

The Martyrdom of John the Baptist

Matthew 14:1-12

Matthew 14:1-12 - *“At that time Herod the tetrarch heard the report about Jesus ² and said to his servants, “This is John the Baptist; he is risen from the dead, and therefore these powers are at work in him.” ³ For Herod had laid hold of John and bound him, and put him in prison for the sake of Herodias, his brother Philip’s wife. ⁴ Because John had said to him, “It is not lawful for you to have her.” ⁵ And although he wanted to put him to death, he feared the multitude, because they counted him as a prophet.*

⁶ But when Herod’s birthday was celebrated, the daughter of Herodias danced before them and pleased Herod. ⁷ Therefore he promised with an oath to give her whatever she might ask.

⁸ So she, having been prompted by her mother, said, “Give me John the Baptist’s head here on a platter.”

⁹ And the king was sorry; nevertheless, because of the oaths and because of those who sat with him, he commanded it to be given to her. ¹⁰ So he sent and had John beheaded in prison. ¹¹ And his head was brought on a platter and given to the girl, and she brought it to her mother. ¹² Then his disciples came and took away the body and buried it, and went and told Jesus.”

Background Notes

“At that time Herod the tetrarch heard the report about Jesus...” (v1).

Who was the “Herod the tetrarch”? He was not King Herod who killed the babies in Bethlehem in Matthew 2. By the way, King Herod of Matthew 2, who is known as “Herod the Great,” is called Herod the Great in secular history – but **not** in the Bible. He is called Herod the Great in secular history because of his great building projects, including the Temple project in Jerusalem. In the Bible, King Herod is only known as the evil ruler who killed the babies in the Bethlehem area in his attempt to get rid of the true King, the Lord Jesus Christ.

The Herod here in Matthew 14:1 is “Herod Antipas” - one of Herod the Great’s sons. He is called “Herod the tetrarch” because he ruled over one fourth of the area that became known under Rome as “Palestine.” His territory included both Galilee and the area of Perea, which was east of the Jordan River. Jesus referred to this Herod as “that fox” (Luke 13:32). This is the Herod who was against the Lord, according to Acts 4:27.

This is the Herod who judged Jesus at his trial under Pontus Pilate. *“When Pilate heard of Galilee, he asked if the Man were a Galilean. And as soon as he knew that He belonged to Herod’s jurisdiction, he sent Him to Herod, who was also in Jerusalem at that time. Now when Herod saw Jesus, he was exceedingly glad; for he had desired for a long time to*

see Him, because he had heard many things about Him, and he hoped to see some miracle done by Him. Then he questioned Him with many words, but He answered him nothing. And the chief priests and scribes stood and vehemently accused Him. Then Herod, with his men of war, treated Him with contempt and mocked Him, arrayed Him in a gorgeous robe, and sent Him back to Pilate” (Luke 23:6-11).

Why did the Lord not say one word to this Herod? Answer: This was the Herod who silenced the voice of God when he had John the Baptist murdered. That was Herod’s last chance. Here in Matthew 14 we have the account of that murder. Evidently Herod was haunted by that event. He thought Jesus was John the Baptist, risen from the dead (v2)! Verses 3-12 are a parenthesis - a literary flash back giving us the details of the martyrdom of John the Baptist.

Doctrinal Points

1. Speaking out against sin is a responsibility of the believer.

Herod Antipas had John the Baptist arrested, bound, and put in prison for the sake of Herodias, his brother Herod Philip’s wife, because John had told him that it was not lawful for him to have married her (v3-4). Herodias was the daughter of another son of Herod the Great. Herod Philip actually married his niece, his brother’s daughter - and then another brother, Herod Antipas, seduced her away from Herod Philip and married her himself!

John the Baptist boldly spoke out against this sexual sin. As you can imagine, this took a lot of guts, because Herod Antipas was not just some local citizen! He was a major political figure, and he had the power to put John the Baptist to death. Herod would indeed have had him executed, but he feared the political implications because the people of Israel considered John the Baptist to be a prophet of God. So Herod had John the Baptist arrested and imprisoned. According to Josephus, the 1st century Jewish historian, John the Baptist was imprisoned in the isolated stronghold of Machaerus, located on a mountaintop high above the eastern banks of the Dead Sea.

John the Baptist spoke out against Herod’s sexual sin because Herod’s actions were wrong, regardless of his position as king. John the Baptist did the right thing - and so should we! Speaking out against sin is a responsibility of the believer. This is what our Lord meant when He said that believers are to be the “salt of the earth” (Matthew 5:13). In that day salt was a preservative for food, and it prevented the spread of decay. In the same way, believers are to prevent the spread of moral decay around them. This involves speaking out against sin.

Are you a grain of salt where you work or where you live? Are you willing to speak out, as John the Baptist did, against the sexual sins of fornication, adultery and homosexuality? You will not be popular, and you will not be politically correct, but you will be **right** - just as John the Baptist was right.

When John the Baptist was in prison, the Lord commended him for his outspoken stand and ministry. *“And when John had heard in prison about the works of Christ, he sent two of his disciples and said to Him, ‘Are You the Coming One, or do we look for another?’ Jesus answered and said to them, ‘Go and tell John the things which you hear and see: The blind see and the lame walk; the lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear; the dead are raised up and the poor have the gospel preached to them. And blessed is he who is not offended because of Me.’*

As they departed, Jesus began to say to the multitudes concerning John: ‘What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed shaken by the wind? But what did you go out to see? A man clothed in soft garments? Indeed, those who wear soft clothing are in kings’ houses. But what did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I say to you, and more than a prophet. For this is he of whom it is written: ‘Behold, I send My messenger before Your face, who will prepare Your way before You “Assuredly, I say to you, among those born of women there has not risen one greater than John the Baptist; but he who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he” (Matthew 11:2-11).

We too, will receive the Lord’s commendation if we are willing to stand for the truth of God’s Word and speak out against sin. Speaking out against sin is a responsibility of the believer.

2. Speaking out against sin is costly for the believer.

John the Baptist’s bold stand against Herod’s sin was costly for him. It ultimately led to his death. Herodias saw her chance to get back at John for his outspoken condemnation. There’s a good chance that Herodias planned this whole event from start to finish. On Herod’s birthday, she had her daughter Salome dance before Herod and his party guests. Salome’s name is not given to us in the gospels; again, we get this reliable information from the writings of Josephus, the 1st century Jewish historian. Most likely Salome’s dance was extremely sensual, and it certainly pleased Herod. As a result, Herod promised to give her whatever she asked for.

Herodias told her daughter to ask for the head of John the Baptist! Herod was distressed, and sorry that he had made such a rash promise because he knew that John was a prophet of God, but he reluctantly granted the request to save face before his dinner guests. What a terrible decision! John was beheaded because of his bold stand for God’s righteous standards. Speaking out against sin is costly for the believer.

Recently on TV I saw a “religious panel” discussing the subject of “knowing God.” The panel consisted of a Hindu, a Muslim, a Jew, and a couple of Christians. One of the Christians was definitely a true believer, and all his answers were based solidly on Scripture. But when this evangelical spoke out about sin, and the fact that people are sinners by nature, the other panelists almost laughed at him. The rest of the panel turned a deaf ear when he quoted Jeremiah 17:9: *“The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked. Who can know it?”*

Even the other “Christian” on the panel didn’t like the idea that the heart of man is “*desperately wicked*”! And when the evangelical believer spoke of the sacrificial death of Christ on the cross, that He died as our Substitute to pay the penalty for our sins, and that this was the only way of salvation, the rest of the panel clearly despised him. They thought that he was out of his mind. Speaking out against sin is costly for the believer.

Being outspoken against sin may not cost you your life, but it will cost you. When a Christian speaks out against sin in our society, it may result in the loss of a friendship, or the loss of a workplace promotion, or even the loss of a job. Christian writers will not be published when they speak out against any kind of sin that has become “socially acceptable,” such as the killing of the unborn. Even in the Christian community, speaking out against sin is not always appreciated. Many Christians will not accept the words of “intolerant” John the Baptist-type people. Speaking out against sin is costly for the believer.

Practical Application

Go to the Lord when you’re bereaved.

“Then his disciples came and took away the body and buried it, and went and told Jesus” (v12).

After the disciples of John the Baptist buried the body of the great prophet, they went to the Lord and told him the sad news. They came to the right Person. They didn’t become angry or bitter towards God because God had allowed their leader to be killed. No -- they came to Jesus.

The practical application for us is obvious: Go to the Lord when you’re bereaved. This past year both my mother and Margie’s mother went Home to be with the Lord - great gain for them, but a great loss for us. Where do we go in times like this? We go to the Lord for His comfort and strength and encouragement!

Unfortunately some Christians become bitter towards God in times of loss and bereavement. How sad! They lose out on the comfort and strength and peace that only God can give. The Lord knows and understands our feelings of loss and sorrow, and He cares about us. Read John 11:1-44 for assurance that He cares!

Go to the Lord when you’re bereaved.