

Antipas – Martyr


“These are the words of him who has the sharp, double-edged sword. I know where you live – where Satan has his throne. Yet you remain true to my name. You did not renounce your faith in me, even in the days of Antipas, my faithful witness, who was put to death in your city – where Satan lives.”

Revelation 2:12b and 13

Prologue

“Antipas, Antipas,” the ghostly sounds drifted in and out of his dreams.

“Antipas – ha, ha, ha, ha, ha!” This time he awoke, startled and sweating.

It was only a dream, he told himself, a nightmare sent straight from Hell. He sat up on the edge of the hard cot, wringing wet from the nightmare but shivering violently in the predawn air. 

It was all coming back. He was in prison. Being held for what reason? When did the local authorities ever need a reason? The past began to flood his memory, faster and faster the images flashed across his mind until he put his head in his hands and wept.



Chapter One

His first memory was the face of his mother bending over his bed, smoothing back the hair from his forehead. He had had another dream. He was four years old and had already had several terrifying dreams. They seemed to come in bunches, five or six nights at a time and then a long rest period when nights took on normal proportions.

His mind skipped over the next few years, years of joy and boyhood growth, to the year he was twelve. What a year that was! It was the year he officially became a man. A man? He still felt like a child, still wanted to be a child, but the priests in the Temple insisted that he become a man.

Pergamum: his hometown, the place where his family dwelled, the place where he learned to worship Zeus, the place where he trudged up the long hill to serve at the altar, the place where he watched the caravans coming through on their way to Ephesus or the Aegean Sea. Pergamum: capital of Asia, centre of Roman Emperor worship, the very house of Satan.


He remembered the day clearly. It had rained during the night, but the day dawned bright and clear with drops from the rain still sparkling on the grass around his home.

“I want to play in the streets, go out to the fields with my friends, chase the wild dogs roaming the streets,” Antipas lamented to himself.” But he knew this was not to be.

“Today is the day that, as a man, I must make my first offering to Zeus,” he bravely told himself.

His parents had been preparing him for the ceremony. New clothes had been provided and his father had instructed him on the proper procedure for presenting his sacrifice.

“Son, you will be involved in a ceremony where you will make your sacrifice to Zeus. I want you to do whatever the priests tell you,” his father told him.

In his heart he said, “I don’t like any of this. I’m not even sure I believe in Zeus but I wouldn’t dare mention it, my parents would be shocked.” He knew they were deeply enmeshed in Zeus worship. 

Later in his room he questioned himself. “What do I believe? I don’t know. I’m so confused. There have to be powers beyond the human realm, but what are they? The Roman emperor is just a man, isn’t he?”

Yet his parents had taught him to worship him as well. He sometimes wished he could believe like everyone else. His older brother, Marcus, had become a man this time last year and told him wild tales about the ceremony.


“Just wait Antipas, you’ll be scared when you see what you have to do,” Marcus taunted him.

But Marcus was known to tell tall tales. Antipas didn’t believe half of what he said.

“I can’t wait to turn twelve,” his younger brother, Paulus, told him.



He, Antipas, was certainly the odd man out in this family. Odd for sure, of man he was not so certain.


Regardless of his reluctance, the day proceeded as planned. He donned the white robe that his mother had laid out for him and placed the scarlet turban on his head. The


gold chain-link belt was a gift from his father. He knew it cost far more than the family could afford, but his father was all about appearances and he knew his mother would do without rather than oppose his father. 



When the sun was directly overhead, the family left their home and began the long trek to the temple, many other families joining them on the way. The group continued to grow as they made their way along the Roman road.


The road stretched through the city and joined the well-used caravan trails to the north and south. The road had been constructed many decades ago when the Roman legions were making their way to the lands to the east. Not much wonder the people worshipped the emperor, life was, or seemed to be, easier after the influence of the Romans.

But his grandfather had told him differently. He had told him about the freedom they had had before the coming of the Romans. But this was seditious talk and not allowed by his father. If his father knew the things his grandfather told him, the old man would be put in prison for treason.  Antipas kept all his grandfather's words to himself and mulled over them time and time again. He was the only one with whom grandfather shared his ideas, the only one who wanted to keep company with the old man. His mother had told him that she was happy that one son was willing to spend time with her father, but she had no idea of the things that were being poured into her son's mind. Had she known, she might have turned him in herself, so frightened was she of her husband and his influence in the city.  was better to go along with him than to ever challenge his ideas.

Antipas steeled himself for the ordeal ahead. He mingled with the families of friends who were also to become adults today. His best friend was Cleotis.  had been friends forever, sharing interests and ideas. He had hinted to Cleotis a few of the things his grandfather had told him but was frightened to share all as it might compromise his friend. The things he had mentioned were received with interest, not shock.

Soon he could see the temple at the top of the hill, a brilliant example of local architecture glowing in the noonday sun. It looked sinister to him as though it beckoned him to enter its evil presence. He needed to get control of himself. His mind was running wild. His father said he had an imagination that would scare Zeus himself. 

The crowds had swelled until they filled the entire street. They pushed on to the temple entrance where the priests waited to receive the boys.  When the moment came to leave his parents, fear gripped his insides,  he resolved to show no indication and obediently followed the long line of boys behind the priests.

After the heat of the sun and the press of people, the temple felt cool as they walked along the marble corridors.  length they turned into a dimly lit room. There appeared to be about thirty boys and just as many priests. The boys were instructed to sit on the floor around the perimeter of the room while the priests stayed in the centre. An ancient priest stepped forward to address the boys. He was very bent and frail and his hands were shaking as he lifted them in worship to Zeus.

In a high whispery voice he began to speak about the rite that was to take place. As he droned on, Antipas stopped listening and escaped in his imagination to green fields and flowing streams. He occasionally heard the words ‘blood sacrifice, penance, service,’


but had lost the old man's meaning. He decided he should be able to follow the others when the ceremony started.

Finally the old priest finished and several of the younger priests prepared for the next part of the ritual, the shedding of blood. This was a two-fold event involving the boys and an animal sacrifice. Each boy would have a small incision made in his arm for the drawing of his blood to swear fealty to Zeus. Antipas wanted to run away, but there was no escape.

He watched as several boys were cut and repeated the oath to Zeus in shaky voices. Two of the boys passed out, but no sympathy was given. When they revived, the process started again and they too swore allegiance. He determined in his heart that when it was his turn, he would not faint, but would make his parents proud of him. If a boy could not complete the ritual, he was returned to his parents in disgrace and could never become a full citizen of Pergamum. Even though in his heart he knew this was wrong, he could not disgrace his parents.

The cut was less stressful than the oath. He felt he was lying to the priests and to himself, but what could he do? He was only a boy caught in his culture. There were no other options except death and he was not yet prepared to die.

The blood oath was finally over and they moved out into the main area. Several lambs and goats were in a holding pen. In groups of two, the boys were to select a lamb or goat, slaughter it, capture the blood in a vessel and then place the animal sacrifice on the great altar. This was soon accomplished as most of the boys were accustomed to slaughtering animals for the family food supply.


Most were not prepared for the next part. They were instructed to drink a portion of the blood of the sacrifice! There was pandemonium as the boys resisted. There was gagging, retching, crying,  above all the stern voices of the priests insisting that this was the most important part of the ceremony and they could not become men in the eyes of the law without completion of this.


At last each boy managed to consume his portion and order was restored. This year, no boy had to be sent back to his parents. They were now ready for the final ritual. Servants appeared with basins of water and new robes. The boys shed their blood-stained white robes, were washed with the clean water, and donned blue robes as an indication of achieving manhood. All that remained was to light the altar under the sacrifices. The smoke ascending skyward would signal the waiting families that the boys had passed the ordeal and would soon be appearing on the temple portico.

As the smoke was sighted, a great cheer rose from the people.



“Zeus has been honoured,” they cried. “Hail Zeus!”

The wild cheering continued as the boys filed into view. Each father and mother scanned the group looking for their son. Sighs of relief could be heard as each boy was spotted. Fathers began boasting about their sons, Antipas’ father among them.

Secretly he was greatly relieved. He murmured to himself. “I wasn’t sure if this son of mine would go through with the ritual. He’s different from his brothers and totally opposite to me. I don’t understand what goes on in that head of his. But he didn’t disgrace the family and for that I’m very grateful.” 

Antipas rejoined his family amid backslapping and cheering. The parties were about to begin! Each household with a boy/man  ready with a feast for family and

friends. The main thoroughfares quickly cleared as people dispersed to the parties.

Antipas was swept along with  siblings. Their mother told them she was anxious to get home and make sure the servants had followed her orders exactly. Antipas put aside his thoughts to be entertained later and focused on the attention he was getting and on the coming feast. 

Chapter Two

Life settled into a pattern after the ceremony. Antipas was now enrolled in classes at the temple. The priests were the most educated in Pergamum, and in order to succeed in business, a temple education was essential. Antipas soon became keenly involved in all the temple activities leaving no time to pursue his doubts. He put them in the back of his mind for now. When it was time for the next group of boys to become men, Antipas had all but forgotten his grandfather's ideas.

It was exciting at the temple as he served and learned. He had a quick mind and soon became the most promising of the temple students. He asked deep questions of the priests and was not afraid to express his opinions. His father was very proud of him, boasting in the marketplace about his brilliant son. He, too, had apparently forgotten about his earlier misgivings.

The time soon came to decide upon a career for Antipas. His father consulted the priests as well as local businessmen hoping to acquire an important position for him. It was finally decided that he was of superior intelligence and should seek further training in Rome.

“Rome! I don't want to go to Rome, the seat of emperor worship. It is enough to be steeped in Zeus worship here in Pergamum, but Rome! I just want to be a merchant like my father and grandfather before me,” he protested to himself.

This reminder of his grandfather sent him into a sea of memories which he had set aside months before. Now it all came back with the doubts crowding in and all but overwhelming him.

“How can I go to Rome? Someone will become aware of my doubts and then I’ll face imprisonment and probably death. I’ll have to talk to father,” he worried.

He dreaded the confrontation, but he could see no other way but to throw himself on his father’s mercy, hoping that he would agree to a merchant’s career at home and not press the issue of Rome. Surely his father would consent.

He approached his father, “Father, may I meet with you in private?”

His father seemed surprised but answered, “Come to my business tomorrow afternoon, I could meet with you then.”

Antipas returned to his room, his stomach churning as he anticipated the unnerving interview. He paced the floor for the next hour. Finally he left the house and walked into the country alone with his thoughts.


“What if I’m wrong,” he thought? “What if father won’t agree to my plan and insists I go to Rome?”

It would be a great honour for his father to have one of his sons chosen to go to Rome. It would raise his status in the business community of Pergamum.

“I can’t live in ‘what ifs’,” he told himself.

He gradually calmed down in the beautiful countryside returning home in a much calmer frame of mind. The die was cast, whatever would happen would happen and he would have to live with the consequences.


He managed to sleep most of the night and in the morning felt calm and optimistic. The morning passed quite pleasantly but as the afternoon approached, he felt a rising dread.

 left the house at noon and walked through the city to his father's place of business. He usually enjoyed strolling through the colourful marketplace, exchanging greetings with the vendors, but today he was focused on only one thing; his talk with his father.


On arriving, he greeted his father and was led into a back room where they could talk undisturbed. They seated themselves and there was silence for a few minutes.

“Why don't you begin and tell me why you requested this meeting,” his father finally asked.


Antipas began to sweat as he looked into his father's impassive face and felt the chill in his tone. Here, away from home, his father was formidable. He was aware that his father would not be pleased but hoped he would consider his feelings and rule in his favour.

He felt strongly that honesty was his best weapon and so decided  all the whole story. He began with the things grandfather had shared with him and of his doubts and fears in becoming a man and of worshipping and learning in the temple. He explained his fear of going to Rome and of what might happen to him there. His father sat staring at him, no comments, no change of expression. There was nothing even in his eyes to indicate what his father was thinking. At last he finished and sat waiting for his father to speak.

His father stood and paced the room. It was so quiet that Antipas began to tremble. This did not bode well for him. Usually his father was quick to respond when he did not approve of something his sons had said or done. His silence was much more terrible.

At last his father came and stood before him. In a quiet, controlled voice, he told Antipas he was no longer his son. 

“I have no son named Antipas. There is no such person. You will not return to my house, you will never seek to see me or the members of my family again. What you do and where you go will be totally your concern. You will leave my presence now.”

His father turned his back on him as Antipas slowly stood. He tried to speak but no words would come. He knew not to argue or try to say goodbye. His feet felt heavy and his knees weak  he left his father’s presence.


He drifted to the marketplace. He had to think, had to make some plans, but nothing would come. He was totally numb. He had known his father wouldn’t be pleased, but he had not expected this. He slumped down close to a vegetable stand and watched his surroundings with disinterest. As night drew near, the vendors began to gather their wares and close their shops. Finally, he was the only one left. It seemed like all the world had deserted him.

As darkness settled, he felt fear like he had never known before. The moon rose and the stars displayed their shimmering beauty, but it was all lost on him. He became aware of a tremendous physical hunger and pulled himself up out of his slumped position. Surely there would be a few morsels left over from the day’s market.

He searched around some of the now empty booths and managed to find a few discarded wilted vegetables which he threw away in disgust. He wandered back to his earlier position and sank down in utter dejection. Then the tears came in great gulping sobs. At last, alone, he fell into a troubled sleep.

But he was not alone. A caravan had arrived late in the evening and had stopped on the other side of the market. They would not be able to carry on their business until daybreak so were setting up camp to await sunrise. There was much jingling of harnesses, snorting of camels, sharp orders from camel drivers as well as cooking pots clanging.

Gradually the noise filtered into Antipas' mind and he awoke. At first he didn't know where he was, but soon complete realization came. He listened intently to the noise and ascertained the source of the sounds. He carefully lifted his cramped body from the ground and slowly began walking toward the caravan. An idea was forming in his mind.

He once heard of a distant cousin who had run away with a caravan and was never heard from again. His parents had said at the time that caravan drivers were always looking for young boys to assist with the goods and camels. Maybe this was the way out for him. Maybe! If they would take him! 

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