

The Martyrdom of John the Baptist

Mark 6:14-29

Mark 6:14-29 - *“Now King Herod heard of Him, for His name had become well known. And he said, “John the Baptist is risen from the dead, and therefore these powers are at work in him.”* ¹⁵ *Others said, “It is Elijah.” And others said, “It is the Prophet, or like one of the prophets.”*

¹⁶ *But when Herod heard, he said, “This is John, whom I beheaded; he has been raised from the dead!”* ¹⁷ *For Herod himself had sent and laid hold of John, and bound him in prison for the sake of Herodias, his brother Philip’s wife; for he had married her.* ¹⁸ *Because John had said to Herod, “It is not lawful for you to have your brother’s wife.”* ¹⁹ *Therefore Herodias held it against him and wanted to kill him, but she could not;* ²⁰ *for Herod feared John, knowing that he was a just and holy man, and he protected him. And when he heard him, he did many things, and heard him gladly.*

²¹ *Then an opportune day came when Herod on his birthday gave a feast for his nobles, the high officers, and the chief men of Galilee.* ²² *And when Herodias’ daughter herself came in and danced, and pleased Herod and those who sat with him, the king said to the girl, “Ask me whatever you want, and I will give it to you.”* ²³ *He also swore to her, “Whatever you ask me, I will give you, up to half my kingdom.”* ²⁴ *So she went out and said to her mother, “What shall I ask?” And she said, “The head of John the Baptist!”* ²⁵ *Immediately she came in with haste to the king and asked, saying, “I want you to give me at once the head of John the Baptist on a platter.”*

²⁶ *And the king was exceedingly sorry; yet, because of the oaths and because of those who sat with him, he did not want to refuse her.* ²⁷ *Immediately the king sent an executioner and commanded his head to be brought. And he went and beheaded him in prison,* ²⁸ *brought his head on a platter, and gave it to the girl; and the girl gave it to her mother.* ²⁹ *When his disciples heard of it, they came and took away his corpse and laid it in a tomb.”*

Background Notes

The Herod in verse 14 was Herod Antipas. He was a son of “Herod the Great,” who was king at the time of the Lord’s birth, and who killed all the babies in Bethlehem. Herod Antipas ruled over Galilee and the area of Perea, on the east side of the Jordan River.

When Herod Antipas heard about Jesus and His ministry and miracles, he thought that Jesus must be John the Baptist, risen from the dead! Other people thought that Jesus was Elijah, on the basis of the prophecy in the last book of the Old Testament. Malachi 4:5 prophesied that Elijah would come before the day of the Lord. Other people thought that He was a prophet - but Herod insisted that it was John the Baptist risen from the dead!

Verses 17-29 are a flashback that describes the death of John the Baptist. John had spoken out against Herod’s marriage - and rightly so! Herod had divorced his wife in order to marry Herodias, who was the wife of one of his half-

brothers, Herod Philip. Herodias herself was his half-niece through another family marriage. John had denounced these relationships as unlawful, so Herodias hated him and was out to get him. She wanted to kill him. So Herod had put John in prison. He was interested in John and he listened to John. Although Herod didn't follow what John said, he respected John. So he protected John from Herodias by giving him "protective custody" in prison.

But Herodias got her chance. Herod threw a birthday party for himself and invited all his nobles and officials. Herodias' daughter came to dance for the party, and it was probably a seductive dance. Herod was so impressed that he said he would give her "up to half his kingdom"! This was probably a proverbial expression that meant a very generous gift.

Salome asked her mother, what she should request. (The name Salome is not given in the Bible, but is recorded by the Jewish historian Josephus.) Herodias may have planned this whole thing, knowing that Herod would offer Salome a generous gift for her performance. Herodias told her daughter to ask Herod for the head of John the Baptist.

When Herod was confronted by this request, he was sorry because he knew that John was a just and holy man. Nevertheless, in order to save face with his guests because of the promise he had made, he gave the order for John the Baptist to be beheaded. His head was brought on a platter and given to Salome, who gave it to her mother.

The passage closes with the disciples of John. They were different than the Lord's disciples - they were specifically the disciples of John. These faithful men went to the prison at the Herodian fortress of Machaerus, on the far side of the Dead Sea. They retrieved the body of John the Baptist, and gave him an honorable burial.

Doctrinal Points

1. Going to church does not make you a Christian.

Where do we find that lesson? It's a lesson from the life of Herod. Look at verse 20: *"Herod feared John, knowing that he was a just and holy man, and he protected him. And when he heard him, he did many things, and heard him gladly."* Herod liked to hear John preach. He respected John. He knew John was right. He had a guilty conscience on the basis of what John said - and yet he went on in his life of sin. He did not repent.

Herod is like a lot of people today who go to church on Sunday - but they do whatever they please the rest of the time. They may listen to the Bible being read, and they may hear the Word of God preached, just as Herod did. They may even respect the preachers, just as Herod respected John. These people know what the preachers are saying is true, but they don't repent. They go on living their sinful lifestyle. And they, like Herod, will perish in their sins. Make sure you're not in the "Herod category"! Going to church doesn't make you a Christian.

2. God's ways are higher than man's ways.

The Bible certainly teaches this, and we see it illustrated here. We get that doctrinal point from Isaiah 55:8-9. *"For My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways My ways," says the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways, and My thoughts than your thoughts.*" God's ways are higher than man's ways!

When we look at the death of John the Baptist, don't we tend to ask, "Why?" Why did God allow this tragedy? Why would God allow a vital ministry to be so brutally ended? The Lord said that John the Baptist was the greatest prophet that had ever lived, and yet God allowed a wicked ruler to murder him. Why? When we look at the events leading up to John's death - a seductive dance, a hate-filled woman, a stupid decision made by a drunken ruler just to save face at a party - how tragic! And yet God allowed all of this to happen. These events were not out of God's control. God's ways are higher than man's ways - even though it may not look that way to us at times.

As we look at the overall scenario, one possible reason why God may have allowed this was that, with John's death, no division would develop between John's followers and Jesus' followers as the Lord's ministry went on. And there are probably many other reasons - we'll have to wait to find them out when we get to Heaven.

The important thing to remember is that these events were **never out of God's control**, even though from the human perspective everything appeared so senseless and tragic. In times of tragedy, it's helpful to remember that God's ways are higher than our ways.

Practical Applications

1. Let's not doubt God's ways.

We may not understand why God allows certain tragedies to happen in our lives. We may have all kinds of "why?" and "how come?" questions. Why did God allow that tragic death in my family? Certainly He could have given us more information, and we might have done something to prevent it. Why did God let our business fail? Why did God let me lose my job? Certainly God could have prevented that.

Well, we simply don't know all the answers. Sometimes God gives us insight as to why He allows certain things to happen in our lives, and sometimes we have to conclude that we may not find out "why" until we get to Heaven. But we're not to doubt God's ways! Just because we don't know all the answers, that doesn't mean we can doubt the way God is doing things in our lives. Ephesians 1:11 says that God is working **all things after the counsel of His will**. We look to Him in faith and trust Him, because He is in control.

The death of John the Baptist provides us with a very valuable lesson, one that's especially important to remember when tragic events enter our lives. Looking at all the seemingly random events that led up to John's murder, we'd conclude that everything was up for grabs - out of control - the result of a weak man's passion. No! God was in control, and He is accomplishing His purposes. So let's not *ever* doubt God's ways!

2. Don't make decisions in moments of emotion.

That's what Herod did. In the emotion of the moment, he said he would give Salome whatever she wanted. Then, to save face and keep his oath, he actually went through with it. Let's not make the mistake that Herod made!

Herod was an unbeliever, but believers can make rash mistakes and foolish decisions in moments of emotion. Such decisions can be costly, and may even bring shame on the name of Jesus Christ. God will always allow us enough time to make the important decisions of life. Although there may be certain times when we have to make a quick decision, God knows that, and we can leave that in God's hands. But for the important decisions of life, we can be sure that God will give us enough time. We won't have to jump into a hasty and foolish decision.

This can be applied to decisions about relationships, finances, career changes - even what you're going to do with your free time! Don't just rush ahead. Don't make important decisions in the heat of an angry moment, or when you are under emotional stress. You could end up being sorry for life!

Don't make decisions in moments of emotion.