

BOOKLET TO PRINT

Saint Papias of Hierapolis

Life, prayer and novena

Feast day: February 22

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IN BRIEF

Saint Papias of Hierapolis

Bishop of Hierapolis in the 2nd century, Apostolic Father and witness to the origins of the Gospels.

Feast day	February 22
Born	Second half of the 1st century, Asia Minor (probably)
Died	2nd century
Canonized	Pre-Congregation (venerated since antiquity)
Era	2nd century

In this booklet

Life

Prayer to Saint Papias for Those Who Hand On the Faith

Novena to Saint Papias

Credits and sources

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LIFE

Saint Papias of Hierapolis

Saint Papias was bishop of Hierapolis, in Phrygia (in present-day Turkey), in the first half of the 2nd century. Counted among the Apostolic Fathers, he belonged to the generation that could still question people who had known the apostles. Of his great work on the sayings of the Lord, only a few fragments remain, but they are among the oldest testimonies on the origin of the Gospels. He is celebrated on February 22.

Who was Saint Papias?

We know neither the date of his birth nor that of his death. What we know of him comes mostly from Irenaeus of Lyon, around 180, and from Eusebius of Caesarea, at the beginning of the 4th century. According to Eusebius, Papias was bishop of Hierapolis and a contemporary of Polycarp of Smyrna and of Ignatius of Antioch.

Hierapolis, a famous spa town in the Lycus valley, near today's Pamukkale, was home to an ancient Christian community. Tradition links it to the apostle Philip, whose daughters are said to have lived there. The town is close to Colossae and Laodicea, two cities also mentioned in the letters of Saint Paul.



The ruins of Hierapolis, the city of which Papias was bishop.

Key dates in the life of Saint Papias

- **Second half of the 1st century**: Probable birth in Asia Minor.
- **Early 2nd century**: Bishop of Hierapolis, in Phrygia.
- **c. 130**: Writes the *Exposition of the Sayings of the Lord*, in five books (probably not before the reign of Hadrian, 117-138).
- **c. 180**: Irenaeus of Lyon quotes him and calls him "a man of old."
- **Early 4th century**: Eusebius of Caesarea preserves several extracts in his *Ecclesiastical History*.

An investigator of the oral tradition

Papias had a method: he preferred living witnesses to books. Eusebius reports his own words: he sought what came "from a living and abiding voice." Whenever a traveler had spent time with the "elders," Papias questioned him

about what Andrew, Peter, Philip, Thomas, James, John, Matthew or other disciples of the Lord had said, and about what Aristion and "John the Elder" were still saying.

Irenaeus saw him as a hearer of the apostle John. Eusebius, more cautious, objects that Papias presents himself only as the disciple of those who had heard the apostles. This discussion, already ancient, shows the unique place of Papias: he stands at the hinge between the apostolic age and the Church of the 2nd century.

For today's readers, this method is moving. Papias lived in a world where the Gospels were already being read, yet he still valued the memories of those who had walked with the disciples of Jesus. For him, faith was not only a text but a living tradition, carried by people.

The witness to Mark and Matthew

The most famous fragments concern the Gospels. Papias reports, on the word of an "elder," that Mark had been Peter's interpreter and had written down accurately, though not in order, what he remembered of his teaching. He also writes that Matthew gathered the sayings of the Lord "in the Hebrew language," and that each person interpreted them as best he could.

This sentence about Matthew has caused a great deal of ink to flow. Does it speak of a lost Aramaic gospel, or of a collection of sayings of Jesus? Specialists disagree, and no answer prevails. What remains is that, for no other Gospel text, do we have such early information.

Traditions to handle with care

Papias's book contained many other stories: a resurrection from the dead in the time of Philip, the story of Justus Barsabbas, who supposedly drank poison without harm, and a very graphic version of the death of Judas. Papias also

shared the millenarianism common in the 2nd century, the expectation of a thousand-year reign of Christ on earth, which is also found in Saint Justin and Irenaeus.

Eusebius, who did not share these views, judged Papias to be "a man of very little intelligence." That severity must itself be read with some distance: Eusebius was writing two centuries later, with his own theological concerns, and he nevertheless took care to copy out Papias's testimony on the Gospels.

Why is Saint Papias a patron for those who seek the sources of the faith?

Saint Papias has no official patronage. But he is the discreet patron of all who want to go back to the sources of the faith: Bible scholars, catechists, historians of the early Church and all who love to hear the Gospel from those who live it. He put his zeal into faithfully gathering the memory of the witnesses before it disappeared, convinced that the Gospel is handed on first from person to person. To pray with him is to give thanks for the living chain of witnesses that has handed the Word down to us.

Symbols and how to recognize Saint Papias in art

Images of Saint Papias are rare. Old engravings show him as a bishop, dressed in the vestments of his office, holding a book. The book recalls his work on the sayings of the Lord and his role as a witness to the writing of the Gospels. He has no particular attribute that would distinguish him from other bishops of the early Church, and he is usually identified by an inscription.



The Martyrium of Saint Philip at Hierapolis.

Where to pray to Saint Papias

No shrine dedicated to Saint Papias is known today, and his tomb has not been identified. The best place to remember him is Hierapolis itself, near Pamukkale in southwestern Turkey, whose ruins are visited by many travelers. On the hill above the ancient city stands the Martyrium of Saint Philip, the octagonal building that recalls the apostle traditionally linked to the Church of Hierapolis. Pilgrims following the footsteps of Saint Paul and Saint John in Asia Minor often pass through it, along with nearby Laodicea and Colossae.

To pray with him, you can use the prayer to Saint Papias or the novena to Saint Papias.

PRAYER

Prayer to Saint Papias for Those Who Hand On the Faith

No traditional prayer to Saint Papias has come down to us. But this bishop of the 2nd century, who carefully gathered the words of those who had known the apostles, invites us to thank God for all who have handed the Gospel down to us. Below you will find a few words of Papias preserved by Eusebius of Caesarea, followed by an original prayer by Saintspedia.

A word of Saint Papias

> *"I did not think that what came from books would help me as much as what came from a living and abiding voice."*

Source: Papias of Hierapolis, preface to the *Exposition of the Sayings of the Lord*, quoted by Eusebius of Caesarea, *Ecclesiastical History*, Book III, chapter 39. Translation by Saintspedia.

Prayer to Saint Papias for those who hand on the faith

Saint Papias, bishop of Hierapolis, you questioned with patience those who had heard the apostles, so that the memory of the Lord's words would not be lost. Give me a love for the Gospel and the desire to know it better.

You trusted the living voice of the witnesses: thank you for the people who passed the faith on to me, my parents, my catechists, my priests and my friends. Help me in turn to be a faithful link in that living chain.

Bless those who study and teach the Scriptures, those who translate them and those who proclaim them. May they serve the truth with humility and love.

When I meet doubts and questions, give me a patient and honest mind, which seeks the truth without fear and does not judge too quickly.

I entrust to you my intention: (name it in silence). Amen.

This prayer is an original text by Saintspedia, free to use for personal and community prayer.

When to pray this prayer

Saint Papias is celebrated on February 22, the same day as the feast of the Chair of Saint Peter. You can pray to him before a Bible study, at the beginning of a catechism year, for students of theology and Scripture, or on Sunday of the Word of God. It is also a beautiful way to thank God for a grandparent or a teacher who first told you about Jesus.

For a longer time of prayer, follow the novena to Saint Papias, and discover the life of Saint Papias.

NOVENA

Novena to Saint Papias

This novena is an original composition by Saintspedia, inspired by the life and fragments of Saint Papias of Hierapolis. It is not an official liturgical text. To finish it on the eve of his feast, begin on February 13; it ends on February 21, the day before the feast of Saint Papias on February 22. It can also be prayed at any time of year, for example at the start of a Bible study, for catechists or for someone who is seeking the truth.

How to pray this novena

Each day, entrust your intention to God, read the meditation, say the prayer of the day, then an Our Father, a Hail Mary and a Glory Be. The suggested act helps you live the prayer during the day. Since Papias loved the words of the Lord, you may want to read a short passage of the Gospel each day, especially from Mark or Matthew, the two Gospels he speaks of. A notebook can help you keep the word or phrase that touches you each day, as Papias kept the words of the elders.

Very little is known about the life of Papias. These nine days do not add to it; they draw on the few things his fragments tell us about his faith and his method.

Day 1: A Church rooted in the apostles

The Church of Hierapolis was linked by tradition to the apostle Philip. Papias received a faith that came from the apostles, and he wanted to remain faithful to it.

Prayer: Lord, thank you for the apostolic faith that has reached me through the centuries. Keep me faithful to it.

Today: Pray the Apostles' Creed slowly.

Day 2: A shepherd for his people

Papias was bishop of Hierapolis. Like every bishop, he was responsible for teaching, sanctifying and guiding the faithful entrusted to him.

Prayer: Lord, bless our bishops and priests. Give them the wisdom and love of good shepherds.

Today: Pray for your bishop by name.

Day 3: Listening to the witnesses

Papias questioned travelers who had known the elders: what had Peter said, or Andrew, or John? He was a patient listener.

Prayer: Lord, teach me to listen, to you first and then to others. Free me from the haste that prevents me from hearing.

Today: Listen to an older person tell you about their life of faith.

Day 4: A living and abiding voice

Papias preferred "a living and abiding voice" to books. The faith is handed on above all from person to person, through witnesses who live it.

Prayer: Lord, make my life a living word that speaks of you.

Today: Thank, in person or in prayer, the one who first spoke to you of Jesus.

Day 5: Peter's memories in Mark

According to Papias, Mark wrote down what he remembered of Peter's preaching. The Gospel of Mark carries the voice of the first of the apostles.

Prayer: Lord Jesus, as Peter did, I want to follow you. Speak to me through the Gospel of Mark.

Today: Read the first chapter of the Gospel of Mark.

Day 6: The sayings gathered by Matthew

Papias writes that Matthew gathered the sayings of the Lord. Those words, such as the Beatitudes and the Our Father, still nourish the whole Church.

Prayer: Lord, your words are spirit and life. Let them take root in my heart.

Today: Read the Beatitudes (Matthew 5:1-12) and choose one to live today.

Day 7: Seeking the truth with honesty

Papias's book also contained traditions that later readers found hard to accept, and scholars still debate his words. Seeking the truth requires humility, patience and honesty.

Prayer: Holy Spirit, Spirit of truth, guide me in my questions and my doubts. Give me an honest mind and a peaceful heart.

Today: Take a question you have about the faith and look for a serious answer.

Day 8: Hoping for the Kingdom

Papias, like many Christians of his time, eagerly awaited the coming of the Kingdom of Christ. The Church does not share his millenarian views, but she shares his hope.

Prayer: Come, Lord Jesus! Renew my hope and make me watchful for your coming.

Today: Do one concrete act of hope for someone who is discouraged.

Day 9: A link in the chain

Papias stands between the apostles and the later Church. Without him and others like him, much of the memory of the first generations would have been lost. Every Christian is, like him, a link in the chain of witnesses that hands on the faith.

Prayer: Lord, through the intercession of Saint Papias, I place in your hands the intention of this novena. Make me a faithful witness for those who come after me. Amen.

Today: Share a Gospel passage that matters to you with a child, a friend or a member of your family.

Closing prayer

Saint Papias, at the end of these nine days, I entrust to you the intention I have presented. You gathered with love the memory of the apostles and gave us early witness to the Gospels. Pray for bishops and catechists, for Bible scholars and for all who hand on the faith. May we never take for granted the Gospel that so many generations have guarded for us. Obtain for us a love of the Word of God, a patient and honest search for the truth, and the joy of being witnesses in our turn. Amen.

To go further: the life of Saint Papias and the prayer to Saint Papias.

CREDITS

Credits and sources

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