

The Murder of John the Baptist
Mark 6:14-29
ABC 3/19/23

Two weeks ago we left off in our study through the gospel of Mark with Jesus' disciples heading out 2 by 2 on the mission Jesus has given them (6:7-13). In our text today (6:14-29), Mark gives us an interlude with 2 scenes. The 1st is Herod's concern with who Jesus is. The 2nd is a flashback to Herod's murder of John the Baptist. You remember John, the forerunner to the Messiah, the one of whom Jesus said, **Truly I say to you, among those born of women there has not arisen anyone greater than John the Baptist!** (Mt 11:11). John's preaching pointed to Jesus, whom he declared to be **the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world** (Jn 1:29). If the religious leaders had received & believed John, they would've received the One he spoke of. Instead, they rejected them both. The story of John's murder is as dramatic as any story in the NT, exceeded only by Jesus' crucifixion. It reads like a bizarre soap opera of intrigue, debauchery, & brutality. These 2 scenes are sandwiched between the disciples being sent out (12-13) & their reporting back to Jesus after their mission (30). Although it's not perfectly clear, it seems Mark has done this to show the cost of following Jesus. The disciples are told to set aside their possessions & comfort to proclaim the good news of God's Kingdom relying on God to meet their needs. John the Baptist has done this & he loses his life because of his faithfulness to his calling. John's death foreshadows the suffering of Jesus, but the sending out of the 12 & their return sandwiches the account of his death. John's beheading casts a shadow of death over the disciples' mission. The bracketing suggests that what happened to John signals what will also happen to those who preach the same message of repentance in a hostile world (6:12).¹ As a model disciple, John gives his life for the gospel (Mk 9:10-13). Our text also continues to highlight the question of who Jesus is while contrasting Him, the true servant King, & Herod, the wannabe king. & it's a preview of what will happen to Jesus as He gives His life for us. Herod's concern about Jesus' identity sets the stage for the flashback to the arrest & execution of John. This gives us an explanation of & follow-up to the earlier brief mention of John's imprisonment. Mark began his gospel with John the Baptist (1:2-8) & then says,

¹ David E. Garland, *Mark*, The NIV Application Commentary, pp 246–247

after John had been taken into custody, Jesus came into Galilee, preaching the gospel of God (1:14). Mark now tells us what happened to John. As you know, John was a miracle child born to the elderly priest Zacharias & his wife, Elizabeth. Following the command of the angel, John was a Nazirite from birth. As such, his hair was never cut, he never touched a dead body, or drank fermented drink (Num 6). As he grew in his knowledge of the Scriptures & God's call upon his life, he took up the clothing of an ancient prophet, wearing a coat of camel's hair, a leather belt, & living in the wilderness eating grasshoppers & honey (Mt 3:4). The way he dressed was similar to Elijah but what about his diet? Does it mean anything?² In Ex 3:8, God spoke to Moses about the Israelites: **I have come down to deliver them from the power of the Egyptians, & to bring them up from that land to a good & spacious land, to a land flowing with milk & honey...** Honey is associated with God's promise & blessing. Locusts are different in what they signify. In the OT, the threat of locusts was about God's judgment (Dt 28:38-45). If locusts came the crops suffered & then the people suffered (Joel 1). Honey is associated with blessing while locusts are associated with judgment. A prophet's ministry included both. God's prophet would proclaim the promise of God's blessing & the warning of God's curse. His ministry would, in a sense, be one of honey & locusts. John the Baptist's diet seems to represent his spiritual message. His words about the kingdom & about repentance needed to be followed. Repentance would lead to blessing, while rejection would lead to judgment. His diet symbolized what his message was. Just as his dress connected him to the OT, so did his diet. The food going into John's mouth represented the message coming out of his mouth. Those who received John's message with faith would taste its sweetness & experience God's blessing, like honey. Those who refused John's message would experience God's judgment, like locusts. Herod would experience locust as he rejected God's prophet. When John burst onto the national scene, he boldly denounced sin & called people to repentance in preparation for the coming Messiah. He backed down & cowered to no one, calling the religious leaders a **brood of vipers** (Mt 3:7). It was inevitable he'd butt heads with the corrupt Herodian dynasty, with its degenerate leader Herod, & his wife Herodias. John was serious & simple; Herod was flamboyant & foolish.

² Mitch Chase, <https://mitchchase.substack.com/p/locusts-and-wild-honey>

John was righteous; Herod was depraved. John was a man with a moral compass; Herod was a man who lived in wishy-washy relativity. John was a man who kept his conscience & lost his head. Herod was a man who took John's head & lost his own conscience.³ **6:12-16**

1. Herod & Jesus (14-16) The mission of the disciples broadened Jesus' ministry, resulting in greater publicity & brought Jesus' activity to the attention of Herod. The text simply says Herod **heard**, without identifying what he'd heard. But the following phrase makes it clear that He'd been hearing about Jesus because **His name had become well known** (14). As the apostles traveled through Galilee, preaching the gospel & performing miracles (Mk 3:7-13), news of their ministry spread so that even **King Herod heard of it**. One of the things that must have troubled Herod (14) is that Jesus & His disciples were proclaiming the kingdom of God. It boils down to the simple message: God is King, & Herod is not.⁴ Herod hears of Jesus, but who is Herod? The family tree of the Herods is more twisted than a pretzel & it's easy to get confused. The Herod here is Herod Antipas, a son of Herod the Great, who was the Herod at the birth of Jesus & the killing of the male babies in Bethlehem (37-4 BC). Herod the Great had 10 wives & 15 kids. His descendants are sometimes incestuous & intermarriage was common. This, along with duplicate names, makes relationships hard to untangle. Salome, for example, Herodias' daughter by her 1st marriage to Herod Philip, was at the same time Herod Antipas' niece (the daughter of his half-brother Philip), his grandniece (since Herodias, his wife, was also his half-brother Aristobolus' daughter), & his stepdaughter (his new wife Herodias's daughter).⁵ We must add to this the fact that all of the Herods (Antipas, Aristobolus, Philip, Archelaus, etc.) can be referred to simply as *Herod*. Finally, there are many people in this tangled genealogy with the same name. The simplest solution is that there were 2 Herod Philips. Herodias's 1st husband, referred to simply as *Herod* by Josephus, was actually named **Herod Philip**, as Mark asserts (6:17). He was a different son of Herod the Great than Philip the Tetrarch (Lk 3:1), who later married Salome, Herodias's daughter.⁶ See why this gets confusing? Although the sons of Herod the Great didn't have the power & prestige enjoyed by their father,

³ R. Kent Hughes, *Mark: Jesus, Servant & Savior*, vol. 1, Preaching the Word, p 140

⁴ Garland, p 244

⁵ Joel Marcus, *Mark 1-8*, p 395

⁶ Mark L. Strauss, *Mark*, ed. Clinton E. Arnold, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the NT, p 264

they did inherit his character, so they were equally immoral & barbaric. They lived lives of laziness, luxury, & lust. Our Herod today is Herod Antipas, who ruled Galilee & Perea from 4 BC to 39 AD. His title was *tetrarch* (Mt 14:1; Lk 3:1, 19; 9:7; Acts 13:1), which means *ruler of a 4th part* as Herod the Great's rule was divided between some of his sons at his death. In 17 AD, to honor his Roman bosses, Herod Antipas built a new capital city named Tiberius, after the current emperor, only to find it was built on top of an old Jewish cemetery. No pious Jew ever entered it & it was inhabited almost exclusively by Greeks & Romans. Jesus' reference to Antipas as **that fox** (Lk 13:32) bears testimony to his uncleanness, cunning, & malice.⁷ Mark refers to Antipas as **king** here but this is probably a popular title rather than an official one. Herod did want to be king, like his father before him, & it was his attempt to gain that title that eventually led to his banishment to Gaul by Caligula in 39 AD.⁸ This Herod is also the one before whom Jesus stood at His trial (Lk 23:7–12), which we'll get to.

The 3 claims about Jesus' identity in vss 14-15 are presented as popular speculation, what **people were saying**. These are the same 3 answers given by the disciples in chpt 8 (27–28) when Jesus asks His disciples who people were saying He was. 1st, some thought He was John **risen from the dead**. Although it's not clear what's meant by this, it could be referring to a superstitious belief that John's ghost had come back to haunt his murderer. Although it refers to the **miraculous powers** in connection to the belief that John had risen from the dead, there's no record of John performing any miracles & Jn 10:41 clearly says he didn't. The likely meaning here isn't that Jesus' miracles are similar to John's, but that such miracles were proof that John's *ghost* was back, since a ghost was thought to have had greater powers than a man. The 2nd speculation by **others** is that Jesus is the prophet **Elijah**. Many expected Elijah to return before judgment day, a tradition arising from his unusual departure from earth to heaven (2 Kgs 2:11–12) & from the prophecies of Malachi (3:1; 4:5–6; cf Mk 9:10–13; 15:35–36; Jn 1:21–25). The 3rd speculation is that, if not Elijah, Jesus is another **prophet**. Herod considers the options & chooses the most menacing: **John, whom I**

⁷ James R. Edwards, *The Gospel according to Mark*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary, p 184

⁸ Josephus, *Antiquities* 18.7.1–2, pp 240–256; *Jewish Wars* 2.9.0, pp 181–188

beheaded, has risen! The sense is he said this again & again. *I'm the one, I beheaded John, I killed him, & he's now risen.* Herod fears retribution from John & his conscience is telling him he's done evil. If John had been raised, Herod reasoned, he must be bringing God's judgment on his enemies, #1 of whom was Herod, who killed him.⁹ Instead of repenting, he simply responds with fear that Jesus was somehow John returned from the dead. As these reports reached Herod, he became fixated on Jesus. According to **Lk 9:7-9:**

Now Herod the tetrarch heard of all that was happening; & he was greatly perplexed, because it was said by some that John had risen from the dead, & by some that Elijah had appeared, & by others that one of the prophets of old had risen again. Herod said, "I myself had John beheaded; but who is this man about whom I hear such things?" & he kept trying to see Him.

Herod was fearfully intrigued by what he heard of Jesus. **17-18**

2. Herod & John the Baptist John's preaching of repentance from sin was an open condemnation of the immoral, lecherous, corrupt life of Herod Antipas. When John heard that Herod was living in incest & adultery, **on account of Herodias, the wife of his brother Philip, because he had married her** (17), John doesn't hesitate to confront & condemn him. Herodias knew that whenever John rebuked Herod he was also criticizing her. To satisfy her, Herod had John arrested, bound, & put in prison. But his *lovely* wife wasn't satisfied with that. She wanted nothing less than John's death. But even in his imprisonment John was summoned to appear before Herod again & again. Herodias probably feared that Herod would come completely under John's spell, & who knows what would result if that happened.¹⁰ The Jewish historian Josephus also gives an account of the arrest & execution of John the Baptist. He agrees that it came from John's criticism of Herod's divorce of his 1st wife & remarriage to Herodias. According to Josephus, Antipas' 1st wife was the daughter of King Aretas IV of Nabatea. When Herod divorced her & married Herodias, Aretas went to war with Herod, defeating him in battle. Many Jews believed Herod's defeat was God's punishment for his killing of John.¹¹ Whatever the case, John objected¹¹ to Herod's marriage because he married his brother's wife (18), a union forbidden in the OT (Lev 18:6; 20:21), unless the brother died without children

⁹ R. C. Sproul, *Mark*, First Edition, St. Andrew's Expository Commentary, p 131

¹⁰ William Hendriksen & Simon J. Kistemaker, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Mark*, vol. 10, New Testament Commentary, p 237

¹¹ *Antiquities*, 18.5.1, pp 109-115

(Dt 25:5–10). Herodias' divorce of Herod Philip would've also raised eyebrows since Jewish law didn't allow a woman to divorce her husband. As a faithful prophet of God, John was fearless in his willingness to confront sin, even in the most powerful of people. **19-20**

Herodias' **grudge against** John & her desire to kill him (19) echoes the OT story of Jezebel's hatred of Elijah (1 Kgs 19:2). Herod's combination of fear & respect for John is similar to King Ahab's relationship with Elijah (1 Kgs 21:20–29). Although Herodias wanted to kill John, Herod knew he was a **righteous** or *innocent* & **holy man** & *kept keeping him safe* by protecting him from his wife's schemes. Although, according to Matthew, there were times Herod wanted to kill John as well but feared the people because they saw John as a prophet (14:5). Herod was afraid of John & was **perplexed** by him but enjoyed **listening to him** (20) but was baffled by his message. Why would Herod enjoy visiting with John? Maybe John was a breath of fresh air among the fawning & scheming of others. John didn't care about popularity or pleasing Herod. He spoke the truth without apology. & maybe that appealed to Herod on some level. But that was not to last. **21**

In spite of Herod's curiosity & fear, John's imprisonment came to a violent end. A **strategic** or *opportune day* for Herodias arrived when Herod threw a birthday party for himself, inviting the leaders in Galilee. The guests appear to be government officials, military leaders, & the local upper classes. It's everyone who is anyone, the political, military, & social elite. Such birthday celebrations were considered pagan by pious Jews but were common among the nobility. Where did this birthday party take place? Josephus says John was imprisoned in Machaerus, a fortress built by Herod the Great about a 2 days' travel from Galilee on the east side of the Dead Sea. It's possible they traveled to Machaerus for the party or Herod could have had brought John to Tiberias, his headquarters in Galilee. We don't know for sure & it doesn't matter. **22-23**

Herodias' daughter isn't named in Scripture but Josephus tells us her name was Salome. Her age isn't given. Mark refers to her only as **the girl**, using the same word Jesus used of the girl in Mk 5 (41). This word is used 8x in the Grk translation of Esther (2:2, 9) to designate a young girl of marriageable age. Salome was most likely in her middle teens when this took place & her dance was probably some sort of sensual dance. Salome seems fully aware of the intrigue going on, since

she elaborates on her mother's request by asking for John's head **on a platter** (25). While some say a suggestive dance is unlikely to have been performed by a member of the royal family, the scene fits well with the debauched decadence of the Herodian family. Her dance so pleases Herod & his guests that he makes the girl an extravagant offer: she can have anything she wants, up to ½ his kingdom. The offer is similar to that made to Esther by King Ahasuerus (5:3, 6; 7:2) & is simply a way of saying, *Ask for anything at all. I'm the king, so I can grant it* (1 Kgs 13:8). **24**

The fact that Salome checks with her mom suggests the opportunity came spontaneously from Herod's foolish offer, rather than through Herodias' plotting. Like a NT Jezebel, Salome's mother, Herodias, was wicked, wily, & cruel. She resented John the Baptist for his attack on her sinful life. From the moment of John's arrest, she wanted him put to death. So when Salome asked her mom what she should ask for, Herodias didn't hesitate, **The head of John the Baptist** (24). To honor her request, Salome rushed back before Herod had a chance to sober up or change his mind. **25**

The girl's desire to please her mother is seen by the haste with which she returns & her adding to her mother's request: she wants John's head **on a platter** & she wants it **at once**. This guarantees Herod won't be able to withdraw his offer after his guests have left. **26**

Herod **was very sorry** or *greatly distressed* by this. This is the same word Mark uses to describe Jesus' agony in Gethsemane where He says, **My soul is deeply grieved...** (14:34). If Herod was drunk when he made his offer, he quickly sobers up when he realizes what he's done. He was in genuine grief. It would be a huge loss of face to back down, so, **because of his oaths & because of his dinner guests** he grants the request. He had no problem breaking his marriage vows but doesn't want to break his oath & look bad to his guests. He reveals himself to be an immoral, vacillating, pathetic ruler. He's the opposite of John, who spoke truth even at the risk of his life. As one commentator says, *Antipas, Herodias, & Salome are ... fascinating studies in deviant psychology.*¹² **27-28**

According to the Roman historian Cassius Dio, when the head of Cicero (43 BC) was brought to Mark Antony's wife, Fulvia, she pulled out his tongue & repeatedly stabbed it with her hairpin. Her assault was seen as an act of vengeance against Cicero, because he'd delivered powerful speeches

¹² Edwards, p 186

against Mark Antony. The 5th-century church father Jerome (420 AD) suggested that Herodias similarly mutilated the head of John the Baptist.¹³ Though it can't be verified, it fits with the spiteful rage of Herodias. In contrast to the depravity of Herod's party, John's disciples come & give him an honorable burial. **29-30**

It's hard to imagine the heart-break that John's disciples must have endured as they gave his headless body a proper burial. Matthew tells us John's disciples came & reported to Jesus what had happened (14:12). The scene parallels & foreshadows the burial of Jesus by Joseph of Arimathea (Mk 15:42–47) after His equally vile murder performed by another unethical & indecisive politician. The report of the disciples' return to Jesus, which one would expect after vs 13, is placed following the death of John, making a sandwich construction. What does Mark intend by bracketing the martyrdom of John by the mission of the 12? It draws mission & martyrdom, discipleship & death, into an inseparable relationship.¹⁴ Whoever would follow Jesus must 1st reckon with the fate of John. John's martyrdom not only prefigures Jesus' death, but also the death of anyone who follows Him. What does John's experience teach us? John's death shows us the ultimate cost of discipleship, an important theme in Mark in the chapters that follow. Jesus teaches & says, **If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross and follow Me. For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake and the gospel's will save it (8:34-35).**

By giving his life, John shows himself to be a model disciple. By sandwiching the death of John between the beginning & end of the mission of the disciples, Mark shows that the path of true discipleship is one of self-denial & self-sacrifice. But John isn't just a model follower of Jesus, he's also His forerunner, & his death serves as a foreshadowing of Jesus' arrest & crucifixion. John's death was a chilling preview of the torture & death Jesus Himself would soon endure. Herod would be there to mock Christ as He suffered under another wishy-washy ruler, Pontius Pilate. Pilate will know Jesus is innocent & will resist putting Him to death, but he eventually concedes to pressure from others (Mk 15:1–15). Herod loses his soul by caving to the pressure of others in pride &

¹³ John MacArthur, *Mark 1–8*, MacArthur New Testament Commentary (Chicago, IL: Moody Publishers, 2015), 308.

¹⁴ James R. Edwards, *The Gospel according to Mark*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI; Leicester, England: Eerdmans; Apollos, 2002), 189.

cowardice. Both Jesus & John are arrested for challenging the powers that be. Both are put to death by self-seeking rulers who know their victims are innocent but waver under pressure & choose practicality over justice. The bodies of both are taken & buried by sympathetic followers. After John's death, rumors arise that he's risen from the dead. Jesus actually does rise from the dead. These parallels between John & Jesus in Mark find similar expression in the other gospels. In Luke, for example, the births of Jesus & John are paralleled, heralded by angelic announcements & miraculous conceptions (Lk 1). Yet in this parallelism, Jesus is shown to be the superior. While John is *prophet of the Most High* (Lk 1:76), Jesus is the *Son of the Most High* (1:32). John's birth to a *barren woman* is a miracle but Jesus' birth to a *virgin* is unprecedented. John's role is to *prepare the way for the Lord* (1:17, 76); Jesus is *that Lord*, the Savior, who is Messiah & Lord (2:11). John says the One who comes after him is so much greater that John isn't worthy to unlace His sandals. While John baptizes with water, Jesus will baptize with the Holy Spirit (1:7-8). Jesus must increase, while John must decrease (Jn 3:3). To follow Jesus is to serve Him at all costs, even willing to give up your life for His glory. To live a life of self-sacrificial giving, promoting the cause of others over ourselves, goes against our natural selfish tendency. Yet it's the mark of true Christianity.

The last mention of this Herod in Scripture gives a chilling reality. According to Luke, Pilate sent Jesus to Herod because Pilate could find no guilt in Him:

When Pilate heard it, he asked whether the man was a Galilean. & when he learned that He belonged to Herod's jurisdiction, he sent Him to Herod, who himself also was in Jerusalem at that time. Now Herod was very glad when he saw Jesus; for he had wanted to see Him for a long time, because he had been hearing about Him & was hoping to see some sign performed by Him. & he questioned Him at some length; but He answered him nothing. & the chief priests & the scribes were standing there, accusing Him vehemently. & Herod with his soldiers, after treating Him with contempt & mocking Him, dressed Him in a gorgeous robe & sent Him back to Pilate (Lk 23:6-11).

In the end, Herod saw Jesus because he thought Jesus might amuse him. He was undoubtedly relieved that Jesus wasn't John risen from the dead. Unfortunately for Herod, He was far more, but to Herod Jesus seemed like far less, nothing more than a side-show he ridiculed & sent back to Pilate. Herod stood face-to-face with God incarnate & saw nothing in Him. In Herod's interaction with John & Jesus, He stands like Judas as a tremendously tragic figure in history. He had the greatest man who'd ever lived, the most honored prophet of God in his hands, & he locked him in

a dungeon & had him killed. More importantly, he had an audience with the King of kings, & he mocked Him. Such wasted opportunity was the result of his love for sin, his arrogant unwillingness to believe, & his cowardly fear of the truth. Herod claimed to rule over others, but in reality he was a man controlled by the fear of others. His fear of the people kept him from killing John at 1st. His fear of his friends finally compelled him to authorize John's execution. His fear of John made him anxious when he heard about Jesus. But his fear turned to disdain when he finally had an audience with Jesus. Herod feared everyone except the One we all must fear.¹⁵ It's possible for a person to be so jaded that they can stand face-to-face with Jesus & feel nothing.

As we've seen, Herod liked listening to John but never acted on what he heard. According to Jesus' parable of the sower, Herod qualifies as bad ground. He hears gladly, but does nothing. He reveres John as a prophet but can't come up with enough courage to admit he made a rash oath & shouldn't have granted his wife's wicked request. A fearless prophet is undone by a cowardly king, who saved his face but lost his soul.¹⁶ How many others have been awakened to eternal things & their own sinfulness, & yet have buried it because they feared what their friends, family, spouse, or co-workers would think. Some spend their entire lives basing their decisions on what others think. There are some who don't make any decisions according to conscience, but are always worried about what others want. More people than we realize have lost eternity because they feared what others think. Is the opinion of others keeping you from following your own instincts & the witness of the Holy Spirit? If so, don't be fooled. If Jesus has been moving your heart & conscience & you realize your sinfulness & that Jesus is perfect righteousness, then you must believe in Him & place your faith in Him alone. Don't fear what others will think or say. Use the opportunity you have today to do what Herod refused to do & place your faith in Jesus. There's also a message for believers here: An ignored conscience will suffer growing hardness to God so that eventually you won't hear Him at all. Cultivate your conscience by filling your mind with God's Word & obeying it. This is a healthy conscience which is in balance with the Word of God. Let us pray that God will

¹⁵ MacArthur, p 310

¹⁶ David E. Garland, *Mark*, The NIV Application Commentary, p 250

give us a conscience worthy of our position in Him. So that we might serve Him obediently, no matter the cost.