

The Martyrdom of John

Mark 6:14-29 ¹⁴ Now King Herod heard of Him, for His name had become well known. And he said, "John the Baptist is risen from the dead, and therefore these powers are at work in him." ¹⁵ Others said, "It is Elijah." And others said, "It is the Prophet, or like one of the prophets." ¹⁶ But when Herod heard, he said, "This is John, whom I beheaded; he has been raised from the dead!"

¹⁷ For Herod himself had sent and laid hold of John, and bound him in prison for the sake of Herodias, his brother Philip's wife; for he had married her. ¹⁸ For John had said to Herod, "It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife." ¹⁹ Therefore Herodias held it against him and wanted to kill him, but she could not; ²⁰ for Herod feared John, knowing that he was a just and holy man, and he protected him. And when he heard him, he did many things, and heard him gladly.

²¹ Then an opportune day came when Herod on his birthday gave a feast for his nobles, the high officers, and the chief men of Galilee. ²² And when Herodias' daughter herself came in and danced, and pleased Herod and those who sat with him, the king said to the girl, "Ask me whatever you want, and I will give it to you." ²³ He also swore to her, "Whatever you ask me, I will give you, up to half of my kingdom." ²⁴ So she went out and said to her mother, "What shall I ask?" And she said, "The head of John the Baptist!" ²⁵ Immediately she came in 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; yet, because of the oaths and because of those who sat with him, he did not want to refuse her. ²⁷ Immediately the king sent an executioner and commanded his head to be brought. And he went and beheaded him in prison, ²⁸ 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 away his corpse and laid it in a tomb.

Eleven of the twelve apostles of Jesus were killed for their faith. James was executed by Herod in around 44. Peter was crucified upside-down by Rome, probably under Nero in around 64. His brother, Andrew, was crucified or hanged about six years later in Edessa. Thaddeus was also crucified there in the year 72. Philip was scourged and then crucified in Heliopolis in 54. Thomas and Bartholomew took the gospel to India, and were there beaten and killed by the idolaters. Simon, the Zealot, is said to have reached Britain, and was there crucified in around 74. The other James was thrown off the Temple in Jerusalem. Matthew was slain with a halberd (a lance/axe) in Ethiopia. Matthias, who took the place of Judas, was stoned in Jerusalem. Only John died of old age.

When Jesus sent these men out on their mission of evangelism and exorcism and healing, they probably did not imagine what might happen to them twenty, thirty or forty years into the future. Indeed, no one did. Even we have this idea that good things must happen to good people, and bad things to bad people. Jesus' own special twelve apostles must have enjoyed full-time angelic bodyguards, and enjoyed happy, prosperous lives to the end... we think. But history doesn't bear that out. And perhaps as an early warning of this, Mark includes, right after the account of the apostles being commissioned, the sad account of John the Baptist's martyrdom. All but one of the apostles would go the way of John.

To read this account is to be shocked at the brutal way that a godly man was treated. Mark doesn't spare us the details. By all accounts, it looked as if John had been abandoned to these evildoers. We can't help reading this and wondering, why? Why does God allow this?

We're introduced to John's death through Herod. This was Herod Antipas, the same Herod who would see Jesus on the day of His crucifixion. He was ruler over Galilee. And as Jesus sent His disciples out, and as word of His ministry spread, it spread to the ears of Herod. While some theorised that this was Elijah, or the prophets, Herod lived with a tormented conscience. He had put John the Baptist to death, and was sure that Jesus was, in fact, John risen from the dead. To Herod,

this was John, and John with new miraculous powers given to one risen from the dead. This was a man haunted by John, haunted by scenes of John's head on a platter, and sure that this was John returned to seek vengeance.

What follows is Mark's flashback of how this all happened. How had the John of Mark chapter 1 been killed by Herod? Mark traces the scene for us back in time. What emerges is a sordid, depraved, ugly picture of a wicked family that ended the life of Israel's greatest prophet in one of the crudest and most undignified ways possible. What we have here is a chain of sins, from his arrest, all the way to his beheading. Mark will show us that when it came to John's death, it was evil at work all the way. Look at the text to see seven sins.

I. Incest

¹⁷ For Herod himself had sent and laid hold of John, and bound him in prison for the sake of Herodias, his brother Philip's wife; for he had married her. ¹⁸ For John had said to Herod, "It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife."

Herod was a wicked man in his morals. He divorced his wife, who was the daughter of king Aretas. While on a boat, he fell in love with his niece – Herodias. She was the daughter of one of his half-brothers. She had married one of his other half-brothers, Philip. Herod convinced her to divorce her husband, his own half-brother, and marry him instead. This was forbidden by the Law of Moses, and a form of incest.

John the Baptist did not specialise in preaching vague sermons. Some sermons are so vague that if they were poison they wouldn't kill and if they were medicine they would not heal. That wasn't John's problem, and without fear, he told the ruler of Galilee that he had broken God's law.

II. Fear of Man

¹⁹ Therefore Herodias held it against him and wanted to kill him, but she could not; ²⁰ for Herod feared John, knowing that he was a just and holy man, and he protected him. And when he heard him, he did many things, and heard him gladly.

Herodias was furious and wanted John dead. Verse 19 could be literally translated, “Herodias had it in for him”. Herod did not want his wife perpetually upset, and according to Josephus, he feared that John's preaching would cause a revolt – and no doubt the Jews may well have objected to his immoral marriage. Herod feared man, he feared his own wife, and he feared the population. So he had John arrested, not for slander, not for telling lies, not for rebelling, but for speaking the truth. An unpleasant truth, and a truth that he and his so-called wife did not like, but still the truth.

To make things worse, Herod respected John. Herod even liked his teaching. Perhaps he visited him down in the cells and asked him questions. And for all that, knowing that John was holy and just, Herod feared his own wife so much that he compromised by keeping John in a dungeon – muzzled but alive.

III. Pride and Vanity

²¹ Then an opportune day came when Herod on his birthday gave a feast for his nobles, the high officers, and the chief men of Galilee.

We know from historical records that John was imprisoned at Herod's fortress-palace near the Dead Sea. On his birthday, he decided to put on a lavish feast, a celebration of himself. He invited three

groups of people: the nobles – the political powers, the high officers (his top military men), and the chief men of Galilee – the socially important and powerful. These were the top notch people, probably none of them particularly religious, judging by this scene, but all no doubt flattered to be invited to the ruler's birthday party. Nothing wrong with a birthday feast, but here is a man intent on impressing his guests. So much so, that when he had nothing more to fill their gluttonous bellies, he tried to meet another base appetite.

IV. Sensuality

²² And when Herodias' daughter herself came in and danced, and pleased Herod and those who sat with him

Whether planned, or whether done on the spur of the moment, Herodias's daughter, whose name was Salome, came and danced before these, no doubt, drunken men. It was forbidden for Jewish girls to dance before men, and even Gentile mothers would have frowned on this action. This is a sordid scene, with the men being entertained in a base way, and Herodias waiting in the wings. So successful was her dance, and no doubt meeting with such approval from all these military men and socialites and politicians, that Herod, showing off in front of them, committed the next sin.

V. Rash Oath

the king said to the girl, "Ask me whatever you want, and I will give it to you." ²³ He also swore to her, "Whatever you ask me, I will give you, up to half of my kingdom." ²⁴ So she went out and said to her mother, "What shall I ask?"

Herod bound himself to give her whatever she asked. This was sheer posturing and showing off in front of the nobles. He was the guy cheering the loudest, to impress others. Salome was, according to the records, just a teenager. So when her stepfather offers her up to half the kingdom, she simply slips off to her mother to ask what she should request.

Back in verse 21, it was said that this was an opportune day. Opportune for whom? For Herodias – she was looking for some opportunity to murder the prophet that her husband was sheltering in the dungeons.

And she said, "The head of John the Baptist!" ²⁵ Immediately she came in 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."

Can you imagine the depth of depravity for a mother to instruct her teenage daughter to ask for a head on a platter? We don't know if Salome was as depraved as her mother, but if that's the kind of thing her mother had in her heart towards John, she wasn't the sort of person Salome wanted to displease. So we're told she went back with haste. Probably also to capitalise on Herod's mood, before he could change his mind.

Try to picture the scene. Herod and his cronies reclining on pillows, still raucously commenting on the dance, amused at his offer of half the kingdom, and wondering what this little girl would ask for. And she comes back in and announces "I would like the head of John the Baptist, on one of these platters." How Herod's face must have fallen! The laughter would have stopped. Probably even the military men were somewhat shocked to hear that request come from a teenage girl. And no doubt every eye turned to Herod.

His rash oath had now put him in a corner. They had heard him swear, and it would have been a great dishonour for him to go back on his oaths.

VI.. The Fear of Man

²⁶ And the king was exceedingly sorry; yet, because of the oaths and because of those who sat with him, he did not want to refuse her.

The men around him would have known he was in a dilemma. They knew he had arrested John but did not want to execute him. And now, through Herodias' scheming, Herod was now bound by his oath to execute John.

Now the most honourable thing at this point would have been to disgrace himself by breaking his oath. By humiliating himself in front of his guests, he could have saved John's life, knowing he was a just and holy man. But instead, he chose to save face. He chose to save his reputation at John's expense. A man who was not faithful to God would now be faithful to his own drunken oath because of the fear of man.

VII.. Murder

²⁷ Immediately the king sent an executioner and commanded his head to be brought. And he went and beheaded him in prison, ²⁸ brought his head on a platter, and gave it to the girl; and the girl gave it to her mother.

Herod sent one of his bodyguards to perform the evil deed, and the gruesome scene must surely have nauseated some of the guests, as Herodias received the gift she wanted so much. Her bloodthirsty revenge was complete.

So here is the end of this chain of seven sins. Incest, fear of man, vanity, sensuality, a rash oath, more fear of man and then murder. And as John's disciples kindly came to collect his body and give him an honourable burial, perhaps they were asking the question, why? Why did this happen to such a great prophet?

John preached the truth and was arrested for it. John lost his freedom because of a woman's malice and a weak husband's fear. John lost his head because of a man's sordid lust, rash vow, a woman's blood-lust, and the man's weak will. John's great ministry seems to be all at the mercy of man. How could such a great man die such a humiliating death? How can such a faithful prophet seem like a pawns of political will?

These are the questions that John's disciples could have been asking. When Jesus' disciples heard it, it might have been what they were asking. And it could well be what we ask today. Although we enjoy relative religious freedom, what of those who still die for their faith? On June 10th, a suicide bomber drove into a Christian church, the bomb killing 2 and injuring 40. On July 1st, two churches in Kenya were attacked by gunmen, killing 17. Then there is Pastor Farshid Fathi, an Iranian Christian pastor, who has been imprisoned in Tehran, simply for sharing his faith. Attacks on Christians in India are growing.

Why? Why does God allow this to happen to some of His children? Why does this happen to some of His choice servants? For that matter, why do we sometimes face injustice at the hands of unfair and unjust managers, corrupt policemen? Why must we endure the results of foolish politicians' decisions? Why are Christians exposed to loss, pain, manipulation? Why are Christians seemingly victims of evil, if our God is sovereign over all?

Mark doesn't give us the reasons here, though perhaps this was put in there as a hint to the early

Christians – if this is what John faced, do you think you will fare better? However, as we look into the rest of Scripture we can see five reasons why God's servants suffer.

1) There is a Real Spiritual Battle, and There are Casualties

In saying so, we take nothing away from the full sovereignty of God over all things. God is not fighting for victory, He is ordering the universe in light of His victory at Calvary. But in this battle, there are still casualties. Remember Job? Job did not find out why he lost his possessions, reputation, children and health. But it came down to a challenge between God and Satan. Satan did the afflicting, under God's permission.

At a later time in Jesus' ministry, Jesus told Peter “**Luke 22:31** ³¹ And the Lord said, "Simon, Simon! Indeed, Satan has asked for you, that he may sift you as wheat.

Satan may be a defeated foe, but that does not mean he is not a dangerous foe. He still walks about, seeking whom he may devour, operating under the sovereignty of God, but seeking to do whatever damage he can to God's church. He is a murderer, and if he is given permission, he will kill.

But in some ways, this is how we defeat him.

The martyrs of the book of Revelation are seemingly given over to Satan to slaughter and kill *en masse*. But we are then told why.

Revelation 12:11 ¹¹ "And they overcame him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, and they did not love their lives to the death.

2) To Remind Us That This is Not New Heavens and New Earth

Hebrews 11:13-16 ¹³ These all died in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them afar off were assured of them, embraced them and confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth. ¹⁴ For those who say such things declare plainly that they seek a homeland. ¹⁵ And truly if they had called to mind that country from which they had come out, they would have had opportunity to return. ¹⁶ But now they desire a better, that is, a heavenly country. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for He has prepared a city for them.

When God's people have been afflicted, it casts their eyes not back to the world, but up and beyond to another country. When God makes life here bitter or even tragic, He is lifting us up by the chin to look up and away from this place. This world is a battleground, and you don't build a home on a battleground. Your home is where there are no longer tears.

Someone pointed out that if Israel had not become slaves in Egypt, they may never have wanted to leave. If God's people lived on pure bliss all their lives, how attractive would heaven be? How strong would our hope be?

I am not sure where I heard it, but a pastor visiting the persecuted church found that the topic that those Christians most wanted to hear about was the topic of heaven.

3) To Teach Us To Walk in the Steps of Christ

1 Peter 2:21 ²¹ For to this you were called, because Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that you should follow His steps:

John 15:20 "Remember the word that I said to you, 'A servant is not greater than his master.' If they

persecuted Me, they will also persecute you.

The path that Jesus took was one of humiliation and suffering first; glorification and honour later. He took no shortcuts, though Satan offered them to Him. He knew the appointed will of the Father was that the first time he came, He would come humble, forgotten, despised, mistaken, misunderstood, rejected, scorned, and eventually murdered.

The time of universal praise, adoration, honour, glory belongs to his Second Coming. And this is largely the pattern for His people. Our life now is not our time of glory, honour, or power. If we are to be true disciples – followers – then we have to follow His path. And while God has a different path for each Christian, each one must face some kind of trial.

Romans 8:17 ¹⁷ *and if children, then heirs -- heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ, if indeed we suffer with Him, that we may also be glorified together.*

It is a very recent idea that the Christian is guaranteed a life of ease and will sail into heaven in an air-conditioned coffin. Christians through the ages have remembered that it is through much tribulation that we enter the kingdom of God.

4) To Grant Us a Special Reward

Matthew 5:10-12 ¹⁰ *Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, For theirs is the kingdom of heaven.* ¹¹ *"Blessed are you when they revile and persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you falsely for My sake.* ¹² *"Rejoice and be exceedingly glad, for great is your reward in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.*

God does not forget our labour of love. And as there was a crown after the cross, so there are rewards for the suffering righteous. Those who do not abandon the faith when trials come, who are not like that third soil which is choked by riches, cares of this life, or persecution – those ones overcome. And Jesus promises them crowns, thrones, honours, and glory.

2 Corinthians 4:17 *For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, is working for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory,*

5) To Teach Us What Death Cannot Touch

Romans 8:35-39 ³⁵ *Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?* ³⁶ *As it is written: "For Your sake we are killed all day long; We are accounted as sheep for the slaughter."* ³⁷ *Yet in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us.* ³⁸ *For I am persuaded that neither death nor life, nor angels nor principalities nor powers, nor things present nor things to come,* ³⁹ *nor height nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.*

Once we are in Christ, what is it that can separate us from the love of Christ? Nothing, not even persecution, sword, famine, danger. Not even if we are slaughtered. No, nothing in all creation can now separate us from the love of God in Christ. And when we must look the sword, or the gun in the face, it is at that moment that we have dying grace – dying grace to say – even if my mortal life is taken away, nothing can take away what is most precious, my relationship with God in Christ.

That's how the aged Polycarp ended his life. The disciple of John was dragged into a Roman stadium and called upon to recant, or be killed. Polycarp said, "Eighty-five years I have served him, and never has He done me wrong. How can I now deny my King, who saved me?" Polycarp understood - you can take my life, but you cannot take my relationship with the Lord; not even

death can sever that. So why threaten me with death, when I love my Lord, and He loves me?

Reality is not a simple story. Yes, it does have a happy ending. Our problem is we think the end of the book is somewhere in the middle. John's sordid death was a chapter in the middle of the book of history. John has only begun his reward, and great will be his reign and reward in Christ's kingdom. The same is true of the apostles, of the modern-day martyrs, and even of your life. The way you do not lose heart is to remember you are in a real battle, and this is not your home. God wants you to walk in Christ's footsteps, earn heavenly rewards and discover that not even the greatest earthly loss can sever your walk with Him.

1 Peter 4:12-13 ¹² *Beloved, do not think it strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened to you;* ¹³ *but rejoice to the extent that you partake of Christ's sufferings, that when His glory is revealed, you may also be glad with exceeding joy.*