

John the Baptist: Losing One's Faith and Losing One's Head

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Locked Up with Nowhere to Go

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Bible Text: Luke 7:18-23, Mark 6:14-29

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Gracious God and ever blessed Father, we ask for your blessing on the reading and preaching of the Scriptures this morning. We pray, Holy Spirit, that you would grant us illumination, help us to read, mark, learn and inwardly digest and all for Jesus' sake. Amen.

Now we began a series several weeks ago now called "Locked Up with Nowhere to Go" and what it is that God's people learned when they were in prison and we've looked at several characters from the Old Testament including Joseph and Samson and Daniel and so on, and Jonah, and this morning we are going to look at John the Baptist. I have two passages, one in the gospel of Mark and another in the gospel of Luke and I hope I don't confuse you too much but I want to actually look at both of these passages this morning beginning in the gospel of Mark 6 at verse 14. Mark 6:14.

14 King Herod heard of it, for Jesus' name had become known. Some said, "John the Baptist has been raised from the dead. That is why these miraculous powers are at work in him." 15 But others said, "He is Elijah." And others said, "He is a prophet, like one of the prophets of old." 16 But when Herod heard of it, he said, "John, whom I beheaded, has been raised." 17 For it was Herod who had sent and seized John and bound him in prison for the sake of Herodias, his brother Philip's wife, because he had married her. 18 For John had been saying to Herod, "It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife." 19 And Herodias had a grudge against him and wanted to put him to death. But she could not, 20 for Herod feared John, knowing that he was a righteous and holy man, and he kept him safe. When he heard him, he was greatly perplexed, and yet he heard him gladly. 21 But an opportunity came when Herod on his birthday gave a banquet for his nobles and military commanders and the leading men of Galilee. 22 For when Herodias's daughter came in and danced, she pleased Herod and his guests. And the king said to the girl, "Ask me for whatever you wish, and I will give it to you." 23 And he vowed to her, "Whatever you ask me, I will give you, up to half of my kingdom." 24 And she went out and said to her mother, "For what should I ask?" And she said, "The

head of John the Baptist." 25 And she came in immediately 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, but because of his oaths and his guests he did not want to break his word to her. 27 And immediately the king sent an executioner with orders to bring John's head. He went and beheaded him in the prison 28 and 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 his body and laid it in a tomb.

Then in Luke 7 at verse 18 and an incident that occurred in John the Baptist's life when he was in prison before the event that we've just read about in Mark 6. Beginning in verse 18,

18 The disciples of John reported all these things to him. And John, 19 calling two of his disciples to him, sent them to the Lord, saying, "Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?" 20 And when the men had come to him, they said, "John the Baptist has sent us to you, saying, 'Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?'" 21 In that hour he healed many people of diseases and plagues and evil spirits, and on many who were blind he bestowed sight. 22 And he answered them, "Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, the poor have good news preached to them. 23 And blessed is the one who is not offended by me." 24 When John's messengers had gone, Jesus began to speak to the crowds concerning John: "What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed shaken by the wind? 25 What then did you go out to see? A man dressed in soft clothing? Behold, those who are dressed in splendid clothing and live in luxury are in kings' courts. 26 What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. 27 This is he of whom it is written, "'Behold, I send my messenger before your face, who will prepare your way before you.'" 28 I tell you, among those born of women none is greater than John. Yet the one who is least in the kingdom of God is greater than he."

I often in the prayer, the prayer for illumination, the prayer that occurs just before the sermon and before the reading of Scripture, I often cite those words to read, mark, learn and inwardly digest and they are words written by Thomas Cranmer who died in 1556. Thomas Cranmer had served as the Archbishop of Canterbury under the reign of Henry VIII and later Edward VI and fatally under Queen Mary or Bloody Mary. And Cranmer was given the task by Henry VIII to come up with a Protestant liturgy, the liturgy of the Church of England of the Episcopal Church and the Book of Common Prayer and this would be the 1549 edition of the Book of Common Prayer and there were various other editions in the decades and centuries that followed, and it's in that Book of Common Prayer that Thomas Cranmer wrote those words, "Let us read, mark, learn and inwardly

digest." Later under the reign of Queen Mary, a Roman Catholic queen who engaged in a torrent of persecutions and executions, Thomas Cranmer recanted of his Protestant beliefs and signed a sermon that he was to preach at the university chapel and when he came to preach the sermon, he followed the course of the printed text until the final paragraphs where he deviated from the text and denied his recantation publicly and held up his right hand and said, "This is the offending hand that signed that recantation and this will be the hand that I will thrust first into the flames to feel its scorching heat." And within days he was burnt at the stake.

The point of that story, of course, is that great men of faith and Thomas Cranmer certainly would be among the great men of faith, have moments when they seem to buckle under the strain just like John the Baptist did in prison in Herod's dungeons northeast of the Dead Sea at Machaerus and great men, great men and women of faith have moments when they seem to lose assurance of their faith and assurance of who Jesus is, for a moment they seem to take their eyes off the Lord Jesus. My trusty intern pointed out to me this week that Dale Ralph Davis, our dear friend, Dr. Davis who wrote a commentary on Luke and I haven't actually read what he said about the passage in Luke 7 but the title my intern told me of that chapter was "What a Baptist can teach a Presbyterian," and I thought that was typical of Dr. Davis and this morning that is precisely what we want to do, we want to know what does John the Baptist have to teach us this morning.

Jesus made two significant statements about John the Baptist. The first was that he who is least in the kingdom of God is greater than John the Baptist. It was Jesus' way of saying that John the Baptist remains under the old covenant, he remains in the land of shadows, he remains in the land of prophecy but he who is in the new covenant is in the land of fulfillment. We see and appreciate Jesus' death and resurrection and, yes, I do believe in the resurrection. Somebody asked me this week, "What is the most awkward thing to do in a mostly empty church livestreaming?" And I said it's reciting the Apostle's Creed which I thought I knew off by heart and this morning I left out the statement about the resurrection so I do believe in the resurrection and ascension of Jesus. But that's the first important thing that Jesus said about John the Baptist, that he was least in the kingdom of God and the new covenant is greater than John the Baptist, the importance of the new covenant, but the second thing that Jesus said about John the Baptist is that of those born of women, none is greater than John. That's an amazing testimony from the lips of the Lord Jesus about the sheer significance of John the Baptist, that none was greater, not Elijah and John the Baptist is certainly in the line of Elijah and dresses like Elijah and eats food like Elijah and he is in many senses Elijah redivivus as the Latins would say, Elijah come to life again, but he was a great great great man.

Now his parents Elizabeth and Zechariah were told about the significance of John the Baptist before he was even born, that he will be great before the Lord; that he will be filled with the Holy Spirit; that he will turn many to the Lord; and he would go before him in the spirit and power of Elijah and he'd bring a message of judgment and gospel, escape from the wrath of God. He performed a baptism of repentance, not Christian baptism but a baptism of repentance calling upon thousands and thousands to repent of

their sins and to trust in the Lord. His mission was to prepare the way and there are two texts, one in Malachi 3 and one in the 40th chapter of Isaiah that seem to dominate John the Baptist's understanding of who he was and why he was here. He was to prepare the way for the Lord Jesus. He was not that light but came as John says in his prologue, John the disciple says in his prologue he came to bear witness to the light. The entire ministry of John the Baptist was to point to Jesus as the fulfillment of God's redemptive purposes, as the one in whom forgiveness is to be found, the one in whom gospel mercy and grace would be found to escape the wrath of God, the impending judgment of God and to trust in the Lord Jesus. You remember at his baptism he saw the Spirit come down and heard the voice of the heavenly Father, "This is my beloved Son in whom I am well-pleased."

Well, I want to see three things as we look at these two passages in Mark and Luke together. The first is John's courageous preaching. Now in Mark 6, John is already dead but Mark has a sort of flashback because Herod is now hearing about Jesus and Herod's conscience is obviously still troubling him because he had executed John the Baptist and he thinks and is convinced that Jesus is John the Baptist come back to life again and that leads Mark to an explanation of how it is that John the Baptist lost his life, imprisoned by Herod. One of the most difficult things to try and sort out in the New Testament are the multiple references to Herods. There are several of them in the New Testament and it's easy to get them confused. This Herod is Herod Antipas and he is the grandson of Herod the Great, Herod the Great is the one who is reigning at the time of Jesus' birth and the one responsible for the pogrom in Bethlehem and the slaughter of the innocents, the little children in Bethlehem, and when he died, he divided the kingdom into four different parts and this grandson, Herod Antipas, there's another Herod in Acts 12 who dies miserably and that's Herod Agrippa, that's another Herod, but this is Herod Antipas. He had married his brother Philip's wife. Philip had divorced her. She was also the daughter of one of Herod's other brothers so technically Herodias, to whom he's now married, is his niece and this was contrary to marital laws, what theologians often refer to as the laws of consanguinity, this was contrary to the Levitical code to marry your niece, and John the Baptist had the courage to call him out. He is the ruler, he is the king, although he's not technically a king, he's a tetrarch and that was an issue for him for sure and got him into trouble later with Emperor Caligula, but this is the courage of John the Baptist, he called sin for what it was.

Now he could easily have avoided Herod-gate as we might call it, certainly the press were silent about Herod-gate at the time, but John the Baptist called him out to his face that he was living in sin. Public sin in public leaders and there's nothing new, is there. This is what we face almost continually. Therein Herod and Herodias are in the summer palace, a palace, a fortress built by his grandfather, Herod the Great, and a place called Machaerus northeast of the Dead Sea with magnificent views down into the valley and the Dead Sea and the hills on either side, and the Dead Sea with its just sheer beauty, this very salty sea and some of you have been there and tried to float on the sea and so on, and this was the summer palace with winds and so on to cool them. It was a place of great luxury, it was ornate, and below in the rocks below the fortress were dungeons and in which John the Baptist had been imprisoned. He was probably, difficult to be absolutely certain, but he was probably in prison for at least six months and maybe a little longer.

We're told in the Mark 6 passage that Herod feared him. Herod tried to help him. There are hints here that Herod would go down into the dungeons and speak to him and ask him and listen to him preach and proclaim the message of God, an uncompromising message of God, and Herod's conscience is clearly smitten. Conscience is what the Apostle Paul refers to as something that either excuses us or accuses us. It's almost like the voice of God imprinted within us from which we can never ultimately free, that the natural man knows God and knows what is right and what is wrong but instinctively rebels against it, holds down that knowledge in unrighteousness. And the first thing I want us to see is that courage, bold preaching of John the Baptist.

Well, secondly, the shocking loss of faith. The shocking loss of faith. In the Luke 7 passage, if you are following and want to flip over now to Luke 7, we read of this account where John sends two messengers to Jesus asking, "Are you the one who is to come or should we look for another?" When we think about heroes, and John the Baptist is certainly a hero in every sense of the term, when we think about heroes we sometimes think that heroes are those who never flinch, or who live their lives in unyielding obedience to God without a single flaw, and there are some signs of discipleship that some people promote that suggest that whenever a Christian faces trial and difficulty, that they should do so without any questioning, but that goes in the face of the Apostle Paul, for example in 2 Corinthians 12 and the thorn in the flesh and three times he asked the Lord to take it away. It goes against Elijah in 1 Kings underneath the juniper tree. But it also goes against our Lord Jesus in Gethsemane when that crucial world-shattering moment when Jesus says, "Father, if it be possible, take this cup away from me." And so we need to be careful how we judge John the Baptist here.

Now there are those, J. C. Ryle, Bishop Ryle, Bishop of Liverpool, late 19th century, wonderful wonderful commentator and preacher, Ryle didn't believe that this was a statement about John the Baptist but it was actually a statement about the two messengers that John sends to Jesus. Very few have adopted that point of view and most commentators believe that this is actually a statement about John the Baptist himself, and he seems to have a moment when he loses his faith. If we engaged in a word association quiz or game and I say John the Baptist, what descriptives come into your mind as you think of John the Baptist, and you might think of bold and strong and courageous and zealous and daring and resolute, but here in prison in a moment of trial, knowing full well that he probably would be executed though probably not in the actual circumstances that they took place in. You know, John the Baptist spent his whole life pointing to Jesus. They are almost the same age, he is six months older than Jesus. So we're talking about a man here in his, he's 30, perhaps he's 31 or so years of age, a relatively young man, and he has spent the last few years preaching about Jesus. He baptized him. He heard the testimony of the Father as to the identity of Jesus but he's confused now.

He was a Nazarene so he never touched wine and yet Jesus at the wedding in Cana of Galilee in the first miracle that we read of, changes water into wine and perhaps that was the beginning of John's puzzlement as to who exactly and what exactly was Jesus. They are, of course, related, they are cousins through Elizabeth and Mary and Elizabeth is

Mary's, possibly Mary's aunt and so they're cousins and they've probably known each other for all of their lives because of the relationship between Mary and Elizabeth, and now John is perplexed. Where are the judgments? His message had been about the coming judgment, the coming wrath, and to escape that judgment by believing and trusting in the promised Messiah. He was to prepare the way but where is the judgment? The separation of the wheat and the chaff? And now imprisoned and the injustice of it. He'd been doing the Lord's work and now he finds himself imprisoned doing the Lord's work.

"Are you the one or should we look for another?" And he sends these two disciples to Jesus and Jesus didn't actually answer the question, he just continued to do what he was doing, healing and raising the dead, and one gets the sense that he was doing it in hundreds of cases, fulfilling something that is said in the 35th chapter of Isaiah that when Messiah would come these would be the attendant signs and blessings of his true identity. "Go and tell John what you've seen and heard," Jesus says to them.

John is not the only one, of course, who has a shocking case of a loss of assurance and a trial. John Bunyan in "Pilgrim's Progress" has Hopeful and Christian and they take Bypath Meadow and they end up in Doubting Castle owned by Giant Despair, and there in the dungeon of that castle looking for that key called promise, and John Bunyan, of course, is writing an autobiography. "Pilgrim's Progress" is autobiographical of John Bunyan's own experience as he spent a dozen years in prison and suggesting that this great great man, John Bunyan, one of the greatest preachers and teachers of all time, had a moment when he seemed to lose his way and lose assurance. Gresham Machen, one of the great heroes of the 20th century and in part founder of Westminster Seminary when he left Princeton and went to Germany to study, doctoral studies and that involved reading a lot of liberals, theological liberals you understand, and he would lose his faith. He would get so immersed in the arguments of these detractors that he would lose his faith and he would read the gospel of Mark, of course he would read it in Greek but he would read the gospel of Mark from beginning to end over and over and over until he came back to faith again. Well, let me pause and say if there are moments in this pandemic when you seem to lose faith, that navigation dial seems to be heading in a different direction, you've lost sight of Jesus, you've been caught up in so much other stuff and strangeness that you've taken your eyes off Jesus, then listen to John the Baptist this morning: you're not alone in that. It can happen to the very best and the very greatest of God's people.

Well, the third thing I want us to see is courageous preaching and the shocking loss of faith, but the third thing I want us to see, we're going back now to Mark 6, is the sudden death of John the Baptist and it occurs in part because of Herodias' grudge against John the Baptist, and it's Herod's birthday and he's invited military people and important people from Galilee and so this would have been weeks in preparation and there's festivity and there's parties and dancing and there's Herodias' daughter. This is Herodias' daughter not through Philip but through another of Herod's brothers. It is a complete family mess here. But she dances in front of Herod, an overtly sexual dance. It's been portrayed, of course, in Oscar Wilde's "Salome." We don't read of her name being Salome here. She's a young girl, probably still a teenager, and Oscar Wilde takes the

name Salome from Josephus, the Jewish historian, who gives us her name as Salome. And Richard Strauss, of course, wrote an extraordinary opera, "Salome," in which there is that dance of the seven veils, a moment in the opera. And Herod is besotted by her. This man's conscience is seared. This man knows no bounds for sexual lust and he says to her in front of her mother, "Ask whatever you want up to half of my kingdom." What kind of person says something like that except someone whose sexual lust is out of control. And Salome runs to her mother, Herodias, and Herodias is instant in the reply, "Ask for the head of John the Baptist on a platter," which is what she got. In Oscar Wilde's play and in Richard Strauss' opera, Salome kisses the lips of John the Baptist and in Oscar Wilde's play Herod is so disgusted that he has her crushed beneath the shields of his soldiers, in actual fact that didn't take place. Herod and Herodias were banished by Emperor Caligula. It was a matter of jealousy about kingship and they were banished to Spain and Herod eventually lost everything and Herodias was walking, according to the historical narrative, was walking across a frozen river and the river cracked, the ice cracked and she fell in and drowned.

Well, what does this have to say to us this morning and I simply have one question: what is it that you'd be willing to die for? On this Memorial weekend, extraordinarily courageous men and women have died for their country, have died for our freedoms and for which we are immensely grateful this morning, but as a Christian what are you willing to die for?

John the Baptist had one statement. Despite this moment or relapse of faith he had one message, "I must decrease and he, Jesus, must increase." And that's true for us today and this week and the coming weeks. It's not about us, it's all about him and if John the Baptist teaches us anything from his imprisonment and death it is that we should make more and more and more about Jesus every single day, to look full into his wonderful face and the things of earth will grow strangely dim in the light of his glory and grace.

Father, we thank you for your word. Thank you for John the Baptist, even this lapse of faith endears him to us all the more, but he's a man of like passions. And so bless your word to us and give us courage, we pray and we ask it all in Jesus' name. Amen.