, ἀνακύπτειν, “to emerge from.” [So Chevallier, but not Wake nor Jacobson. See the note of latter, *ad loc.*]

372 1 Pet. ii. 11.

373 1 Cor. vi. 9, 10.

And let the presbyters be compassionate and merciful to all, bringing back those that wander, visiting all the sick, and not neglecting the widow, the orphan, or the poor, but always “providing for that which is becoming in the sight of God and man;”³⁷⁴ abstaining from all wrath, respect of persons, and unjust judgment; keeping far off from all covetousness, not quickly crediting [an evil report] against any one, not severe in judgment, as knowing that we are all under a debt of sin. If then we entreat the Lord to forgive us, we ought also ourselves to forgive;³⁷⁵ for we are before the eyes of our Lord and God, and “we must all appear at the judgment-seat of Christ, and must every one give an account of himself.”³⁷⁶ Let us then serve Him in fear, and with all reverence, even as He Himself has commanded us, and as the apostles who preached the Gospel unto us, and the prophets who proclaimed beforehand the coming of the Lord [have alike taught us]. Let us be zealous in the pursuit of that which is good, keeping ourselves from causes of offence, from false brethren, and from those who in hypocrisy bear the name of the Lord, and draw away vain men into error.

Chapter VII.—Avoid the Docetæ, and persevere in fasting and prayer.

“For whosoever does not confess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh, is antichrist;”³⁷⁷ and whosoever does not confess the testimony of the cross,³⁷⁸ is of the devil; and whosoever perverts the oracles of the Lord to his own lusts, and says that there is neither a resurrection nor a judgment, he is the first-born of Satan.³⁷⁹ Wherefore, forsaking the vanity of many, and their false doctrines, let us return to the word which has been handed down to us from³⁸⁰ the beginning; “watching unto prayer,”³⁸¹ and persevering in fasting; beseeching in our supplications the all-seeing God “not to lead us into temptation,”³⁸² as the Lord has said: “The spirit truly is willing, but the flesh is weak.”³⁸³



³⁷⁴ Rom. xii. 17; 2 Cor. viii. 31.

³⁷⁵ Matt. vi. 12–14.

³⁷⁶ Rom. xiv. 10–12; 2 Cor. v. 10.

³⁷⁷ 1 John iv. 3.

³⁷⁸ Literally, “the martyrdom of the cross,” which some render, “His suffering on the cross.”

³⁷⁹ [The original, perhaps, of Eusebius (*Hist.* iv. cap. 14). It became a common-place expression in the Church.]

³⁸⁰ Comp. Jude 3.

³⁸¹ 1 Pet. iv. 7.

³⁸² Matt. vi. 13; Matt. xxvi. 41.

³⁸³ Matt. xxvi. 41; Mark xiv. 38.

Chapter VIII.—Persevere in hope and patience.

Let us then continually persevere in our hope, and the earnest of our righteousness, which is Jesus Christ, “who bore our sins in His own body on the tree,”³⁸⁴ “who did no sin, neither was guile found in His mouth,”³⁸⁵ but endured all things for us, that we might live in Him.³⁸⁶ Let us then be imitators of His patience; and if we suffer³⁸⁷ for His name’s sake, let us glorify Him.³⁸⁸ For He has set us this example³⁸⁹ in Himself, and we have believed that such is the case.

Chapter IX.—Patience inculcated.

I exhort you all, therefore, to yield obedience to the word of righteousness, and to exercise all patience, such as ye have seen [set] before your eyes, not only in the case of the blessed Ignatius, and Zosimus, and Rufus, but also in others among yourselves, and in Paul himself, and the rest of the apostles. [This do] in the assurance that all these have not run³⁹⁰ in vain, but in faith and righteousness, and that they are [now] in their due place in the presence of the Lord, with whom also they suffered. For they loved not this present world, but Him who died for us, and for our sakes was raised again by God from the dead.

Chapter X.—Exhortation to the practice of virtue.³⁹¹

Stand fast, therefore, in these things, and follow the example of the Lord, being firm and unchangeable in the faith, loving the brotherhood,³⁹² and being attached to one another, joined together in the truth, exhibiting the meekness of the Lord in your intercourse with one another, and despising no one. When you can do good, defer it not, because “alms delivers from death.”³⁹³ Be

384 1 Pet. ii. 24.

385 1 Pet. ii. 22.

386 Comp. 1 John iv. 9.

387 Comp. Acts v. 41; 1 Pet. iv. 16.

388 Some read, “we glorify Him.”

389 Comp. 1 Pet. ii. 21.

390 Comp. Phil. ii. 16; Gal. ii. 2.

391 This and the two following chapters are preserved only in a Latin version. [See Jacobson, *ad loc.*]

392 Comp. 1 Pet. ii. 17.

393 Tobit iv. 10, Tobit xii. 9.

all of you subject one to another³⁹⁴ “having your conduct blameless among the Gentiles,”³⁹⁵ that ye may both receive praise for your good works, and the Lord may not be blasphemed through you. But woe to him by whom the name of the Lord is blasphemed!³⁹⁶ Teach, therefore, sobriety to all, and manifest it also in your own conduct.

Chapter XI.—Expression of grief on account of Valens.

I am greatly grieved for Valens, who was once a presbyter among you, because he so little understands the place that was given him [in the Church]. I exhort you, therefore, that ye abstain from covetousness,³⁹⁷ and that ye be chaste and truthful. “Abstain from every form of evil.”³⁹⁸ For if a man cannot govern himself in such matters, how shall he enjoin them on others? If a man does not keep himself from covetousness,³⁹⁹ he shall be defiled by idolatry, and shall be judged as one of the heathen. But who of us are ignorant of the judgment of the Lord? “Do we not know that the saints shall judge the world?”⁴⁰⁰ as Paul teaches. But I have neither seen nor heard of any such thing among you, in the midst of whom the blessed Paul laboured, and who are commended⁴⁰¹ in the beginning of his Epistle. For he boasts of you in all those Churches which alone then knew the Lord; but we [of Smyrna] had not yet known Him. I am deeply grieved, therefore, brethren, for him (Valens) and his wife; to whom may the Lord grant true repentance! And be ye then moderate in regard to this matter, and “do not count such as enemies,”⁴⁰² but call them back as suffering and straying members, that ye may save your whole body. For by so acting ye shall edify yourselves.⁴⁰³

394 Comp. 1 Pet. v. 5.

395 1 Pet. ii. 12.

396 Isa. lii. 5.

397 Some think that *incontinence* on the part of the Valens and his wife is referred to. [For many reasons I am glad the translators have preferred the reading *πλεονεξίας*. The next word, *chaste*, sufficiently rebukes the example of Valens. For once I venture not to coincide with Jacobson’s comment.]

398 1 Thess. v. 22.

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400 1 Cor. vi. 2.

401 Some read, “named;” comp. Phil. i. 5.

402 2 Thess. iii. 15.

403 Comp. 1 Cor. xii. 26.

Chapter XII.—Exhortation to various graces.

For I trust that ye are well versed in the Sacred Scriptures, and that nothing is hid from you; but to me this privilege is not yet granted.⁴⁰⁴ It is declared then in these Scriptures, “Be ye angry, and sin not,”⁴⁰⁵ and, “Let not the sun go down upon your wrath.”⁴⁰⁶ Happy is he who remembers⁴⁰⁷ this, which I believe to be the case with you. But may the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, and Jesus Christ Himself, who is the Son of God, and our everlasting High Priest, build you up in faith and truth, and in all meekness, gentleness, patience, long-suffering, forbearance, and purity; and may He bestow on you a lot and portion among His saints, and on us with you, and on all that are under heaven, who shall believe in our Lord Jesus Christ, and in His Father, who “raised Him from the dead.”⁴⁰⁸ Pray for all the saints. Pray also for kings,⁴⁰⁹ and potentates, and princes, and for those that persecute and hate you,⁴¹⁰ and for the enemies of the cross, that your fruit may be manifest to all, and that ye may be perfect in Him.



Chapter XIII.—Concerning the transmission of epistles.

Both you and Ignatius⁴¹¹ wrote to me, that if any one went [from this] into Syria, he should carry your letter⁴¹² with him; which request I will attend to if I find a fitting opportunity, either personally, or through some other acting for me, that your desire may be fulfilled. The Epistles of Ignatius written by him⁴¹³ to us, and all the rest [of his Epistles] which we have by us, we have sent to you, as you requested. They are subjoined to this Epistle, and by them ye may be greatly profited; for they treat of faith and patience, and all things that tend to edification in our Lord. Any⁴¹⁴ more

404 This passage is very obscure. Some render it as follows: “But at present it is not granted unto me to practise that which is written, Be ye angry,” etc.

405 Ps. iv. 5.

406 Eph. iv. 26.

407 Some read, “believes.”

408 Gal. i. 1.

409 Comp. 1 Tim. ii. 2.

410 Matt. v. 44.

411 Comp. Ep. of Ignatius to Polycarp, chap. viii.

412 Or, “letters.”

413 Reference is here made to the two letters of Ignatius, one to Polycarp himself, and the other to the church at Smyrna.

414 Henceforth, to the end, we have only the Latin version.

certain information you may have obtained respecting both Ignatius himself, and those that were⁴¹⁵ with him, have the goodness to make known⁴¹⁶ to us.

Chapter XIV.—Conclusion.

These things I have written to you by Crescens, whom up to the present⁴¹⁷ time I have recommended unto you, and do now recommend. For he has acted blamelessly among us, and I believe also among you. Moreover, ye will hold his sister in esteem when she comes to you. Be ye safe in the Lord Jesus Christ. Grace be with you all.⁴¹⁸ Amen.



Introductory Note to the Epistle Concerning the Martyrdom of Polycarp

Internal evidence goes far to establish the credit which Eusebius lends to this specimen of the martyrologies, certainly not the earliest if we accept that of Ignatius as genuine. As an encyclical of one of “the seven churches” to another of the same Seven, and as bearing witness to their aggregation with others into the unity of “the Holy and Catholic Church,” it is a very interesting witness, not only to an article of the creed, but to the original meaning and acceptation of the same. More than this, it is evidence of the strength of Christ perfected in human weakness; and thus it affords us an assurance of grace equal to our day in every time of need. When I see in it, however, an example of what a noble army of martyrs, women and children included, suffered in those days “for the testimony of Jesus,” and in order to hand down the knowledge of the Gospel to these boastful ages of our own, I confess myself edified by what I read, chiefly because I am humbled and abashed in comparing what a Christian used to be, with what a Christian is, in our times, even at his best estate.

That this Epistle has been interpolated can hardly be doubted, when we compare it with the unvarnished specimen, in Eusebius. As for the “fragrant smell” that came from the fire, many kinds of wood emit the like in burning; and, apart from Oriental warmth of colouring, there seems nothing incredible in the narrative if we except “the dove” (chap. xvi.), which, however, is probably a

⁴¹⁵ The Latin version reads “are,” which has been corrected as above.

⁴¹⁶ Polycarp was aware of the death of Ignatius (chap. ix.), but was as yet apparently ignorant of the circumstances attending it. [Who can fail to be touched by these affectionate yet entirely calm expressions as to his martyred friend and brother? Martyrdom was the habitual end of Christ’s soldiers, and Polycarp expected his own; hence his restrained and temperate words of interest.]

⁴¹⁷ Some read, “in this present Epistle.”

⁴¹⁸ Others read, “and in favour with all yours.”