

The Death of John the Baptist -- Mark 6:14-29

by Travis Dean
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Please bow your heads with me for prayer:

"Father, as we hear Your Word today, may we receive it. May it settle down deep into our hearts. May Your Word find in our hearts fertile soil. And from this soil I pray that the fruit of the Spirit might grow: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self control. In Jesus' name we pray, amen.

One of my more memorable birthdays was when I turned 30. It was my first birthday after being married. My wife agreed to plan something to make it a special day. The evening of my birthday she had me leave the house to get a massage by a friend of ours who was a massage therapist. That was pretty special. I like massages. When I came home, our house was surrounded by cars. I distinctly remember seeing the car of our friend who had given me the massage. She had seemed to be in a bit of a hurry to leave before me. So as I walked in the house, I was met by quite a surprise. That evening was a memorable time with many favorite friends and food as well. My wife had found out from my mom that my favorite cake as a child was Pineapple Upside-down Cake.

Our story today mentions a birthday celebration, and yet it did not end nearly as pleasantly as mine did. As I look back on this birthday celebration, I have pleasant memories. But this was not the case with Herod's birthday celebration mentioned in our story. It was one that he would never forget and would cast a cloud on the rest of his life.

As we continue our journey through the book of Mark, let's begin by reading together a summary of today's story:

When King Herod heard about Jesus, he thought it was John the Baptist, raised from the dead. Earlier Herod had put John in prison, under pressure from his new wife, Herodias, who wanted to kill John. (SLIDE) During Herod's birthday celebration, Herodias' daughter came out and danced for him. Herod was so pleased, he promised to give her whatever she asked for. When she asked for the head of John the Baptist, he regretfully consented. Afterwards, John's disciples came and laid his body in a tomb.

Unlike most stories in the book of Mark, Jesus is not one of the main characters. Instead, the main characters are King Herod, his wife, Herodias, and John the Baptist. We will consider this story first from Herod's perspective.

Well, who is Herod? He is a king, who ruled Galilee and Peraea under Rome from 4 BC to AD 39. He most likely lived in Tiberius, a city which he built himself in honor of Tiberius Caesar.

Herod's full name was Herod Antipas. He was the son of Herod the Great, who was an Edomite, a descendant of Esau, Jacob's brother. Herod's mother was Malthace, a Samaritan. Herod the Great married several women from different countries probably for political reasons. His family was known for their violence. His sons were often vying for the throne. Even his wives, daughters, and daughters-in-law would often get involved in the bloodshed. Herod the Great was perhaps best known by the Jews for rebuilding the temple in Jerusalem, which became known as "Herod's temple".

So, this is the type of family Herod Antipas grew up in. He was not a Jew, but he professed Judaism, perhaps for more political reasons than sincere devotion to God.

What did Herod experience in this story? First, he experienced hearing about Jesus. Jesus had been very popular throughout Galilee for quite some time. For some reason, Herod hadn't heard about Jesus or His miracles previously. When he did hear about him, he imagined it was John the Baptist, who had come back from the dead. You say, "I didn't know John was dead." Well, Mark will explain that as we go on.

Next, Herod experienced putting John in prison. According to Mark 6:20, Herod had been strongly influenced by John. He "feared John, knowing that he was a just (righteous) and holy man." Herod had been convicted by John's preaching of repentance. He was moved by the power with which John spoke. Mark says he "heard him gladly". And yet at the same time, Herod became infatuated with Herodias. She was his half-brother Philip's wife, which would make her his sister-in-law. She was also his half-brother's (Aristobulus IV) daughter, which would make her his niece. Herodias lived in Rome, which was quite a distance from Galilee. But since Herod worked for the Caesar in Rome, he would occasionally visit there. Taken with her charm and beauty, Herod divorced his wife and married her, bringing her to live with him in Galilee.

Mark 6:18 mentions that he was rebuked by John for this. He was told that what he had done was "not lawful". The law of Moses in Leviticus 18:16 and 20:21 forbids it. This says something about the relationship between Herod and John, in that John felt free to rebuke him, who was the king. Certainly there was a close relationship there. But according to Mark 6:19 Herodias was so upset by John's disapproval that she wanted to kill him. Herod wouldn't allow her to, but he tried to pacify her. Verse 17 says he compromised by putting John in prison, hoping to be able to release him when he got a chance.

Last, Herod experienced a birthday celebration. It was quite an event, filled with pomp and pleasure. Mark 6:21 says Herod invited many honorable guests. It mentions "nobles". These would have been high government officials. (perhaps the equivalent of a president's cabinet) There were also "high officers". These were commanders in the Roman military who were in charge of 1,000 soldiers. The "chief men of Galilee" were likely celebrities. Some could have been Jewish leaders and wealthy business people.

According to Mark 6:21, 22 this celebration was a banquet. There was lots of luxurious food (and certainly wine as well). Verse 22 mentions some unexpected entertainment. "Herodias' daughter herself came in and danced." This was an unusual favor. A woman of royalty typically would never expose herself in this way. But Herod was flattered by this act. And in the midst of the splendor, the wine, and the entertainment, he felt moved to make an oath. It was an oath that he would regret for the rest of his life. In verse 23 of Mark 6 he promised Herodias' daughter whatever she wanted, even up to half of his kingdom. She quickly went and asked her mother what she should ask for. Immediately, Herodias told her to ask for the head of John the Baptist. Here was the chance she had been scheming for. Finally she would be rid of John, the one who had disapproved of her marriage to Herod. When Herodias' daughter came back and told Herod what she wanted, he and all the guests fell silent. What a horrible request! And yet Herod had made an oath. Someone could have spoken up for John. Someone could have released Herod from his oath. But no one did. It was like they were all dead in their consciences. So, Herod regrettably stuck to his oath and ordered the death of John the Baptist.

In Mark 6:29 John's disciples come and take John's body. They give him a respectable burial by laying his body in a tomb.

According to historical records Herod and Herodias never recovered from this incident. Herodias was labeled as the one guilty of John's death. John was still very honored and respected among the Jews. And for the rest of her life Herodias had to live with the stigma that she was the one who had ordered the death of this innocent and righteous man. The revenge she had sought after for so long was not so sweet. Instead it was quite bitter. For Herod his choice to follow through with his impulsive oath and order John's execution haunted him for the rest of his life. Forever afterward he was tormented by guilt. His effort to compromise didn't work. He found that you can't serve two masters. You can't ride the fence. Both Herod and Herodias lost what they had tried to keep – popularity and position. A few years later, Herod was defeated in battle by his former father-in-law (a king who ruled east of Herod), from which he was never able to redeem himself. Later his nephew King Agrippa I accused him of conspiracy against the emperor of Rome. As a result he was sent into exile in Gaul. He was forced to leave his throne for a remote place in the area of modern-day France, quite a distance from his palace in Galilee.

Herod and Herodias both wanted to be someone great. John, on the other hand, was very humble. His mission was to lift up Christ. One time he said of Jesus, "He must increase, but I must decrease." And yet in the end, Herod and Herodias are humiliated, and John is forever immortalized as the greatest of the prophets.

John was the first to proclaim Christ (Mark 1:1-8). He was the first to recognize Christ (John 1:29-34). And we find in our story today he was also the first to suffer & die for Christ (Mark 6:14-29). And according to Jesus no prophet was greater than John the Baptist (Matthew 11:11).

In the book Desire of Ages by Ellen White (in the chapter entitled "Imprisonment and Death of John") it says of John:

"Of all the gifts that heaven can bestow upon men, fellowship with Christ in His sufferings is the most weighty trust and the highest honor."

In suffering for Christ John became great.

Most of us probably don't like to suffer. In fact, we probably try to avoid it. But John has given us an example in that he remained faithful in the midst of suffering. His example inspires me to remain faithful. Whatever life may throw at me, by God's grace, I will remain faithful.

As we close, I invite you to turn with me to Romans 8:38, 39. (Read) Cancer cannot separate me from God. Losing a loved one cannot separate me from His love. Whatever I may lose, whatever I may suffer, nothing will ever be able to separate me from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

In all these things we overcome. Our closing hymn is "Faith Is the Victory". The same faith that sustained John in prison and in death will sustain us. By faith we can overcome the world.