

OUT OF THE AFRICAN LANDS

The Story of Saint
Perpetua and Her
Companions

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List of Characters

- Perpetua: A twenty-two year old woman of a wealthy Roman family, catechumen, and author of one of the earliest and most notable Christian autobiographies
- Felicity: Perpetua's faithful maidservant, a young pregnant woman in her twenties, and catechumen
- Saturus: A teacher of the Christian faith
- Sarturnius: A young catechumen
- Revocatus: A former slave and catechumen
- Secundulus: A wealthy catechumen
- Pudens: A prison guard
- Hilarion: The governor of Carthage, local representative of the Roman Emperor.
- The Tribune: Twelve-man governing council of Carthage

Chapter 1:

The Catechumens Depart

“Forgive me, Saturus. I know we’ve gone over this before, but could you tell us again about temptation?” Revocatus asked, sitting up from his reclining position on one of the many chesterfields lining the ornate sitting room. He rested his strong chin in his large calloused hand.

Perpetua smiled inwardly at the ease with which Revocatus spoke as one among equals.

“Well, as we’ve said, the jealousy of the evil spirits knows no bounds,” Saturus began. Perpetua shifted her gaze from Revocatus back to Saturus. She noticed how often their teacher used the term “we” when a pagan would have said “I”. The differing manner of speech between pagans and Christians was just one of the many things Perpetua had observed since she and her companions first began learning the Christian faith. Saturus, their teacher, had taught the faith to many before them, for although he was young in years, he was wise in Christ.

“There are obvious attacks the evil one brings against us, such as the desire to overeat, or

become angry at a perceived injustice against our person,” Saturus said as he leaned forward on the edge of his seat. The afternoon light from the large window illuminated his expressive face and made his large eyes seem even brighter.

He paused, readjusting his white tunic. He took a moment and then said, “As it is now Satan lurks in your souls. He fights from within you to inhibit the approach of grace. After your baptisms, however, he will be cast out, and grace will fill you. And yet, we must never forget that even after holy baptism he never ceases to rage against us. Once a Christian emerges from the redeeming waters, the devil will fight him even more fiercely.

At this, Secundulus began to drum his fingers on his knee. Perpetua had often noticed him doing this when he was nervous. Even in his own home, which was where they had gathered today, he had trouble relaxing.

“We need not worry, however,” Saturus said, looking directly at Secundulus. “As high as the heaven is above the earth, so great is God’s mercy toward them that fear Him.”

Saturus took a contented breath and leaned back in his chair. After a silent moment shared with the five catechumens, he stood up.

“Well, friends, I think we’ve spoken enough for today.” Satorus smiled at Perpetua’s infant son, fast asleep on her lap.

They all rose for the departing prayer. After making the sign of the cross, Satorus said his goodbyes and quickly strode over the hunting mosaic on the floor.

Turning back to the catechumens he briefly held each of them in his gaze as though it may be the last time they would be gathered together. Seeing his hesitation, an uneasy feeling arose in the pit of Perpetua’s stomach. She decided to ignore it.

Saturnius—the youngest of the catechumens—approached Secundulus and with a warm smile said, “Thank you, again for hosting us, my friend. It is much appreciated.”

Saturnius had first been brought by Revocatus, his former slave, to hear the great teacher Satorus speak some weeks prior. His words about the Christian faith had been so irresistible that Saturnius had quickly become enthused with the true faith.

“It was my pleasure, as usual,” Secundulus said. He clapped a hand on the shoulders of both Saturnius and Revocatus as he walked the men toward the exit.

“Goodbye, Perpetua,” Saturnius half-turned to wave. “Goodbye, Felicity.”

Revocatus gave a kind nod.

“And a safe road home,” Perpetua answered, as Felicity waved.

When the three had exited to the main hall, Felicity bent down to take the infant child from Perpetua.

“Domina,” Felicity said, “will we be going straight home this morning, or would you like to pass by the forum once again?”

“Felicity, please, call me Perpetua.” She placed a delicate, though familiar, hand on the young maid’s arm. “Remember, there is only one Master and His Mother is the true Domina, worthy of the title. There is no slave or free man in Christ: we are equals.” She gave a small squeeze and smiled, looking intently into Felicity’s dark brown eyes.

“But if you’re feeling up to it,” Perpetua gently patted Felicity’s pregnant belly, “I think we will pass by the forum and see if we can distribute some of these figs we have here in our basket to the dear beggars of Carthage.”

Turning toward the nearby table, Perpetua lifted a corner of the embroidered linen cloth draped over her wicker basket to examine the ripe figs. Carthage, the capital of Africa Nova under the Roman Empire, had no more poor than any large city did in the year 203. In fact, the city flourished in trades and many citizens

had ample amounts of work and food. But Perpetua was insistent on giving to those who had less than her, and considering her great wealth, finding those less fortunate was not a difficult task.

As the two women were preparing to leave the room, the thick, satin curtain separating Secundulus' sitting room from the large passageway was torn open. Perpetua was surprised to see Saturnius and Revocatus had returned. She noticed the look of horror spread across their faces.

"They have come to arrest us!" Saturnius shouted.

"They've what?" Perpetua asked, her eyes growing wide. She grabbed Felicity's hand. "Are they close?"

"We had just stepped out of the courtyard when we spotted them approaching the estate," Saturnius said. "We heard them ask the shopkeeper across the way if this was the home of a Christian convert."

"Then we will have to go out to meet them," Perpetua said calmly, though her knees felt like they might give out. "Together?" she said, looking to her companions.

"Together," they each echoed, voices weak.

Perpetua took her swaddled son from Felicity and proceeded toward the front door. Walking

down the marble-floored corridor and stepping into the hot afternoon sun she saw at least a dozen Roman soldiers approaching.

Perpetua lifted her chin slightly as Felicity, Saturnius, Revocatus, and Secundulus came to stand on either side of her.

God help us, she thought, and strode forward to meet the soldiers.

Chapter 2: Freedom in Captivity

“Perpetua, come to your senses and leave behind this childish pursuit of vain doctrines!” Perpetua’s father shouted, his arms raised in the air as he yelled, now pacing back and forth in front of Perpetua’s cell in the prison corridor.

“Father, please. Just think of this pitcher here. Could we call it any other name than pitcher?” Perpetua’s shaking voice betrayed her anxiety in the face of her father’s anger.

“No, of course not!”

“And neither can I be called by any other name but Christian. I cannot and will not forsake the Christian faith,” Perpetua said with a quiet intensity—a perfect counterpoint to her father’s ranting. She leaned toward him, wrapping her small hands around the prison bars and fixed him with an unwavering gaze.

Just then the anger of Perpetua’s father escalated beyond control and he thrust his strong hands through the bars, grabbing and violently shaking her as if his next move would be to tear her eyes out.

Perpetua freed herself from his fit of rage and stared hard at him. In her deep pain she had to choke her desire to lash out at him.

He whirled then, and stormed down the dark corridor of the prison, cursing and hollering about his “ungrateful daughter”.

Hearing the angry voice fading with the increase of distance, Perpetua could no longer support herself. She collapsed onto the dry, dirt floor and dissolved into tears.

Saturnius’ announcement the day before that guards had come to arrest them had come as a shock, but Perpetua was thankful the catechumens were arrested together. Now, however, alone in a dark, cold prison cell, separated from her baby, her Christian companions, and her loyal maidservant, Felicity, Perpetua was filled with fear and doubt. She wrapped herself in her blue outer garment, burying her face in the folds of her white and gold dress and wept bitterly.

Eventually exhausted from crying, Perpetua fell asleep.

* * *

“Perpetua, it’s time,” her teacher’s calm voice broke through her anxious dreams.

“Come! You will all put on Christ today,” Satorus said, stretching his hand out to her through the bars.

For a moment Perpetua felt a spike of fear. To execution? With no trial?

Then she saw Satorus’s warm smile. Her panic melted away like dew before the morning sun.

She smiled too. She was going to death—but not the one she had feared on waking.

* * *

A small leather pouch of silver coins was all it took for the guards to look the other way while Satorus led a Christian priest, a deacon, and a deaconess into the prison to baptize the catechumens.

Although Satorus had not been present when his students were arrested, he had asked to be imprisoned so that he could suffer alongside his companions should they be sentenced to death.

He was already a Christian, though. He had not broken the new law that sought to stifle the growth of the Christian religion by forbidding conversions. And yet still he was here.

The priest stood before the large stone bath in his intricately woven gold and red robes. He began chanting hymns for the baptismal service in a slow, deep tone. The five catechumens stood beside each other facing the priest and their

teacher who stood across from them on the other side of the prison bath—the make-shift baptismal font. The light from the deacon’s burning candles pierced the prison’s darkness and cast a golden hue over the dreary room as the catechumens patiently waited to be freed from the bondage of sin while yet imprisoned.

Saturnius was the first to be buried with Christ. Perpetua watched as he emerged from the water. Observing him closely she thought his expression appeared resolute: as if convinced he would willingly die for Christ, should it come to that. She considered him to be the most eager to imitate their teacher Saturus, and figured he—above all the companions—would strive to exemplify the Christian virtue of bravery.

After him Secundulus entered the waters. He was the smallest of the male catechumens, the weakest, and most certainly the wealthiest. When he emerged from the water his face had a peaceful expression, his hands clasped calmly in front of him.

Next was Revocatus, his strong arms and stern face revealed a hard life of labour as a slave. Although he had bought his freedom some years earlier, he was about to receive the possibility of eternal freedom.

Now it was time for the women to be cleansed by water and Spirit. The deaconess assisted the pregnant Felicity into the water. She stood with her arms wrapped around her swollen belly, her sober gaze fixed on the water. Perpetua watched her rise from the water with bright, joyful eyes, as if revealing a hint of the internal felicity which she was experiencing.

Last of all Perpetua was escorted into the water. She stood facing the priest, with her arms crossed on her chest and her long hair cascading down her back. She waited to be submerged in the water.

Here I am Lord, a willing handmaid of your divine will. The words came as a silent cry from deep within her, a mixture of elation and scared fear.

“The servant of God, Perpetua, is baptized in the name of the Father.” Perpetua plunged into the water. “And of the Son.” She went under once again. “And of the Holy Spirit.” She was buried in the water for a third and final time.

Arising from the water, Perpetua felt a perfect peace encompassing her, surrounding her, emanating from her. Sins remitted, and prepared to receive the Holy Spirit, she stepped out of the font with a glow equal in brilliance to the burning candles. Newly illumined and filled with grace, she felt she should ask the Holy Spirit only

for strength to endure the sufferings that inevitably awaited her, as they do every Christian who puts on Christ.

* * *

All through the night Perpetua sat in her pitch-black prison cell unable to sleep. It was not the stench and the filthy surroundings that disturbed her so much as her own inner turmoil. The unimaginable joy of her baptism had slowly been replaced by something darker. She couldn't help reflecting on her dear teacher's words, "We must never forget that even after holy baptism the evil one never ceases to rage against us. Once a Christian emerges from the redeeming waters, the devil will fight him even more fiercely."

She shivered and pulled her knees up to her chest, wrapping her hands around them as if this might comfort her. Rarely had she known such anxiety, such fear, such darkness. Her mind was filled with distressing thoughts for her infant son whom she had still not seen since entering the prison three days before. This was her temptation—perhaps small in comparison to others—but full of intensity on account of the evil one's influence.

Her chest tightened; emotion constricted her breathing. She dug her fingers into the dry dirt floor, drawing her hands into fists. She took shallow breaths and struggled to fight off the growing anxiety rising up in her chest.