

What Do You Get for Following Jesus?

Ignorance and Insight: Part 3

Mark 6:14-30 (Mt.14:1-12; Lk.9:7-7) 9/23/2018

Summary: Herod had arrested John but protected him from Herodias, who wanted to kill him for pointing out their immoral marriage. He liked to listen to John, but remained perplexed instead of repenting. The great “king” became powerless before a little girl because of his bondage to lust, pride, and the idol of human approval. So he had John killed. When he later heard about Jesus, he was haunted by what he did to John. John was the forerunner not only of Jesus’ ministry, but also of his death.

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Mark 6:14 King Herod heard about this, for Jesus’ name had become well known. Some were saying, “John the Baptist has been raised from the dead, and that is why miraculous powers are at work in him.” 15 Others said, “He is Elijah.” And still others claimed, “He is a prophet, like one of the prophets of long ago.” 16 But when Herod heard this, he said, “John, the man I beheaded, has been raised from the dead!”

17 For Herod himself had given orders to have John arrested, and he had him bound and put in prison. He did this because of Herodias, his brother Philip’s wife, whom he had married. 18 For John had been saying to Herod, “It is not lawful for you to have your brother’s wife.” 19 So Herodias had it in for John and wanted to kill him. But she was not able to, 20 because Herod feared John and protected him, knowing him to be a righteous and holy man. When Herod heard John, he was greatly puzzled; yet he liked to listen to him. 21 Finally the opportune time came. On his birthday Herod gave a banquet for his high officials and military commanders and the leading men of Galilee. 22 When the daughter of Herodias came in and danced, she pleased Herod and his dinner guests. The king said to the girl, “Ask me for anything you want, and I’ll give it to you.” 23 And he promised her with an oath, “Whatever you ask I will give you, up to half my kingdom.” 24 She went out and said to her mother, “What shall I ask for?” “The head of John the Baptist,” she answered. 25 At once the girl hurried in to the king with the request: “I want you to give me right

now on a platter the head of John the Baptist.” 26 The king was greatly distressed, but because of his oaths and his dinner guests, he did not want to refuse her. 27 So he immediately sent an executioner with orders to bring John’s head. The man went, beheaded John in the prison, 28 and brought back his head on a platter. He presented it to the girl, and she gave it to her mother. 29 On hearing of this, John’s disciples came and took his body and laid it in a tomb.

Introduction

Romans 8:28 We know that God works all things together for the good of those who love him...

Sometimes that verse is hard to believe. Most of the hardships that happen to us, if you’re a mature Christian, it’s not that hard to imagine how they could be used by God for good and fit into his perfect plan. But once in a while something happens to you that is so evil, so unfair, so damaging to your life that it seems impossible to conceive of how it could possibly be part of God’s good and perfect plan. We’re going to read about an event like that today.

We left off last time with Jesus sending out the 12 on their first short term mission trip. That was in v.7. They aren’t going to come back and report to Jesus until v.30. So what are we going to do between now and v.30? Well, to kill some time while we’re waiting for them to return, Mark tells us the story of what Herod did to John the Baptist in vv.14-29. This account is sordid, it is seedy, it is slimy, but we need to study it because it has a lot to teach us, and it’s actually intended for our encouragement. I’ll show you how as we go.

Making Jesus Famous

So in v.13 the disciples are out there preaching repentance and doing miracles, and in v.14 Herod gets wind of it. But he doesn’t hear about them; he hears about Jesus.

Mark 6:14 King Herod heard about this for Jesus’ name had become well known.

That’s the greatest success story for the Apostles in the entire Gospel! They are the ones doing the preaching and miracles, and yet they manage to do it in a way that make Jesus famous, instead of making themselves famous. And that’s the goal of all missions and Christian ministry—make Jesus famous.

Herod & Herodias

So Herod gets word about Jesus and comes up with a theory about who Jesus is. And in order to understand this theory we need to know a whole bunch of background information about Herod and his illegitimate wife Herodias and what they did to John the Baptist.

The reason I say “illegitimate wife” is because of end of v.17.

17 ... He did this because of Herodias, his brother Philip’s wife, whom he had married.

This is Herod Antipas.¹ His brother Philip had married Herodias, who, by the way, was his niece. You say, “Isn’t that incest?” Yes, it is,² but that’s how the Herod family rolled. So Herodias marries her uncle Philip but then has an affair with another one of her uncles—Herod Antipas. She wanted the life of

¹ There has never been a soap opera more convoluted and twisted than the Herod family. It all started with Herod the Great. He was the one who spoke to the Magi and tried to kill baby Jesus by slaughtering all the baby boys in Bethlehem. Herod the Great had 10 wives, there were a lot of little Herod’s running around. Two of them are named Philip. (That’s right—two brothers both named Philip, from different mothers.) Another one of the brothers was named Aristobulus. I mention him because he had a daughter named Herodias who is the woman in this story. So Herodias is the niece of all these Herod brothers—her uncles. She had two uncle Philips, and when she grew up, she married one of them.

² The OT law doesn’t explicitly forbid marriage between uncle and niece, but it does forbid marriage between

a queen. Antipas was a ruler down in Israel—not quite a king, but he made the people call him king, and he had a big palace. That’s the kind of thing Herodias wanted. So one day Antipas (who is also married) proposes to Herodias, and she says, “Yes, on one condition. You have to banish your wife.”³ Antipas says, “Deal,” banishes his wife, and so Herodias dumps uncle Philip and marries uncle Antipas. And when she goes down to Israel to live with Antipas, she brings her little daughter with her.⁴

John’s Preaching

So, Herodias and her daughter get all settled in in the palace and tries to get on with her “happily ever after” life as royalty. But then along comes something very rare—a fearless preacher. Most preachers today won’t preach things that might offend a few key families in the church or put their job at risk. But this preacher, John the Baptist, isn’t afraid to rebuke a murderous, bloodthirsty tyrant for his immoral marriage.

18 For John had been saying to Herod, “It is not lawful for you to have your brother’s wife.”⁵

Their divorces were unbiblical, so this marriage was illegitimate. They wanted to sweep it under the rug, but John is making a federal case about it. And the verb tense means John kept saying this to Herod—over and over. Talk about “speaking truth to power.” Usually when people use that phrase it means something like write a blog grumbling about the government. And in our country that doesn’t require any courage at all. But to speak out publicly against an ancient mid-eastern ruler at that time was a great way to get your head chopped off. And John didn’t just go around saying this to his friends—he said it directly to Herod’s face.

John’s Arrest

So Herodias is beside herself with hatred for John.

19 So Herodias had it in for John and wanted to kill him.

So what happens? Herod has John arrested.

17 For Herod himself had given orders to have John arrested, and he had him bound and put in prison.

Mark mentioned that back in ch.1; now we finally learn why it happened. Why did Herod arrest John? It wasn’t because he wanted to. He didn’t want to mess with John.

³ Antipas’ first wife was the daughter of the Nabatean ruler. Antipas married her to try to establish peace with the neighboring Nabateans. So when he banished her, she escaped, went home, and the Nabateans later attacked Antipas and decimated his army. This was seen by the Jews as punishment from God for what Herod did to John the Baptist.

⁴ Josephus tells us the daughter’s name was Salome. She went on to marry the other Herod Philip, her great uncle. So Herod the Great was her great grandfather through her mother, and her grandfather through her father, and her father-in-law through her husband.

⁵ There are many who say we shouldn’t call sinners to repentance because unbelievers can’t be expected to live by biblical standards of morality. Or they water down the definition of repentance to mean only a change of mind about who Jesus is, not a turning from sins in their life. John the Baptist didn’t agree. He called sinners to repentance from specific sins. John pointed out the sins of everyone he talked to.

- Tax collectors—he told them, “Repent of your stealing and dishonesty.”
- Soldiers—he told them, “Repent of your grumbling and discontent about your salary and repent of your mistreatment of people and abuse of power.”
- To the average Joe, “Repent of your selfishness and greed” (Luke 3:11-14).
- To Pharisees, “Repent of being a bunch of snakes” (Matthew 3:7-8).
- To kings, “Repent of your immoral marriage” (Mark 6:18).

Paul was the same way. At his trial before Felix. Paul **discoursed on righteousness, self-control and the judgment to come** (Acts 24:25). Jesus preached the same way John did (Mark 1:15) and trained the Twelve to do the same (Mark 6:12).

20 Herod feared John and protected him, knowing him to be a righteous and holy man.

Herod was afraid to mess with John because he knew John was a man of God, and if you kill a man like that, it can cause an uprising among the people.⁶ So then why did he arrest him? Because of his angry wife.

17 Herod himself had given orders to have John arrested, and he had him bound and put in prison. He did this because of Herodias

I don't know if this was a compromise to try to satisfy her, or if this was protective custody, so Herodias couldn't get to him. Otherwise John might end up with a really unfortunate drowning accident during one of his baptisms or some poisoned locusts or something. So Herod is protecting John because he knows John is a holy man.

Puzzled Listeners

Plus, Herod kind of liked hearing John preach.

20 ... When Herod heard John, he was greatly puzzled; yet he liked to listen to him.

Prison guard shows up, "John, the King wants to see you again." Herod asks him some questions about the kingdom of God or something in the Bible. So John preaches, but inevitably ends up back of the subject of Herod's immoral marriage, and Herod says, "That's enough. Take him back to the hole." Later on, back to Herod, another sermon, back to the dungeon.

That might sound strange, but it's not really that uncommon for people to be drawn to good, powerful preaching, and yet always walk away puzzled. The word **puzzled** means to be inwardly disturbed, shaken up, perplexed. A lot of people are shaken up by good preaching, and they like it. But like Herod, they just never get around to making a decision because they are afraid of commitment. They are afraid of what it might cost them.

Remaining Undecided

We're all like that. Every one of us tends to be a procrastinator when it comes to spiritual things—don't we? You have some sin in your life—what are you going to do about it? "I don't know. I'm still thinking it over." "Haven't you been thinking it over for 20 years?" "Yeah, but I still haven't really landed on a definite decision." Today we're going to see the dire consequences of indecision.

Birthday Party

So Herod is protecting John, but Herodias isn't the type of woman who gives up just because her husband said no. She's still looking for an opportunity to kill John. And she gets it in v.21.

21 Finally the opportune time came. On his birthday Herod gave a banquet for his high officials and military commanders and the leading men of Galilee.

In those days, only egomaniacal, pagan rulers and kings celebrated their birthday.⁷ And that's exactly what Herod was so he throws this huge party to celebrate himself. Anyone who is anybody in Galilee is

⁶ Apart from the fear of such an uprising, Herod would have gladly killed John (Matthew 14:5).

⁷ The Jews regarded the celebration of one's birthday as a pagan thing to do. And if you think about it, it really is a self-centered, egotistical thing to do to expect everyone to celebrate the anniversary of the day you were born, as if you deserve any credit for your own birth. And one thing I've noticed is that most people are the least happy on their birthday. They are unhappy, because we have this expectation that everything should go well for me on my birthday. But everything doesn't cooperate with that. In working on the highways, when I have helped people in accidents or who have broken down, the people who are the most distressed are often people who say, "And to top it all off, today is my birthday!" Everyone else can handle the hardship, but the

there—all the big wheels. At a party like this there would be plenty of alcohol, no wives present, and so you can imagine what it was like—complete with an exotic dancer. But look who it is.

22 When the daughter of Herodias came in and danced, she pleased Herod and his dinner guests.

What in the world? Herodias sends her own daughter in there like some cheap prostitute⁸ to dance for a bunch of drunk slobs including her own dad? This girl is 12-14 years old—how does she even know how to dance like this? I’m guessing her mom taught her. Neither her mom nor her dad have any concern whatsoever for her purity. They put her out there, and the men (including Herod) get all excited, especially because instead of a typical dancer, this was a princess. Normally a woman of nobility would never dance like this. Herod is so worked up, he blurts out a stupid promise.

The Oath and Request

22 ... The king⁹ said to the girl, “Ask me for anything you want, and I’ll give it to you.” 23 And he promised her with an oath, “Whatever you ask I will give you, up to half my kingdom.”¹⁰

She can have anything she wants here, but instead of asking for something, she goes to her mom.

24 She went out and said to her mother, “What shall I ask for?”

At this point I’m thinking, *Ask for a pony*. What 12-year-old girl in her right mind, if she can have anything, wouldn’t ask for a pony? But she didn’t come to me; she went to her mom. “What should I ask for mom?”¹¹ Now Herodias can have anything she wants. What does she ask for? Diamonds? A luxury cruise? No, she asks for the one thing in this world she desired more than anything else. There is no hesitation.

24 ... “What shall I ask for?” “The head of John the Baptist.”

Wow. You already made your daughter a prostitute; why not also make her an accessory to murder too? This is what bitterness will do to you. If you have a choice between all the pleasures in the world or revenge, you’ll choose revenge. That’s how angry people get when the gospel exposes their sin—especially when it has to do with some kind of immoral relationship.¹² They want to kill the messenger.

birthday girl can’t because she is expecting everything to go well for her. The same thing happens on vacations. Any time your whole focus is on yourself, and your own enjoyment and pleasure in this world, you’re going to be miserable.

⁸ This is prostitution. It’s visual rather than physical, but it’s still a woman selling her body in a sexual way for some gain.

Models who pose for obscene pictures, actresses, no matter how much they try to call it art, it’s all prostitution.

⁹ NICNT: The royal title had been denied to Antipas by Augustus. Goaded by the ambitious Herodias, it was Antipas’ request for the title of “king” which officially led to his dismissal and exile in A.D. 39. [Josephus, Ant. XVIII. i. 3; ix. 4.] Mark’s use of the royal title may reflect local custom, or it may be a point of irony. Herod had modeled his court after the imperial pattern, [See below on Ch. 6:21, 27.] and it is possible that the irony of designating him by a title he coveted, but failed to secure, would be appreciated in Rome where his sentence had been sealed.

So why does Mark call him “king”? Some take this to be sarcasm, but I don’t think that’s what it is. It seems more likely to me that Mark is making a point about the fact that his ruler, with all his power to arrest and kill John, was really a spineless, henpecked, pathetic weakling.

¹⁰ Antipas served at the pleasure of Rome, so he didn’t actually have the authority to give even a single acre of his kingdom away without Roman approval, so this isn’t literal. It was just a saying, kind of like, “Ask for the moon; it’s yours.” See 1 Kings 13:8, Esther 5:3.

¹¹ If this whole thing were planned out by Herodias, we know that the daughter was not in on the plan because she has to ask her mother what the request should be.

¹² It seems like that kind of hatred for Christ and his people, especially his preachers, is provoked most often in people who want to justify some sexual sin. Maybe they want the freedom to divorce one spouse and marry another one, like Antipas and Herodias. Or maybe it’s the kind of relationship that God forbids altogether, like homosexuality or, as in Herod’s case, incest. Maybe it has to do with a rejection of God’s definition of marriage or male and female. It seems like those are the people who are the most militant, the angriest, and often the most violent against God’s people.

You definitely see that in our culture. You can preach against lying and stealing and everyone will say “amen.” (They may not repent of their lying and stealing, but they will tolerate your preaching against it.) You can preach about loving God with all

Killing the Messenger

When people reject God's Word—they usually make it about the preacher. That's easier to justify, because every preacher has plenty of flaws. "I can't listen to him, look at all his sins and problems." Some Christians never go to church because they can't find one with a good enough pastor. If you make it about the preacher, you don't have to admit that you're really rejecting God himself.¹³ And that's what Herodias was doing by asking for John's head. She was rejecting the Lord himself.

So how does the girl respond? Is she horrified by the idea?

25 At once the girl hurried in to the king with the request

She's excited. "What a great idea mom! We'll make dad chop John's head off—that's awesome!" So she goes running back in with her request. And she's all dramatic about it—like she's building suspense.

25 ...“I want you, to give me, right now, on a platter...”

All this buildup. Here's my request dad. I want it right now—no delay. And I want it brought to me on a platter. Are you ready? Here's the big finish:

25 ...“I want you to give me right now on a platter the head of John the Baptist.”

Herodias didn't say anything about a platter. The girl comes up with that little gem on her own. She thought it would be really funny to have his head served up on one of those dishes they were using in their banquet. At a young age she's already just as twisted as her mom.

Herod's Distress

26 The king was greatly distressed

At this point, Antipas sobers up real fast. This just got serious. He considers himself to be in a really hard spot, which is amazing if you think about it. If you told one of your kids, "You can have whatever you want for your birthday," and they say, "Oh, ok. How about you murder Billy Graham," would that be a big dilemma for you? No. If you have to suffer a little embarrassment for making a rash promise that you can't fulfill, so be it, but you wouldn't even consider granting the request. But for Herod, embarrassment is not an option. The word translated **greatly distressed** is a very strong word. It's the word used later to describe the anguish and agony of Jesus in the garden the night before the crucifixion when he was sweating blood (14:34). When human approval becomes an idol in your heart, some of the easiest, no-brainer decisions in the world can become impossible, soul-wrenching dilemmas.

So Herod is greatly distressed, but not distressed enough to do the right thing.

26 The king was greatly distressed, but because of his oaths and his dinner guests, he did not want to refuse her.

Killing John—greatly distressing; losing face in front of all his guests—even more distressing. So, after thinking it through for a matter of seconds, he gives his answer. Everyone is looking at him. *Is he*

your heart and they won't get mad. But you start defining sexual relationships by God's Word, or you start calling people to repent of wrong sexual or marital relationships and look out. You get into some online forum and unbelievers who disagree with Scripture on some other point—they will very often carry on a rational discussion. But the people who disagree on some issue of sexual immorality, there is such anger and hatred and vitriol—you can just feel the venom seeping from the words they write.

¹³ Isn't it amazing that God chose to use sinful men as his messengers? You might think God would say, "This message is so important, only sinless beings can convey it, so I'm going to hand over all preaching duties to angels." He could have done that, but he didn't. Did you know that Jesus Christ has never selected one, single sinless man to be a preacher, ever? And yet he expects people to receive the message nevertheless. And rejecting the messenger equals rejecting the message, which equals rejecting Christ himself.

really going to do it? Does he have the guts to follow through on his promise and kill the prophet? He turns to one of his bodyguards and says, “Go do it.”

The Powerless “King”

27 So he immediately sent an executioner with orders to bring John’s head.¹⁴

Have you noticed how, as soon as his daughter danced, Mark switches from call him Herod to calling him “the king” and his daughter “the girl”?¹⁵ He’s showing the irony of this. This big, powerful monarch vs this little girl, and guess who wins? Who has more power? The girl. She gets whatever she wants, the king gets nothing that he wants. A man entrapped by his lusts is powerless.

Proverbs 6:25 Do not lust in your heart after her beauty or let her captivate you with her eyes, 26 for the prostitute reduces you to a loaf of bread.

When you can’t say no to the impulses of your body, whether it be for sex or food or leisure or a habit or anything else, you become powerless and vulnerable to the enemy.

Proverbs 25:28 Like a city whose walls are broken down is a man who lacks self-control.

That’s Herod. So his lust, combined with his desire for human approval and his spineless cowardice¹⁶ results in the murder of the greatest man to ever live up to his time. Cowards are some of the most dangerous people in the world, because they will do anything to you if they have enough pressure put on them.¹⁷

The Murder

Whenever I read this story, even though I already know the ending, somehow I’m still holding out hope that the guy won’t go through with it. Surely it can’t end this way. John’s so young—early 30’s. He’s only been doing his ministry a matter of months. He’s such an important man with such an important ministry and he’s doing so much good. He’s holy and righteous and courageous. Surely he’s not going to just be slaughtered like an animal at the whim of some girl and a rash, drunken vow at a party. But in v.27—the unthinkable.

27 ...The man went and beheaded John in the prison

¹⁴ The historian Josephus, writing some sixty years later, gave a different reason for the execution of John. He said it was because Herod feared a political uprising. It is understandable that that would be the official story that came out, as Herod was not likely to tell people the real reason was that he got tricked into a stupid vow by his wife and step-daughter. Bible writers do what historians can’t do—give us insight into people’s thoughts and motives. However, what we read in Mark is thoroughly consistent with what Josephus reported at length concerning the active role played by women and their intrigues in the conduct of Herodian affairs.

¹⁵ The whole first half of the passage he calls Herod “Herod”—eight times. And the dancer is called **the daughter**. But then as soon as she dances and he starts interacting with her, Mark stops calling him “Herod” and starts calling him “the king.” From that point on, instead of “Herod” and “the daughter” it’s “the king” and “the girl.” The switch is very dramatic and clear.

Herod Antipas never did actually reach the rank of king, even though he spent his life trying. (He repeatedly sought that title from Caesar and was always denied. Herodias finally nagged him into trying one more time with Caligula, and Caligula responded by banishing him to Gaul.) But he still went by that title because he like the sound of it, so he made all the people under him call him king.

¹⁶ Herod had some fear of God, but even more fear of man, which is the definition of a coward. A coward is someone who fears anything more than they fear God. Jesus called the disciples cowards for fearing the storm more than they feared Jesus. And Herod fears losing face more than he fears the consequences of murdering a prophet of God.

¹⁷ Most people are limited in how much evil they will do against you because of conscience or other restraints, but not cowards. They might even like you, but if they have enough peer pressure, they will turn on you and destroy your life if that’s what someone is pressuring them to do. If they crowd turns against you, they will join in.

Cowards are dangerous people, and they are evil people. In Revelation 21:8 there is a list of people who will be thrown into the lake of fire (murderers, the sexually immoral, idolaters, occultists, etc.), and #1 on that list is the cowardly.

I saw a video of a Christian being beheaded with a knife by a Muslim once, and I won't describe it to you, but I'll tell you—seeing something like that changes you. It's absolutely horrific.

John is in the dungeon, hears someone coming and thinks, *Oh, Herod wants another sermon*, and he starts thinking about what he's going to preach. But when the guard comes into view, he's got his sword out. And John realizes what's about to happen, and he can't believe it.

His whole life was devoted to announcing that the Messiah would come in judgment on the wicked. Why isn't that happening? Why are the wicked still breathing? And why are they winning? John's been wasting away in this dungeon, and now he's just going to die? Alone? Because of a dancer at a party? Why is this happening?

Whatever was racing through John's mind, there isn't much time to think—just seconds. John quickly breathes one last prayer, "I trust you God. Please forgive my doubts¹⁸..." and it's over.

Presentation of the Head

The assassin leaves the body, takes John's head, puts it on a plate, and brings it in to the party. The room goes silent. All those officials and big shots and leaders in Galilee look at the head of the man they knew was a prophet from God sitting on a serving tray, and all the raucous laughter and lewd speech and all the rest comes to a stop. Sin seems like harmless fun at first, but it carries you into such blackness.

The assassin carries the dripping platter over to the girl and she carries it out to her mother. Historians tell us that Herodias then took the head and started abusing it. It wasn't enough for John to be dead; she pulled out his tongue and started piercing it with a pin. Not even death is enough to satisfy the vengeful heart.

Herod Hears About Jesus

Why did you tell us all that, Mark?

Here's why: it's because we need all that background to understand why Herod responds the way he does when he gets word about Jesus. That whole story is in the past by Mark 6. John the Baptist is dead and gone, Herod is trying to get on with his life, but then one of his advisors comes into his office. "Your majesty, have you heard about this man who is performing miracles all over Galilee?" "Yes, I've heard about him. You're the fourth person to tell me this week."

14 King Herod heard about this, for Jesus' name had become well known.¹⁹

Theories About Jesus

Who is this guy?"

"There are several theories."

14 ... Some were saying, "John the Baptist has been raised from the dead, and that is why miraculous powers are at work in him." 15 Others said, "He is Elijah." And still others claimed, "He is a prophet, like one of the prophets of long ago."²⁰

¹⁸ John did have doubts about Jesus. God sent him to preach a message of judgment, and he said, "The ax is at the root of the tree" (Matthew 3:10). But instead of judgment coming on the wicked, John gets thrown in prison while Herod lives in luxury. So in Matthew 11:3 John sent his disciples to ask Jesus, "Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?" Jesus' response was interesting. He performed a flurry of miracles, right there on the spot. Then he said, "Go tell John what you've seen." Then Jesus quoted a passage from Isaiah 61 about the Messiah. **Matthew 11:5 The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor.** Those were the very miracles Jesus performed, so they had their answer. Yes, Jesus is the one. However, when Jesus quoted Isaiah 61, there's one part he left out—the part about setting prisoners free. It wasn't time yet for that. That will come at Jesus' second coming.

¹⁹ Evidently, Herod had never heard of Jesus before John died.

Which one of those theories did Herod buy into? The first one.

16 But when Herod heard this, he said, “John, the man I beheaded, has been raised from the dead!”

This one who struck fear into the heart of Herod’s the Great when he was born now strikes fear in the heart of the son, Herod Antipas. The word “I” is emphatic in v.16. John, the man *I myself* beheaded— he’s come back to haunt me!” When he hears about Jesus, why is his first thought about John? Guilty conscience. When there is something on your conscience, you tend to interpret events in light of that thing.

Death of Conscience

That night after the party when Herod had John killed, how do you think his conscience bother him that night? Probably. Did it bother him the next night? Maybe. The night after that? Probably not. It doesn’t take much to bury a guilty conscience.

But conscience is a gift from God, to help us return to him when we stray. And in his mercy, God will sometimes raise up your conscience to speak to you again even after you have buried it. I think that’s what’s happening here in v.14. This isn’t some detached, academic theory. It’s very personal: **...whom I beheaded.** It’s not, “John, whom my nagging wife badgered me into killing.” No excuses; it’s all on him. When conscience finally gets to you, it’s just you and your sin.

Don’t Let Conscience Define Who Jesus Is

I think that’s what’s happening to Herod here, but he makes the mistake of letting his guilty conscience define his interpretation of who Jesus is. He thinks Jesus must be some kind of ghost of John to haunt him or torment him for what he did. Is that what Jesus was? Just the opposite. He didn’t come to *torment* Herod for his sin, he came to *save* Herod from his sin. It’s not John back from the dead, it’s Herod’s conscience that God raised from the dead to bring him to repentance.

Never let your guilty conscience define your concept of God, so you make him into an irritated dad who can’t wait to scold you for your mistakes. A guilty conscience should drive you to repentance and into the arms of a merciful, forgiving God who welcomes you with joy.

Is that what Herod does? No. Instead of listening to his conscience, he just buries it again, so that not long after this, when he finally does get a chance to meet Jesus (at Jesus’ trial), he’s not one bit afraid. He thinks Jesus is just a big freak show, and he mocks him and ridicules him and then sends him back to Pilate. Herod had the power to let Jesus go free. He could have said, “I’m not going to have the blood of another righteous, holy prophet of God on my hands. I made that mistake once; I’m not doing that again.” But he didn’t do that, because he had utterly destroyed the gift of conscience that God had given him.

Expect Persecution

Why does Mark sandwich this story in the middle of the account of the sending of the 12? He sends them, then this story, then they come back down in v.30. Why put this story right in the middle? It’s to show us what to expect when you’re on mission for Jesus.

In Matthew’s account of the sending out of the 12 Jesus says, “I’m sending you out as sheep among wolves.” Mark doesn’t mention that comment. Mark’s way of communicating the same idea is to show us what happened to John. Instead of just telling us we are sheep among wolves; he wants us to feel it. So he shows us one of the best of the sheep getting devoured by a pack of wolves.

²⁰ Maybe John, maybe Elijah, maybe a new prophet, but they all agree that Jesus was some kind of prophet from God. That was obvious to everyone except for his hometown, Nazareth. Their unbelief was so determined that they wouldn’t accept the obvious, but pretty much everyone else did.

Rewarded with Persecution

Jesus required a lot of his disciples, didn't he? They had already left their families, their jobs, and everything else to follow Jesus. Now they have to go out on a very difficult mission, no supplies or money, and were rejected by many.

Mark 10:28 Peter said to him, "We have left everything to follow you!"

What kind of response do you think Jesus gave him? What's the reward for losing everything to following Jesus?

Mark 10:29 "I tell you the truth," Jesus replied, "no-one who has left home or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields for me and the gospel 30 will fail to receive a hundred times as much in this present age (homes, brothers, sisters, mothers, children and fields-- and with them, persecutions) and in the age to come, eternal life.

What do you get for following Jesus? In the age to come, eternal life. In this age, you get a whole new family—lots of new brothers and sisters in the church, and you get persecuted. One thing about Jesus, he doesn't sugar coat things. He tells it like it is. "You gave up a lot to follow me? You're going to have to give up even more." If you want an easy life, Christianity is not the religion for you. (If you want eternal life, it's the only way. But if you want an easy life here and now, you won't find that following Jesus.)

Why do horrible things happen to us? Because we are still in the suffering phase of the kingdom of God. It seems like a lot of Christians believe more in karma than grace. They think, *If I'm being faithful and obedient and I'm following God with all my heart, things should go pretty well for me.* That's karma—the Bible doesn't teach that. It teaches grace. It teaches that if you follow Jesus, when he returns, all wrongs will be made right and you will be lavished with reward and blessing and joy and happiness a billion times more than what you deserve even on your best day. But in this life, you will suffer in this life like he did.

Conclusion

Portrait of the Cross

Mark gives us one last little detail.

29 On hearing of this, John's disciples came and took his body and laid it in a tomb.

John was honored in his death and has been honored by the righteous ever since. But there's another reason why this is significant. Can you think of another time when a righteous man was executed and his disciples came and asked for his body? It's a picture of what would happen to Jesus. In fact, this whole event is a picture of Jesus' death.

There are only two passages in Mark that aren't about Jesus, and both are about John the Baptist. The first was about how John was the forerunner of Jesus' ministry. And this one is about how John was the forerunner of Jesus' death. Think of all the parallels. John was innocent and was unjustly arrested because of his righteousness. He was murdered by a cowardly ruler who didn't really want to kill him, who considered him innocent, and who was afraid of him, but finally caved into pressure from others who were embittered because of his preaching. Then there is a request for his body, and his followers put him in a tomb. Every one of those details will happen again in chapter 15 when Jesus dies.²¹

John's death was not just a tragic injustice by a spiteful woman and spineless, drunken king. John had the privilege of preparing the way for Jesus in his life, but also of walking the path of his death ahead

²¹ Compare 6:17-29 with 15:1-47.

of him so that John's death became the perfect portrait of the most glorious act of God's mercy and the mightiest display of God's saving power ever. Jesus would later walk that path and accomplish redemption on the cross for all who believe, taking upon himself the guilt of every one of us so that we could have forgiveness of sins when we repent and believe. And we also have the same privilege John had because Jesus calls us to follow in his steps, to suffer persecution and injustice and die if need be for his name, just like John did.

What an encouragement this would have been for Mark's readers, who were suffering persecution and must have been wondering if they were doing something wrong, or if God had forsaken them. Mark shows them—no, this kind of suffering was the path of John the Baptist, foreshadowing the work of Jesus Christ, and shared with all Christ's followers. It's all part of the plan.

Today is the Day

Are you postponing a decision about repentance from some sin, or whether or not to follow Christ? Just compare Herod with John. John lived in poverty, hardship, deprivation, and abuse. Herod lived in a palace in luxury and opulence, indulging every impulse or desire he had for earthly pleasures. But John lived with a clear conscience and had a meaningful life, while Herod lived a tormented life that was an absolute waste. The greatness he lusted after, he didn't get. It went to John instead. Today people name their children after John. No one names their kid Herod—and for sure not Herodias. And for the last 2000 years now John has enjoyed a paradise that makes the beaches of Hawaii seem like a garbage dump. For 20 centuries he has enjoyed rest that is more rejuvenating than the best night's sleep he ever had on earth. And he has enjoyed face to face fellowship with the Lord Jesus Christ. And all those years in the desert and his time in the dungeon, right now, seem to John like a blink of an eye. At this moment, he is so glad he chose to follow Christ.

Herod and Herodias—all the pleasures they enjoyed on earth—those memories are also like a blink of an eye. But if they didn't repent before they died, they have been suffering torment worse than anything in this world for 2000 years already, and they haven't even touched the fringes of eternity yet.

Don't put it off. Today is the day of salvation; now is the time to repent and believe.

Then you can know for sure that none of your suffering is pointless; all of it accomplishes God's glorious plan.