

## The Murder of John the Baptist

**Text:** Mark 6:14-29

### Introduction:

1. This passage details the sad death of John the Baptist, a man who was described by the Lord Jesus as the greatest man born of women (Matt. 11:11).
2. Historical Background:
  - Background to Herod and Herodias' adulterous marriage:

Herodias was the daughter of Aristobulus, a half-brother to Antipas, thus his niece. She had married her uncle, here called Philip, and they had had a daughter named Salome. Philip had been disinherited by his father, Herod the Great, and lived with Herodias in Rome as a private citizen. While visiting his brother in Rome, Antipas became enamoured with Herodias, who, as an ambitious woman, agreed to marry Antipas on the condition that he would divorce his wife, a daughter of the Nabataean king Aretas IV. Upon learning of the treacherous intentions of her husband, his wife of many years fled to her father at whose hands Antipas later suffered a humiliating military defeat. (Hiebert)

- Place of John's imprisonment:

He was imprisoned, according to Josephus, at Machaerus, near the north-eastern shore of the Dead Sea. It was a fortress, palace and prison all in one. (Hiebert) Vincent describes the palace as follows: "Perched on an isolated cliff at the end of a narrow ridge, encompassed with deep ravines, was the citadel. At the other end of this ridge Herod (the Great) built a great wall, with towers two hundred feet high at the corners; and within this enclosure, a magnificent palace, with colonnades, baths, cisterns, arsenals – every provision, in short, for luxury and for defence against siege. The windows commanded a wide and grand prospect, including the Dead Sea, the course of the Jordan and Jerusalem. In the detached citadel, probably in one of the underground dungeons, remains of which may still be seen, was the prison of John."

3. Verse 18 reveals the heart of this passage. It was John's uncompromising denunciation of the sin of immorality that cost him his head.
4. We will now examine this murder of John the Baptist in four sections.

### I. The Conscience about John's Murder (Vs. 14-16)

#### A. The Report to Herod (Vs. 14a; 16a)

1. The Evangelistic mission of the disciples was so effective that the Gospel began to unsettle Herod in his palace. So powerfully did they witness of Jesus Christ that Herod did not hear of "them" (the disciples) but of "him" (Jesus Christ).
2. Our witness for Christ is effective when Christ is the focus rather than ourselves as His messengers.

#### B. The Reaction of Herod (Vs. 14b-16)

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1. Herod's conscience was so troubled over his murder of John the Baptist that when he heard the reports of Christ, he superstitiously believed it was John the Baptist risen from the dead!
2. "others said" = others reported that Christ was Elijah or one of the prophets (Vs. 15)
3. "But when Herod heard...he said" = Herod repeatedly insisted that it was John the Baptist
4. "whom I beheaded" = Herod felt the personal responsibility for what he had done

### II. The Catalyst for John's Murder (Vs. 21-25)

There were some events that acted as a catalyst that lead to the gruesome death of the fiery Baptist. There was...

#### A. A Bold Rebuke from John (Vs. 17-18)

1. The Sin he rebuked (Vs. 17b, 18)
  - a. The sin of Adultery
    - i. "Thou shalt not commit adultery" (Ex. 20:14)
    - ii. "...But the thing that David has done displeased the LORD." (2 Sam. 11:27)
    - iii. Death penalty for adultery under O.T. law (Lev. 20:10)
    - iv. John the Baptist was not a respecter of persons. Most preachers today won't reprove this sin in strong terms, especially in those of high position in their church. We loudly proclaim that as Bible believers we follow in the footsteps of the Fiery Baptist but in reality, he would probably be thrown out of most of our churches for his uncompromising denunciation of evil.
  - b. The sin of Divorce and Remarriage
    - i. John denounced the marriage as 'unlawful' on the basis of Lev. 18:16 & 20:21.
    - ii. God hates divorce! *"For the LORD, the God of Israel, saith that **he hateth putting away...**"* (Mal. 2:16)
    - iii. Marriage to a divorced person equals adultery in God's eyes – Jesus said, *"Whosoever putteth away his wife, and marrieth another, **committeth adultery**: and whosoever marrieth her that is put away from her husband **committeth adultery.**"* (Luke 16:18)
    - iv. There's no such thing as divorce and remarriage "Christian style!" John's preaching reflected the mind of God on this matter.
2. The Suffering he Received (Vs. 17a)
  - a. John paid a heavy price for his stand against sin. First incarceration and then execution.

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- b. Taking a stand against immorality will not win you the popularity vote! In fact, it will provoke some of the most vicious anger and opposition for the man of God. But better to lose your head for the truth than keep it for error!
- c. “It was a blunt and brave thing that John said. It cost him his head; but it is better to have a head like John the Baptist and lose it than to have an ordinary head and keep it.” (RWP)

### **B. A Bitter Reaction from Herodias (Vs. 19-20)**

- 1. The revenge intended (Vs. 19)
  - a. “had a quarrel” = imperfect tense. Means she nursed and harboured a spirit of bitterness and malice against John. She “had it in” for John.
  - b. “would have killed him” = so incensed was Herodias against John that she desired his murder. She would settle for nothing less than seeing John’s head, dripping in blood on a platter in her hands.
- 2. The revenge obstructed (Vs. 20)
  - a. The only obstacle that stood in the way of Herodias and her desired revenge was Herod.
  - b. Herod had a respect for John on account of his impeccable character and genuine holiness and would on occasion, speak with John, hearing more of his uncompromising message of repentance.
  - c. Illustration: In a similar way, Felix heard the Gospel from Paul and trembled, but out of political expediency left Paul bound (Acts 24:25-27).

## **III. The Conspiracy for John’s Murder (Vs. 21-25)**

The conspiracy for John’s death involved:

### **A. A Sinister Plot (Vs. 21)**

- 1. ‘convenient’ = means opportune, suitable, timely, seasonable. Herodias was watching and waiting for such a moment where she could ensnare Herod and carry out her murderous plan.
- 2. “Herodias chose Herod’s birthday as the strategic moment to spring her trap and force him to put John to death.” (Wuest)
- 3. “Herod on his birthday made a supper” = a luxurious banquet with drinking, dancing and debauchery.
- 4. F.B. Meyer describes the scene: “...the great banquetting chamber was specially illuminated; the tables decked with flowers and gold and silver plate; laughter and mirth echoing through the vaulted roof from splendid company that lay, after the Eastern mode, on sumptuous couches, strewing the floor from one end to the other of the spacious hall. Servants, in costly liveries, passed to and fro,

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bearing the rich dainties on massive salvers (platters), one of which was to be presently besprinkled with the martyr's blood."

### B. A Sensual Performance (Vs. 22a)

1. "the daughter of the said Herodias came in, and danced" = the root of the verb means some kind of rapid motion (RWP).
  - a. "Towards the end of such a feast it was the custom for immodest women to be introduced, who, by their gestures imitated scenes in certain well-known mythologies, and still further inflamed the passions of the banqueters." (Meyer)
  - b. "Such solo dances were grossly suggestive...comparable to a striptease act in a modern nightclub. They were regularly performed by professional entertainers of low moral character, and it was an almost unprecedented thing for Salome to perform such a dance before Herod's guests." (Hiebert)
  - c. "It was a shameful exhibition of lewd dancing pre-arranged by Herodias to compass her purpose for John's death." (RWP)
2. This passage reveals God's mind on the drink, dancing and parties of the world. Christians should have nothing to do with it! Conversion used to mean that you tipped your booze down the drain, got rid of your rock and roll music and left the dance house, movie house and pub house never to return! And yet today in the name of so-called 'liberty' we have Christians advocating the drink, dance, movies and music of this evil world!
3. Making application to this passage of Scripture in 1890, F.B. Meyer warned:

Some of us dare not enter the theatre, or encourage others to enter...even when a play may be deemed inoffensive and harmless, the sensuous attractions of the place, the glitter, the music, the slightly-dressed figures of the actors and actresses, the entire atmosphere and environment, which appeal so strongly to the lust of the eye, the lust of the flesh, and the pride of life, break down some of the fortifications, which would otherwise resist the first incidence and assault of evil. **The air of the theatre, the ball-room, the race-course, seem so impregnated with the noxious germs and microbes of evil, that it is perilous for the soul to expose itself to them**, conscious as it is of predisposing bias and weakness.

### C. A Senseless Promise (Vs. 22b-23)

1. This foolish promise was given while enflamed by wine and lustful passion. How many foolish and evil decisions are made under such circumstances. Herod was evidently impressed by the fact Herodias, a daughter of high position, would lower herself to the level of an immoral dancer just out of honour for him! His pride was inflated and his lust aroused and he quickly fell into Herodias' trap.
2. "he swore unto her" = Herod put himself under oath

### D. A Sickening Petition (Vs. 24-25)

1. The request of the mother (Vs. 24)
2. The cooperation of the daughter (Vs. 25)

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- a. Salome shows no reluctance in carrying out her mother's evil wishes. Both mother and daughter were united in evil.
- b. Her demand was made with haste – 'straightway'; "with haste"; "by and by" (meaning at once, right now in Old English)

### IV. The Completion of John's Murder (Vs. 26-29)

#### A. The Beheading of John (Vs. 26-28)

1. Herod's Decision (Vs. 26)
  - a. "exceeding sorry" = Herod was remorseful over his foolish oath but not repentant.
  - b. "yet for his oath's sake...and their sakes which sat" = Herod's pride restrained him from going back on his word.
  - c. "Is it not marvellous that a man who did not refrain from doing deeds of incest and murder, should be so scrupulous about violating an oath that ought never to have been sworn?" (F.B. Meyer)
2. Herod's Directive (Vs. 27-28)
  - a. The executioner is quickly dispatched to carry out the gruesome deed.
  - b. Imagine the scene:

John lies bound in a prison cell, perhaps even hearing the occasional sound of music and laughter from the party wafting down the dungeon corridors. All of a sudden, the sound of heavy, approaching footsteps greets his ears; they pause outside his door and a key grates as it turns in the lock. The door opens and there stands a brutal Roman guard, the flickering torchlight illuminating his hardened face and the presence of a sword in his hand. What words transpired at that fateful moment we are not told but the deed is carried out swiftly. The sword falls upon the neck of the greatest man every born and he is ushered into eternal glory. The head is unceremoniously placed on a golden platter and taken back to the two women who wait gloating and hissing like two venomous vipers for the gory spectacle.

- c. Maclaren: "Lust dwells hard by hate. Sensual crimes and cruelty are closely akin."

#### B. The Burial of John (Vs. 29)

1. Josephus stated that the body of John the Baptist over the castle wall, and lay for a time unburied. Whether that is true or not, the disciples of John showed great courage in what they did.
2. If we could have put a plague on John's Tombstone it could have been, "*all things that John spake of this man (Jesus) were true.*" (John 10:41)

**Conclusion:** Are you repentant or just remorseful over your sin? Herod had the opportunity to repent from his wickedness but he refused and suffered eternally.

What is your attitude towards bold, uncompromising preaching against sin? Do you support or attack the man of God when he stands for righteousness?