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The Martyrdom of John the Baptist

Mark 6:14-29

Introduction: God's Painful Use of Martyrs to Advance Christ's Kingdom

1. For twenty centuries, the gospel has advanced as by a trail of blood
 - a. The early history of the church is filled with the blood of martyrs... and that pattern continued and developed
 - b. In our time, an estimated 100,000 Christians are killed every year for their faith
 - c. It is especially stunning the frivolous way that Christians have died to please the whims of tyrants
 - d. Roman Emperor Nero illuminated an evening dinner party by smearing Christians with combustible oils and lighting them afire... his personal entertainment at their ultimate expense
 - e. Christians' lifeblood was poured out on the sands of the Coliseum to entertain the Romans... until the audience realized there was very little entertainment about watching a godly family, husband, wife, children, kneeling and praying while the lions mauled them
2. The lingering question for us is: How can God allow such suffering to happen by his choicest servants?
3. This becomes especially acute when we consider the awesome power of God depicted in the Bible which God exerts to rescue his people

Psalm 18:6-9 In my distress I called to the LORD; I cried to my God for help. From his temple he heard my voice; my cry came before him, into his ears. ⁷ The earth trembled and quaked, and the foundations

***of the mountains shook; they trembled because he was angry. ⁸
Smoke rose from his nostrils; consuming fire came from his mouth,
burning coals blazed out of it. ⁹ He parted the heavens and came
down***

Yet throughout redemptive history, God has usually NOT descended from heaven to rescue his servants from their enemies... but rather has time and time again poured them out like a drink offering to serve His purposes

This is extremely perplexing, especially when one considers Luke 18, the parable of the unjust judge and persistent widow; Jesus closes with these words:

***Luke 18:7-8 And will not God bring about justice for his chosen ones, who cry out to him day and night? Will he keep putting them off?
⁸ I tell you, he will see that they get justice, and quickly!"***

Yet Jesus himself cried out from the cross, saying **“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me”** and God did not take him down from the cross!

To put two verses from Romans 8 together, **“He who did not spare his own Son...”** why would he not also **“consider us as sheep for the slaughter”**?

So we come to Mark 6 and the martyrdom of John the Baptist with trembling hearts, struggling to understand how such a holy man, an otherworldly figure, could die like an animal... this was a man of whom Jesus said

“Of those born of women there has not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist.”

How could such a faithful and pure servant of the living God be executed because of a lust-filled promise made by a corrupt king at his birthday party, a promise made to a seductive dancing girl in front of all his dinner guests. How could someone so high be brought down by someone so low, by something so despicable?

- In our present day, how can God allow Sudanese Christians to be murdered systematically by the Islamic government for nearly 50 years?
- How can God allow Chinese house church pastors to languish in communist jails, eating putrid food and undergoing hours of interrogation?

- How can God allow a Muslim family to murder their own son because he has professed faith in Christ?

The answers are raised in conjunction with John the Baptist's execution as described in Mark 6

In the account today, we will see very clearly depicted the life of fear versus the life of faith; how a man who fears God need fear nothing else in this life, but a man who doesn't fear God is actually dominated by fears of many kinds

John the Baptist fearlessly proclaimed the truth to a wicked ruler, Herod the Tetrarch, concerning his sinful, adulterous, and incestuous marriage to Herodias:

“Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel: ‘It is not lawful for you to have her!’”

Herod, on the other hand, had no fear of God: committing adultery and murder boldly... but he lived a life ruled by fear: fear of the crowd, fear of John, fear of his wife, fear of the Romans, fear of his dinner guests

We have on display two different ways to live: fear God and nothing else; refuse to fear God, and fear everything else

I. John the Baptist: A Lamp Burning and Shining for a While

A. Who Was John the Baptist?

John 5:35 John was a burning and shining lamp, and you were willing to rejoice for a while in his light.

1. One of few people ever predicted by the prophets

a. John the Baptist had two different prophecies about him

Isaiah 40:3 A voice of one calling: “In the desert prepare the way for the LORD; make straight in the wilderness a highway for our God.”

Malachi 4:5 “Behold, I will send you the prophet Elijah before that great and dreadful day of the LORD comes.

2. Jesus' amazing assessment

Matthew 11:11 I tell you the truth: Among those born of women there has not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist

B. What Was His Ministry?

Mark 1:4-6 And so John came, baptizing in the desert region and preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. ⁵ The whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem went out to him. Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River. ⁶ John wore clothing made of camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey.

John MacArthur's unforgettable summary: 1) Prepare the way; 2) Proclaim the way; 3) Get out of the way

1. Prepare the way

- a. John prepared the way by speaking of the imminence of the Kingdom and of the Messiah
- b. Got the hearts of the Jewish nation ready for the coming King, calling people to repent of their sins
- c. John was very clear that he was not the Messiah

Mark 1:7-8 And this was his message: "After me will come one more powerful than I, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. ⁸ I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

2. Proclaim the way

- a. John did this one fateful day when Jesus came to be baptized

John 1:29-31 The next day John saw Jesus coming toward him and said, "Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!"

John said to Jesus...

"I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?"

3. Get out of the way

- a. John was immensely popular and had a huge following; his fame spread over the Jewish communities throughout the Roman Empire
- b. Once John identified Jesus, it was time for John to step aside and not share the spotlight

John 3:30 He must increase; I must decrease.

- c. So... God himself sovereignly moved John out of the way by having Herod the Tetrarch arrest John for his preaching against their sinful marriage

C. Truth on Fire: A LAMP BURNING AND SHINING

- 1. Like Elijah, a man utterly fearless in his ministry of confronting sinners and bringing them to repentance

Jeremiah 23:29 "Is not my word like fire," declares the LORD, "and like a hammer that breaks a rock in pieces?"

- 2. Two samples of his courageous preaching
 - a. Warning the Scribes and Pharisees of their sins

Matthew 3:7-12 But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to where he was baptizing, he said to them: "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? ⁸ Produce fruit in keeping with repentance. ⁹ And do not think you can say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham. ¹⁰ The ax is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire. ¹¹ "I baptize you with water for repentance. But after me will come one who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not fit to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. ¹² His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor, gathering his wheat into the barn and burning up the chaff with unquenchable fire."

- b. Warning Herod the Tetrarch of his sins

Mark 6:17-18 *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."*

The Greek verb tense implies John was repeatedly preaching directly against Herod's sin in taking Philip's wife

- i) Kings don't like to be told they need to repent
- ii) But God has consistently raised men who will stand their ground and tell rulers the truth

Moses said to Pharaoh:

"Thus says the Lord: Let my people go!"

Samuel said to King Saul

1 Samuel 15:22-23 *To obey is better than sacrifice, and to heed is better than the fat of rams. ²³ For rebellion is like the sin of divination, and arrogance like the evil of idolatry. Because you have rejected the word of the LORD, he has rejected you as king."*

Nathan said to King David

"You are the man!" convicting him of his hidden sin of adultery and murder

Elijah said to King Ahab

1 Kings 21:19 *This is what the LORD says: Have you not murdered a man and seized his property?' Then say to him, 'This is what the LORD says: In the place where dogs licked up Naboth's blood, dogs will lick up your blood-- yes, yours!'"*

Christ said to Pilate

"You would have no authority over me if it were not given you from above."

Peter and John said to the Sanhedrin:

Acts 5:30 The God of our fathers raised Jesus from the dead-- whom you had killed by hanging him on a tree.

Paul spoke boldly to Felix about righteousness, self-control and the judgment to come, and then fully preached the gospel to the Emperor Nero

Courage and boldness in proclaiming the word of God is a hallmark of Redemptive History

In John the Baptist, we see the courage and boldness of a man filled with God

John was no “reed swayed by the wind” blowing back and forth with public opinion

Fearing God, John feared nothing else... and he paid for it with his life

By stark contrast...

II. King Herod: A Black Hole of Sin

Jesus said John was a lamp, burning and shining, and people for a time enjoyed that light

If John was a lamp, burning and shining, then Herod was a black hole of sin... pride, lust, luxury, fear, rage, weakness

Black holes are stars that have collapsed in on themselves, whose self-directed gravitational pull is so strong that even light cannot escape them

Herod took the light of God and extinguished it... he discarded John’s preaching and his warning through his selfishness and sin

A. Herod’s Pride and Power

1. Herod the Tetrarch was usually called Herod Antipas, and was the son of Herod the Great, the king who slaughtered all the babies when Jesus was born
 - a. The apple doesn’t fall far from the tree!!
2. After the death of Herod the Great, the Romans divided Herod’s kingdom among his three sons... the word “Tetrarch” literally means “ruler of the fourth part”... the Romans did it to keep one man from being too powerful

3. Herod was thus a ruler but not a king... a petty middle-level potentate who lived for luxury and pleasure

B. Herod's Pattern of Lust

1. Herod set his eyes on his brother Philip's wife, Herodias
2. She was a thoroughly evil woman, perhaps as bad as Jezebel herself
3. The story in Mark 6 was typical of the way such evil women manipulate their ruling husbands to do their will
4. Herodias left her husband Philip to be married to her uncle Antipas, the Herod of our text... probably for reasons of power... she was closer to the possibility of being named queen this way
5. Herod lusted after her and took her and they were married
6. But lust is a character flaw not satisfied by obtaining what it desires... like a thirsty man drinking saltwater
7. We see Herod's lust again when the young girl danced and pleased Herod... but now, let's talk about Herod's complex anger

C. Herod's Complex Anger

Matthew 14:5 Herod wanted to kill John

1. Herod's conscience did not stop him from stealing his brother's wife
2. When John tried to convict him of sin, Herod's prideful anger stirred
3. BUT Herod's view of John was complicated:

Mark 6:19-20 Herodias nursed a grudge against 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.

Amazing!! Herod **liked to listen** to a man his wife wanted to put to death!! I think he would have set him free if he could have

There was something in John's message that was appealing to Herod... perhaps a hope of his own forgiveness and restoration to God

But he also didn't really understand John's message either... it GREATLY PUZZLED him

4. Now, Herod was the ruler; that meant he could kill John, right? Theoretically, yes... but now we meet Herod's dueling fears

D. Herod's Dueling Fears

1. Herod was afraid of John... his behavior is one of anger motivated by fear... he wanted to kill John because he was afraid of him
2. BUT Herod had other fears beside: He feared the people

Matthew 14:5 Herod wanted to kill John, but he was afraid of the people, because they considered him a prophet.

3. Violent and cruel tyrants are usually that way because of fear and insecurity
4. Herod feared an uprising of the people if he killed John
5. So here is Herod... trapped like an animal by his corrupt character

Trapped by pride and power... Trapped by lust... Trapped by anger... Trapped by fear

He was trapped by all these things even before his birthday party

Little did he know he would be trapped openly before his dinner guests by his cold-hearted, clever, conniving wife, Herodias

III. Herodias's Trap Springs

Mark 6:21-28 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 the head of John the Baptist on a platter." 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.

A. A Birthday Party to Remember

1. Birthdays can be times of encouragement given to a loved one
2. OR they can be lavish, materialistic, gluttonous, lascivious orgies of self-indulgence in the pleasures of the flesh

B. Herodias Bait and Springs the Trap

A famous old poem begins this way: *Will you walk into my parlor?" said the spider to the fly*

1. Knowing Herod's lust, Herodias arranged to have her teen-aged daughter dance for Herod at the party; she is the bait to trap Herod into the execution order he feared to give
2. It seems obvious that the girl's dance was lascivious... a sultry alluring dance meant to ensnare Herod by his lust-filled eyes

Mark 6:22-23 *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."*

3. She pleased Herod so much that he made a lavish oath
 - a. This kind of lavish oath was meant to be very impressive to his dinner guests
 - b. "See how powerful I am, see how generous!!"**

- c. Little did he realize it would cost him his soul, stained by the blood of God's choice servant

C. Herodias's Wicked Request

Mark 6:24-25 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 the head of John the Baptist on a platter."

1. Sick twisted request... the details particularly gruesome
2. She is undoubtedly motivated by a deep-seated hatred of the man who has called her an adulteress
3. She wants him to suffer, she wants him to die
4. So she has woven a trap like a spider does for its unwitting victim; now her husband has been caught, and he must do her will

D. Herod's Cowardly Surrender

1. Herod honored and respected John... he even feared him
2. BUT Herod honored and respected himself and his dinner guests more... he was TRAPPED... he was "greatly distressed" (vs. 20)
3. BUT "**because of his oaths and his dinner guests...**"; like an animal in a snare.
4. He agreed to the dastardly request, and John's head was severed from his body

Mark 6:27-28 ... 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.

5. What did this do to the soul of the young woman? She was a pawn in her wicked mother's game, and I can hardly imagine how she must have been in anguish over her role in John's death for the rest of her life. The blood of an innocent man dripped from her alluring skirts

E. Herod's Guilty Conscience... Haunted by John's Memory

Mark 6:14-16 King Herod heard about [Jesus' miracles], 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!"

This was clearly impossible, for John and Jesus were contemporaries who interacted. But it shows how much Herod was forever haunted by what he had done.

IV. Lessons

A. Jesus Calls Us to Be Fishers of Men

Mark 1:17 "Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men."

1. We should expect more and more persecution... even state-sponsored persecution, perhaps in our lifetime, even sponsored by hostile local and national rulers in America
2. Jesus taught us to be ready to give a defense before rulers

Mark 13:9-10 You must be on your guard. You will be handed over to the local councils and flogged in the synagogues. On account of me you will stand before governors and kings as witnesses to them. ¹⁰ And the gospel must first be preached to all nations.

3. This account is very realistic... the more boldly a messenger from God stands on the truth, the more likely that some wicked ruler will persecute him, attack him, imprison him, torture him, even kill him
4. Jesus said that servants that are willing to suffer for his name will be greatly rewarded in heaven for all eternity... but not necessarily amazingly delivered by the intervention of God

B. Fear God and Fear Nothing Else

1. John the Baptist was a fearless preacher of the word of God

2. He had absolutely no fear of man or of the consequences of the message he came to preach
3. This is essential to being a preacher of the truth... fear God more than you fear man
4. John lived that out more than anyone who preceded Christ
5. Do you live this out in your life?
6. Fear of man is a terrible snare in our lives

Proverbs 29:25 Fear of man will prove to be a snare, but whoever trusts in the LORD is kept safe.

7. It keeps us from following our convictions, from evangelism, from rejecting worldly sinful patterns

C. Don't Fear God, Fear Everything Else

1. If the fear of God is not your starting point in life, you will be blown and tossed by fears of all sorts
2. Look at wicked King Herod... torn in every direction by competing fears, in the end trapped by his even more wicked wife
3. God allowed this evil man to be trapped by his fears and commit this epic sin of murdering the greatest man that had lived up to his time

D. Christ Both Ordains Martyrdom and Mourns Martyrs

1. Long march of the church has been sprinkled by the blood of martyrs
2. This is the way the church conquered the Roman empire
3. This is the way the church grew and thrived under communism
4. This is the way the church must conquer the final frontiers, many of them Muslim
5. BUT YET Christ mourns over the martyrs and is compassionate to their suffering

“Saul, Saul, why do you persecute ME???”

- E. Get Active in Praying for and Helping Persecuted Christians Around the World
 - 1. Many Christian agencies: Voice of the Martyrs, Persecution Project, Christian Freedom International
 - 2. Learn more about what your brothers and sisters are going through around the world
 - a. Do not think it is a light thing that they are being persecuted