

IRENÆUS OF LYONS

THE LESSON: WITH HEART, SOUL, MIND AND STRENGTH

*“You are all partakers with me of grace, both in my imprisonment
and in the defence and confirmation of the gospel.”
(Philippians 1:7)*

Throughout the first and most of the second centuries, early Church writers were concerned with addressing specific issues as they arose, including frequent outbreaks of persecution against believers. But towards the end of the second century, a number of false teachings had arisen with such comprehensive doctrinal systems that the teachers of the Church recognized the need to set out a much more complete explanation and defence of right Christian belief. Among these teachers were Clement of Alexandria, Tertullian, Origen and Irenæus of Lyons.

*“I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes.”
(Romans 1:16)*

Irenæus was the son of Christian parents, born in the year 130 (or thereabouts), and he grew up at Smyrna in modern-day Turkey. As a young man, he sat under the teaching of Polycarp and had a deep admiration for that bishop’s pastoral heart. In those days the south of France was a great mission field, where the eastern Church was sending evangelists to share the good news. Irenæus, who was well-educated and eloquent, was among those sent to serve under the first bishop of Lyons, where he was then invited into ordained ministry. But while Irenæus was away on an errand in Rome, persecution broke out back in Lyons and his bishop was killed. Upon his return, Irenæus was called to replace him, becoming the second bishop of Lyons.

*“The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.”
(John 10:11)*

In spite of the obvious dangers involved in his new role, Irenæus did not keep a low profile. He wanted the people of Lyons to come to know God as the loving Shepherd who was at work in history, seeking to draw them into closer communion with himself.

While on two occasions, Irenæus urged Rome to show leniency with groups that were at odds with church teaching on minor points (such as when to observe the feast of Easter), other teachings in circulation at that time were far more harmful, and Irenæus expended great effort opposing them.

*“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul
and with all your mind and with all your strength.”
(Mark 12:30)*

In the preface to his book, “Against Heresies”, Irenæus wrote: “Error never shows itself in its naked reality, in order not to be discovered. On the contrary, it dresses elegantly, so that the unwary may be led to believe that it is more truthful than truth itself.”

“Gnosticism” was very popular during that time, and it was misleading many of the people in Lyons. It taught them that the material world was evil and that Jesus did not have a real human body. Some of its followers became extreme ascetics, while others became libertines. But in addition to drawing people into harmful ways of living, Gnosticism contradicted a right Christian understanding of creation, the incarnation and the resurrection. A second heresy causing great concern was taught by Marcion and took Gnosticism a step further, by claiming that the Creator-God of the Old Testament was himself bad, and an entirely different God from that of the New Testament. Marcion went so far

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as to put forward his own idea of a canon of scripture – complete with his own edits to the texts, so that the writings would line up with his teachings.

Irenæus was a gifted thinker and writer, but he was also a faithful shepherd. He recognized that these false teachings had the potential to lead believers away from their true Shepherd. He knew they needed to be given tools with which they could recognize and stand up to false teachings. Irenæus challenged the heresies of his day head-on. He appealed to the teaching of the apostles and the scriptures, and provided a thoughtful explanation of Christian doctrine in a time when it was desperately needed.

Later accounts tell us that Irenæus was martyred in 202, during persecution that broke out under the Roman emperor Septimius Severus.

(SOURCE ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS: DAVID FARMER, “OXFORD DICTIONARY OF SAINTS” | IRENÆUS OF LYONS, “AGAINST HERESIES” | JUSTO GONZÁLEZ, “THE STORY OF CHRISTIANITY, VOLUME 1” | GERARD SAMPSON, “LAYMAN’S BOOK OF SAINTS”.)

AT-HOME CHALLENGE

Each morning and evening, follow your own rule of prayer.

(IF YOU DON’T HAVE ONE, TRY SAYING THE MORNING AND EVENING PRAYERS FROM THE “FORMS OF PRAYER TO BE USED IN FAMILIES”, WHICH BEGINS ON PAGE 728 OF THE BCP. IF YOU DON’T HAVE A COPY, YOU CAN LOOK IT UP HERE: [HTTP://PRAYERBOOK.CA/RESOURCES/BCPONLINE/FAMILY-PRAYER](http://PRAYERBOOK.CA/RESOURCES/BCPONLINE/FAMILY-PRAYER).)

Review today’s lesson. Choose a line of scripture or a phrase from the story of Irenæus that you find edifying, inspiring or instructive:

Throughout this week, spend some time prayerfully reflecting on the phrase you’ve chosen. Close your time of reflection with a prayer of gratitude for the witness of Irenæus.

- AND/OR -

Take some time to pray through the following collect.

O God, our heavenly Father, who didst raise up thy faithful servant Irenæus to be a Bishop in thy Church and to feed thy flock: We beseech thee to send down upon all thy Bishops, the Pastors of thy Church, the abundant gift of thy Holy Spirit, that they, being endued with power from on high, and ever walking in the footsteps of thy holy Apostles, may minister before thee in thy household as true servants of Christ and stewards of thy divine mysteries; through the same Jesus Christ our Lord, who liveth and reigneth with thee in the unity of the same Spirit, one God, world without end. Amen. (SUPPLEMENTARY COLLECT OF A BISHOP, P. 312)