

A SERMON IN A NAME

"I know thy works, and where thou dwellest, even where Satan's seat is: and thou holdest fast my name, and hast not denied my faith, even in those days wherein Antipas was my faithful martyr, who was slain among you, where Satan dwelleth." Revelation 2:13.

This text is a biography in one verse. It does not require volumes to tell a life's story. The noblest ever penned has been condensed into one sentence, "He went about doing good."

Biography is perhaps the greatest of all teachers. We learn quickest and best from examples. That is the reason that the Gospels are taken up so largely with incidents from the life of the one perfect Man. That is why we turn to them again and again and find a perennial interest in them. Christ did not give the world a complete ethical system, but He lived a perfect life, and then said, "Go and do as you have seen me do. I have given you an example that you should walk in my steps." That which gives the key to a man's character, or tone and color to his life, is always interesting.

Once in a city where might was right, where Satan was enthroned and men's hearts were bent on wickedness, where thought was tied to the wheels of power, where the best men were in prison and the worst in the palace, there dwelt one man who dared to live up to the light that he had. He made no compromise with his conscience but stood out as a solitary and brave witness for God and the truth. And they murdered him, as his Master had been murdered before Him.

That city, which is not mentioned elsewhere in the New Testament, was Pergamum. This illustrious city, the capital of Mysia in Asia Minor, held a prominent place in ancient history. Long before the Christian era it was a celebrated city. It was the residence of the Roman Proconsul. The city was noted for its idolatry. Temples to Jupiter, Minerva, Apollo, Venus, Bacchus and Aesculapius adorned the city. It was to the last named of these that the deepest homage of the Pergamenes was given. Aesculapius, the god of medicine, was the patron deity. He was worshiped in the form of a serpent, and the worship degenerated into corruption. It was associated with the worst forms of licentious indulgence.

In Pergamum was one of the world's greatest libraries, consisting of some 200,000 rolls. It was from this library that Mark Antony, to please Cleopatra, transported the parchments or books to Alexandria, to be added to the collection of that famous library, which was ultimately destroyed by the Kaliph Omar.

Pergamum was a city of power, Roman authority, and of great iniquity. In the midst of this wicked city, this seat of Roman power, this center of Greek culture and idolatry, this cathedral city of paganism, there was a New Testament church. We do not know who established the church. We know nothing of its early history.

Distinguished as it was for its idolatry, its learning and its medical science, the city was, from a Christian standpoint, one of the worst. Multitudes flocked to the amphitheater to view the bloody spectacles of the arena; others thronged the temple of Venus with its licentious rites; and still others went to the baths by the temple of Aesculapius, where the serpent was worshiped. But there were also a few men and women who were meeting in a secluded place to worship God. How encouraging that in such a city of vice, sensuality and godlessness Christ had a band of faithful soldiers who unfurled His banner and battled for His truth!

From the first the world has sought to vanquish the church in one of two ways: either to destroy it by persecution or to corrupt it by patronage. It has tried to exterminate Christians by putting them to death, and when that attempt has failed it has attempted to take the aggressiveness out of their Christianity by beguiling them into its fashionable

sins or tempting them into self-indulgence. If they could not be thrust out of the world, they might be amalgamated with the world. If they would not yield to its persecution, they might be won by its flattery. If they did not fear its violence, they might be courted by its friendship. Of these two methods the latter is by far the more insidious.

In the message sent to Pergamum the first thing about which they received assurance was that their environment was known. No fair estimate of any life can be made unless environment be taken into account. We know, of course, that environment can be overstressed or wrongly stressed; we know also that it can be made an excuse for weakness and failure; but, making allowance for all this, environment has much to do with the shaping of character. It is not all the truth, but there is truth in the observation that we are what we are because we are where we are.

It is possible to be a Christian anywhere. Pergamum was the place where Satan's throne was, but there were Christians who held fast to Christ's name and did not deny His faith. Christianity is not a thing of locality, but of character. It can live wherever a man can live. It consists in the loyalty of the heart and the allegiance of the life to Christ, and these may be maintained anywhere. The grace of God can live where neither you nor I can.

Inasmuch as a man can be a Christian anywhere, we must not be prejudiced against a man because of the locality in which we find him. Even the Lord Jesus came out of Nazareth, and we know how near Nathaniel was to making a fatal mistake regarding Him by ignoring the principle on which I am now insisting. Test a man by what he is, rather than by where he comes from. The question is whether or not he is serving Christ.

Since it is possible for one to be a Christian anywhere, then we ought not to excuse ourselves for our lack of Christianity by pleading the force of circumstances, or the nature of our business, or the character of the place in which we live. How often do we hear one saying: "It is no use trying to be a Christian where I am;" "I am sorry, but under the present circumstances I cannot keep from doing thus and so." But it is never necessary to do wrong. Most anybody will try to excuse himself for doing wrong by saying that he could not help it.

It is harder to be a Christian in some places than in others. Some places and circumstances are more favorable for the development of Christian character than others. The Lord knows this and will estimate our work in the light of our opportunities. He said, "I know thy works, and where thou dwellest, even where Satan's seat is. You observe the works are estimated by the locality. We may be sure, therefore, that, if we are in a hard place, He will give us grace according to our need, and strength according to our day. He will not fail us nor forsake us. The greater the difficulty which we overcome in the maintenance of our Christianity the nobler will be our reward.

A name comes into this sermon here. "Antipas, my faithful martyr, who was slain among you, where Satan dwelleth." This one mention of his name opens a door of imagination and rich thought. Since he had a Greek name, we shall assume that he was a man of education and scholarship, perhaps the custodian of that great library at Pergamum. Perhaps one evening, on his way home from the library, he saw a group of people standing in the shadow of one of the temples, and a man was addressing them in earnest speech. Upon stopping to listen, he heard words that were new to him and they aroused his interest. The Word of God found lodgment in his heart, and eventually he became a Christian. He was destined to be one who was singled out by Christ and named as His faithful martyr.

Antipas was a believer in Christ. Even in his satanic environment, he loved a true and beautiful Christian life. The Christian life can reveal its beauty and shed its fragrance under every condition and circumstance.

Antipas was a faithful Christian in spite of worldly loss. One can visualize the prefect or consul calling him before him and saying, "Antipas, what is this I hear about you running around with those wretched people of 'The Way,' those miserable Christians?"

"It is true," answers Antipas. "I am a Christian."

"But do you not know," says the consul, "that they are under suspicion, that they are charged with being in conspiracy against the empire? That they practice secret abominations in their night meetings?"

"Yes," says Antipas, "I know that charge has been made; but, sir, it is not true. I have found them to be law-abiding, hard-working, faithful and honorable men and women."

"Well," says the consul, "whether it is true or not, Antipas, you cannot hold the important post of librarian in this, almost the most famous library of the world, and at the same time run around with those Christians. You will have to choose, Antipas, between this post with all its honor and distinction, and the fine living which it gives you, and these Christians and your Christ as you call Him."

"I have chosen," says Antipas. "I will be faithful to Christ."

Dismissed from his post, and with a family dependent upon him, Antipas faces the world anew. His loyalty to Christ has cost him something. So it is today, there are things which the true Christian will not do. There are customs to which he will not bow; and because he will not, he will still suffer loss.

Antipas was a Christian at the place where Satan dwelt. Perhaps more people are laughed and scorned and ridiculed out of doing their Christian duty than are frightened out of it by persecution. It will often require more courage to be pointed out as peculiar, as old-fashioned and strait-laced than it does to face physical persecution.

Imagine a group of Antipas' friends stopping at his door and saying, "Antipas, there is going to be a great show at the Greek theater tonight. Thousands will be there. We are going to raise money to prosecute the war against the savage Gelatians. Some of the famous Roman gladiators are going to fight, and there will be dancing and theatrical exhibitions by celebrated beauties and dancers from Rome. You can't afford to miss it. Even if you don't care for the show, we are sure that you will go for the sake of patriotism. After all, you know that this is a very worthy cause."

But to their surprise Antipas answers, "I cannot go with you. This is the Lord's Day, and even if it were not the Lord's Day, I would not go with you."

"The Lord's Day!" they said, "What is that?"

"It is the day on which my Lord and Saviour rose from the dead. I am a Christian."

"What," they said, "you a Christian! Have you joined that wretched band of slaves, artisans and released criminals?"

"Yes; I am a Christian!"

"Well," they said, "we will not argue with you longer. When you go to your meeting in that cave with that miserable crowd, you can think of us down at the Greek theater and the great show going on; but there in that cave you will be with that blind beggar, and a couple of the slaves of the prefect, and two or three others."

"Yes!" replied Antipas, "but there is One Whom you have forgotten."

"Who is that?"

"He is the Son of God! I shall be in His company."

Antipas was loyal and faithful to Christ in spite of persecution. One day one of his old

friends on the staff of the library came to him secretly, and said: "Antipas, while I was resting after the bath at the temple of Aesculapius this afternoon, I heard one of the men say to his companions that you were going to be accused to the prefect as an atheist and as a rebel against Caesar. Of course, that is because they know you are a Christian. Remembering your kindness to me when I worked with you at the library, I thought I would come and warn you."

Antipas did not make any change in his habits. When his hard work had ended the next day, and he had his frugal supper, he went again to the cavern on the hillside where the Christians met. They were in the midst of one of their hymns when angry voices were heard outside. Roman soldiers, under the command of a centurion, asked for Antipas. When he rose up to identify himself they seized him and carried him off to the prison cell under the seats of the amphitheater.

The next day a great throng assembled. Antipas was led out of his dark cell into the dazzling sunlight of the arena. Two soldiers brought him over to the wall under the canopied seat of the prefect. A clerk read the charge against him: "A Christian, a rebel against Caesar, an atheist who would overthrow the religion of the gods." Near Antipas stood a heathen altar. The prefect said to Antipas: "Will you renounce Christ, burn incense on the altar, and bow before the image of Caesar?" Antipas answered: "I cannot burn incense on the altar. I cannot bow to the image of Caesar. I bow only to God. I am a Christian." Immediately the amphitheater shook with the shout which soon was to be so familiar in all the arenas of the Roman world: "Christianos ad leones!"--"The Christians to the lions!"

Antipas was led to the center of the arena, which all the attendants vacated. A sliding door was raised from one of the subterranean cages at the lower end of the arena, and two famished lions rushed forth. Soon it was all over. The hooting mob dispersed to their homes. In the midst of the arena were just a few bones and a torn, bloodstained robe. The murderers thought, "We are done with that pestilential fellow; we have silenced his tongue; we have put an end to his witnessing; we shall not hear any more of him. We can now go home and sleep in peace for a dead man does not tell any tales."

Are you sure about that? Did you never read, "He being dead yet speaketh"? The lisping tongue often becomes eloquent after death, and the one dead man mightier than a whole battalion of living ones. "The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church." Approximately nineteen centuries have gone by and Pergamum is still pilloried before the world because of the murder of that saintly man. It cannot get rid of those blood stains. For ever they will remain upon the city's charter as an indelible disgrace.

Christ has immortalized him in one single sentence, "Antipas was my faithful martyr." He was a man who feared God more than death; a man who never flinched; a man who deemed it better to be a dead hero than a living coward. Nineteen centuries after he gave his life for his faith his name still lives. This is true because in a wicked city he bore his testimony and witnessed for Christ by living the life of a saint, and dying the death of a martyr. He thus caused his name to be honored on earth and in heaven. Not only is there divine approval expressed in the words of Christ, "My faithful martyr," but also much affection. What praise! What an honor to have such mention, by such lips, before men and angels! Did Antipas regret his fealty to principle and loyalty to Christ? A thousand times, "No!"