

Sticking His Neck Out

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[0 : 00] Other than the crucifixion of Jesus, tonight's passage is perhaps the most gruesome section! in Mark's Gospel. As we cover Mark 6 verses 14 through 29 tonight, we'll see what happened! to John the Baptist after he confronted Herod Antipas and Herodias about their sin. John the Baptist suffered for being willing to stick his neck out and speak the truth. Mark 6 verse 14 alludes to what we covered last week when we saw Jesus send the twelve apostles out on their first missionary journey. Because of that, let's set the context by reading verses 12 and 13 along with verses 14 through 29. So here are Mark 6, 12 through 29. Speaking initially about the apostles, Mark wrote, So they went out and proclaimed that people should repent. And they cast out many demons and anointed with oil many who were sick and healed them.

King Herod heard of it, for Jesus' name had become known. Some said John the Baptist has been raised from the dead. That is why these miraculous powers are at work in him. But others said he is Elijah, and others said he is a prophet like one of the prophets of old. But when Herod heard of it, he said, John, whom I beheaded, has been raised. For it was Herod who had sent and seized John and bound him in prison for the sake of Herodias, his brother Philip's wife, because he had married her. For John had been saying to Herod, It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife. And Herodias had a grudge against him and wanted to put him to death.

But she could not, for Herod feared John, knowing that he was a righteous and holy man, and he kept him safe. When he heard him, he was greatly perplexed, and yet he heard him gladly.

But an opportunity came when Herod, on his birthday, gave a banquet for his nobles and military commanders and the leading men of Galilee. For when Herodias' daughter came in and danced, she pleased Herod and his guest. And the king said to the girl, Ask me for whatever you wish, and I will give it to you. And he vowed to her, Whatever you ask me, I will give you up to half of my kingdom. And she went out and said to her mother, For what should I ask? And she said, The head of John the Baptist. And she came in immediately with haste to the king and asked, saying, I want you to give me at once the head of John the Baptist on a platter.

And the king was exceedingly sorry, but because of his oaths and his guest, he did not want to break his word to her. And immediately the king sent an executioner with his orders to bring John's head. He went and beheaded him in the prison and brought his head on a platter and gave it to the girl, and the girl gave it to her mother. When his disciples heard of it, they came and took his body and laid it in a tomb. Here's the main idea for tonight's passage. Believers should be prepared for hostility and persecution when they faithfully proclaim God's truth. Once again, believers should be prepared for hostility and persecution when they faithfully proclaim God's truth.

[3 : 29] Early in Israel's history, prophets like Moses and Samuel faced repeated criticism and grumbling from the people. Later, during the period of the divided monarchy, many prophets endured even more intense forms of persecution. In the days of Elijah, evil queen Jezebel killed many of the true prophets of the Lord. Though Elijah survived, he was constantly threatened by Jezebel and her husband Ahab.

The prophet Micaiah was imprisoned. Elisha was mocked. Isaiah was likely sawn in half. Uriah was killed by the sword. And Zechariah, the son of Jehoiada, was stoned to death in the court of the temple.

Other examples of mistreatment, persecution, and rejection could easily be multiplied. As the author of Hebrews recounts the prophets, he said this, They were stoned. They were sawn in two. They were killed with the sword. They went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, afflicted, mistreated, of whom the world was not worthy, wandering about in deserts and mountains, and in dens and caves of the earth. That was Hebrews 11, verses 37 and 38.

Perhaps no Old Testament figure better illustrates the constant persecution the prophets faced than Jeremiah, the weeping prophet. During his prophetic ministry, Jeremiah was threatened with death, beaten, and put in stocks, arrested, imprisoned, and placed in a pit to die. He was also bound in chains and publicly called a liar. John the Baptist generally is considered the last of the Old Testament prophets, even though he first appears in the New Testament. Like the other prophets before him, we will see that John faced persecution. His persecution came directly from the hands of pagan rulers, but we see no evidence that the religious leaders tried to prevent it. Those religious leaders likely were glad to see John locked away and then killed. After all, John regularly had denounced the religious leaders' sin, too. Before we get into the text, let's reacquaint ourselves with some of the main characters in this section of Scripture. Those are Herod and his family. The Herod of this story is

Herod Antipas. His father was Herod the Great, the Herod who tried to have the baby Jesus murdered. Palestine was divided into four regions after the death of Herod the Great. His four sons each ruled one part. Herod Antipas ruled Galilee and Perea from 4 BC to AD 39. The Herods were a messed up family.

[6 : 17] Herod Antipas, who was Herod's current wife, also was his niece. Herod Antipas was already married to another of Herod's half-brothers when Herod first met her. And when Herod first met her, Herod himself was already married to the daughter of King Aretas, who ruled Nabataean Arabia to the southeast of the Dead Sea.

Compounding his unlawful divorce with adultery and incest, Herod Antipas enticed his niece Herod Herodias to divorce his half-brother so that Antipas could marry Herodias. Herod's wickedness angered his former father-in-law, King Aretas, who brought an army against Herod.

And he would have defeated Herod if the Roman troops had not intervened. We almost need a diagram to figure out who was related to whom and to figure out who was formerly married to whom. At first, this real-life family sounded more like a modern-day soap opera.

However, even a modern-day soap opera likely would never have come up with a scenario where one brother marries his niece. Then another brother in that same family convinces the niece to divorce her first uncle here so that she could marry herself to a second uncle. Throw in an angry former father-in-law, and Herod Antipas firmly planted himself in the middle of some very tense family drama. And that sets the scene for what we will see tonight as we go through the passage. We'll break tonight's text into three sections, starting with verses 14 through 20. So here are verses 14 through 20 again.

We'll see the bothered ruler in these verses. Once again, we'll see the bothered ruler. So let's go ahead and read verses 14 through 20. King Herod heard of it, for Jesus' name had become known.

[8 : 10] Some said, John the Baptist has been raised from the dead. That is why these miraculous powers are at work in him. But others said, he is Elijah, and others said, he is a prophet, like one of the prophets of old. But when Herod heard of it, he said, John, whom I beheaded, has been raised. For it was Herod who had sent and seized John and bound him in prison for the sake of Herodias, his brother Philip's wife, because he had married her. For John had been saying to Herod, it is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife. And Herodias had a grudge against him and wanted to put him to death, but she could not. For Herod feared John, knowing that he was a righteous and holy man, and he kept him safe.

When he heard him, he was greatly perplexed, and yet he heard him gladly. Herod wanted to be a king, but he never officially was made king. Herod asked the Roman emperor to give him the king title, but the Roman emperor denied Herod's request. Nevertheless, Herod still asked the citizens of the area he ruled to call him a king. Perhaps Mark was being respectful by using Herod's preferred title, but perhaps Mark was interjecting some sarcasm by starting verse 14 with the word King Herod. Verses 14 through 16 indicate that Herod had a troubled conscience. His conscience was troubling him because of a man whom Herod unlawfully executed. That, of course, was John the Baptist. Herod was convinced that John the Baptist had come back to life. Herod was haunted by the idea that John had returned to life because, in the ancient world, there was a popular idea that resurrections were signs of impending judgment. If John had been raised, Herod reasoned, he must be bringing the judgment of God on his enemies, number one of whom would have been Herod, who had been responsible for John's death. Jesus and John the Baptist appeared together in public view at the time of our Lord's baptism. However, what had happened in one part of the country might not be known elsewhere. We see in verse 17 that Herod put John the Baptist in prison

because of Herodias.

Herod, however, refused to kill John. Matthew chapter 14 verse 5 tells us that Herod feared the people too. Here is Matthew 14 verse 5, and though he wanted to put him to death, he feared the people because they held him to be a prophet. Over the next year or so, John was likely incarcerated in the dungeon at Herod's palace in Machaerus near the northeastern end of the Dead Sea. The fortress was situated on a high hilltop offering dramatic views of the surrounding countryside. But John the Baptist would have been deep in the earth below in a dank dungeon that offered no natural light or fresh air.

And it was there that Herod held John captive. After living his entire life in the open expanses of the Judean wilderness, John ended his days in the isolation of an intolerable dungeon. His only temporary reliefs were the visits he received from his disciples. Verse 18 tells us why Herodias hated John the Baptist so much. Here is verse 18 again. For John had been saying to Herod, it is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife. The tense of the original Greek there indicates that John said this repeatedly. It wasn't a one-time thing. According to Jewish law, this arrangement was unlawful on two grounds. On one hand, there was the problem of adultery. On the other hand, Jewish law prohibited sexual relations with one's brother's wife.

John, with the fearlessness so typical of many of the prophets, had confronted Herod about this sin. Herod was unconcerned about Jewish law. He wasn't a Jew. But we can tell from these verses that Herod was unable to silence his conscience. Even though Herod had no respect for Jewish law, he knew what he had done with Herodias and what he'd done to John were wrong. The single greatest restraint on evil that God has placed in this world is conscience. The most wicked people, sociopaths and psychopaths, are sometimes described as being without conscience. Nevertheless, they've not been able to annihilate altogether the voice of right and wrong that God has implanted in every human heart. Listen to what Paul wrote in Romans chapter 2, verses 14 through 16. Here are Romans 2, 14 through 16.

[13 : 13] For when Gentiles who do not have the law by nature do what the law requires, they are a law to themselves, even though they do not have the law. They show that the work of the law is written on their hearts, while their conscience also bears witness, and their conflicting thoughts accuse or even excuse them on that day when, according to my gospel, God judges the secrets of men by Jesus Christ.

While Herod was being troubled by his conscience, Herodias knew exactly what she wanted to happen to John. Look again at Mark 6, 19. And Herodias had a grudge against him, that's John, and wanted him put to death. The small remaining glimmer of Herod's conscience and Herod's filth were the only things that prevented Herodias from getting her wish. We see that from verse 20. Verse 20 says, For Herod feared John, knowing that he was a righteous and holy man, and he kept him safe. When he heard him, he was greatly perplexed, and yet he heard him gladly. Earlier we read where Herod avoided killing John because Herod feared the people. In verse 20. We see that Herod also feared John.

Herod knew that John was just a man, but John was a holy man. Herod was both fearful and fascinated. He agreed to put John in jail to make his wife happy, but he would not go any further. He did not want to put John to death.

Meanwhile, Herodias was looking for the opportunity to force her now husband to get rid of her enemy. Such an opportunity presented itself in our next section.

In Mark 6, 21 through 25, we see the birthday request. So the birthday request is your second set of blanks. Look at just verses 21 through 23 first.

[15 : 18] But an opportunity came when Herod, on his birthday, gave a banquet for his nobles and military commanders and the leading men of Galilee. For when Herodias' daughter came in and danced, she pleased Herod and his guest. And the king said to the girl, Herodias gets that opportunity to get revenge on John during Herod's birthday party.

John MacArthur said this, For the Romans, birthday parties were excuses for uninhibited revelry, often characterized by overindulgence, gluttony, drunkenness, and sexual deviance. Such was certainly true of the festival to which Herod invited his nobles, the political elite of Galilee. His dinner guests, limited to men only, included the most powerful people, from upper-level tax collectors to high-ranking military commanders, to those who Mark 3.6 identifies as Herodians. Those were supporters of Herod and the Romans. The party itself was a lecherous affair, as evidenced by the erotic entertainment. That entertainment, if we can term it as such, came from none other than

Herod's own stepdaughter.

She likely was only a teenager when this happened. Josephus, the Jewish historian, says that the girl's name was Salome. The original wording of Mark's text indicates that Salome's dance was most comparable to a modern striptease. Mark tells us that Herod and his guest were pleased by her performance. Suffice it to say that if you suspect that the word translated as pleased means more than how we typically use the word, you're correct. That party was shameful in more ways than one.

The party also gives us another example of how messed up the Herod family was. What kind of stepfather would put his daughter on display like that? What kind of mother would allow her daughter, and perhaps even encourage her daughter, to do such a thing? And what kind of teenage girl would willingly do it? Herodias was so consumed by her hatred for John the Baptist that she was willing to put her daughter in a terrible situation. Herodias obviously knew Herod well enough to be able to predict what he might do once the party got rolling. We'll see that as we get deeper into this section.

Herod enjoys Salome's performance so much that verse 23 tells us, Herod's magnanimous offer was nothing more than empty boasting. He had nothing to give. He ruled his territory only as a proxy of Rome. Motivated by foolish pride, drunkenness, and sexual perversion, Herod took an oath and bound himself to the request of his stepdaughter. Even if Herod did have a kingdom to give away, Salome would have known that the half my kingdom line was a proverbial saying. It meant that Herod intended to be very generous. As we read through verse 25 now, we see that Salome knew just whom to ask for advice. Mark 6, 24 and 25 say, And she went out and said to her mother, For what should I ask?

[19:05] And she said, The head of John the Baptist. And she came in immediately with haste to the king and asked, saying, I want you to give me at once the head of John the Baptist on a platter.

Here we see more evidence that Herodias likely had planned the whole scheme to take advantage of her husband when she anticipated that he would be anything but clear-headed. Based upon Mark's wording, Herodias made her suggestion without any hesitation. We also see evidence that Herodias could manipulate Salome very much like she could manipulate Herod. No normal teenage girl requests that a man be decapitated as payment for dancing.

This is how low Herodias stooped. She cared more about the head of John the Baptist than she cared about the dignity and reputation of her own daughter. Herodias knew that Herod had no authority to give away part of his self-described kingdom.

She also knew, though, that one other piece of authority that Herod did have was the authority to order capital punishment. He could order someone's execution. Herod was no better.

He cared more about looking important and pleasing his guests than he cared about the dignity and reputation of his stepdaughter or the legal and moral implications of ordering the execution of an innocent man.

[20:34] Sadly, Salome showed the lack of inhibitions that we might expect from someone who had been raised in such a perverted family. She was without shame, as her obscene dance had just confirmed.

She was without conscience. Hurrying on such an errand and delivering her demand for John's head with such determination and in such detail proved that. But then the Herods made a specialty out of murdering their consciences, as well as murdering others.

Herod feared displeasing his wife and losing face with man more than he feared God. Pride took Herod down, just like it did Satan and Adam. Herodias feared and hated John because he was right, and she knew it.

John was a nuisance to her conscience and a cancer to her reputation. In her mind, John had to go. His head on a platter would solve all her problems, or at least that's what she thought.

Salome, from what we can tell, willingly participated in her mother's scheme, and Salome willingly passed up useful compensation for such terrible behavior.

[21:44] She requested to have a man murdered instead. So far, we've seen the bothered ruler and the birthday request. In the final four verses of our passage tonight, we see the barbaric result.

So the barbaric result is your last set of blanks. Look at verse 26 again. In his pride, Herod would not break down, as if keeping promises was something sacred to this guy.

The problem, of course, was his guests. They were the upper crust of Galilean society, and they'd heard him promise in his twisted thinking. And in his twisted thinking, he believed that somehow he

would be diminished if he did not keep his word.

Having made such a promise in the presence of his dinner guest, many of whom were political supporters and military dignitaries, Herod could not go back on his word without losing face. Herod was very sorry, yet his fear of embarrassment precluded him from doing what he knew to be right. He was filled with regret, but his sorrow had no connection to true repentance.

[23 : 04] Though he realized that he had been trapped by his wife, Herod obliged the wicked request of his stepdaughter to avoid personal humiliation. Herod was sorry that his drunken tongue had landed him in such an awkward situation, but he was not sorry enough to do what was right.

He was not sorry about his sin. He went on to commit worse ones. He only was sorry that he had no way out of his predicament except to confess himself in the wrong.

And we've already seen that he refused to do that. Verses 27 and 28 tell us what happened next.

Here are verses 27 and 28 again.

And immediately the king sent an executioner with orders to bring John's head. He went and beheaded him in the prison and brought his head on a platter and gave it to the girl, and the girl gave it to her mother.

When Herod's command was issued, it was carried out immediately. The executioner went and had John beheaded in the prison.

[24 : 15] The executioner then brought John's head on a platter and gave it to Salome. Salome then gave it to her mother. Though the setting of John's head on a platter was a presentation fit for cannibals, such an act was fairly common in the barbaric world of that day.

Receiving the head guaranteed that the execution had been carried out. According to the ancient Roman historian Cassius Dio, when the head of Cicero was brought to Mark Antony's wife, Fulvia, she pulled out his tongue and repeatedly stabbed it with her hairpin.

Her violent assault on his tongue was intended as a poetic act of final vengeance against Cicero.

He had delivered powerful speeches that attacked Mark Antony. The 5th century church father, Jerome, suggested that Herodias similarly mutilated the severed head of John the Baptist.

Though such cannot be verified, that certainly would fit with the spiteful rage that characterized the vulgar queen. Only one group of people does the right thing in these verses.

We see those people in the final verse of this section. Mark 6.29 says, When his disciples heard of it, they came and took his body and laid it in a tomb.

[25 : 42] John's disciples risked their lives to come and get his body and bury it. It's difficult to imagine the heartbreak that John's disciples must have endured as John's headless body was given a proper burial.

He had been both their teacher from God and their leader. God had used John's fiery preaching in their lives to convict their hearts of sin and to bring them to a place of repentance.

John had also pointed them to the Messiah. It's not surprising then that John's disciples came and reported what had happened to Jesus. Mark's account omits the fact that John's disciples reported John's death to Jesus.

To read about that and to read about Jesus' reaction, listen to Matthew 14.12 and the first part of Matthew 14.13. Here are Matthew 14.12 and the first part of Matthew 14.13.

Now when Jesus heard this, he withdrew from there in a boat to a desolate place by himself. Later on in his ministry, Jesus referred to Herod as that fox.

[26 : 53] You can read about that in Luke 13.32. Remember the main idea. Believers should be prepared for hostility and persecution when they faithfully proclaim God's truth.

A servant is not greater than his master. If people treated Jesus with cruelty, they will do the same to his followers. The life of John the Baptist perfectly illustrates what we might expect as we faithfully serve our God.

J.C. Ryle said, Stories like these are meant to remind us that the true Christians' best things are yet to come. Their rest, their crown, their wages, their reward are all on the other side of the grave.

Here in this world, they must walk by faith and not by sight. And if they look for human praise, they will be disappointed. Here in this life, they must sow and labor and fight and endure persecution.

And if they expect a great earthly reward, they expect what they will not find. But this life is not all. There is to be a day of retribution.

[28 : 09] There is a glorious harvest yet to come. Heaven will make amends for everything. Then he continued, Let it never surprise us when we hear of faithful ministers of the gospel being spoken

against, hated, and reviled.

Let us rather remember that they are ordained to bear witness against sin, the world, and the devil, and that if they are faithful, they cannot help giving offense.

It is no disgrace to a minister's character to be disliked by the wicked and the ungodly. It is no real honor to a minister to be thought well of by everybody.

Ryle then referenced Luke 6, verse 26. In Luke 6, verse 26, Jesus is speaking. Jesus said, Woe to you when all people speak well of you, for so their fathers did to the false prophets.

The events of tonight's passage document the end of John the Baptist's life, but they also point forward to something else.

[29 : 22] And we'll spend the remainder of our time tonight looking at what they point forward to. John was more than the greatest and last of the Old Testament prophets. He was also the first martyr for Jesus Christ.

His entire life pointed to the coming Messiah. Even in his death, he remained faithful to his God-given task. We need to see how closely Mark connects the ministries of John and Jesus. There are only two passages in Mark that are not about Jesus. These two passages are both about John. Those passages are Mark chapter 1, verses 2 through 8, and the passage that we've studied tonight.

But those two passages are really about Jesus because they foreshadow much about Jesus. Mark 1, 2 through 8, presents John as the forerunner of Jesus' coming.

In our passage tonight, John is the forerunner of Jesus' death. The parallels between Mark 6 and Mark 14 and 15 show us that John's death is preparing us for Jesus' death.

[30 : 34] Both John and Jesus were killed by political tyrants who vacillated but put them to death because of the fear of man. Both deaths were the result of political conniving and manipulation.

Both men were righteous and innocent victims. Both men were buried by men who put themselves at risk by requesting to have the bodies. But there's one amazing difference.

John died because of the sin of others. Jesus died for the sins of others. Jesus came into the world to save sinners, not those who deny that they are sinners.

The only hope is on the other side of repentance, getting out of denial so that you can own your sin. That is the only hope because there is a sacrifice for sin, but there is no sacrifice for denial.

After John the Baptist was killed, Herod began to pay attention to the ministry of Jesus. Herod sought to see Jesus, and that meeting would take place just a few hours before the Lord's crucifixion.

[31 : 50] According to Luke, Pilate sent Jesus to Herod because Pilate could find no guilt in Jesus. Luke 23, verses 8-11 tell us about that meeting between Jesus and Herod.

Here are Luke 23, verses 8-11. When Herod saw Jesus, he was very glad, for he had long desired to see him, because he had heard about him, and he was hoping to see some sign done by him. So he questioned him of some length, but he made no answer. The chief priest and the scribe stood by, vehemently accusing him. And Herod with his soldiers treated him with contempt and mocked him.

Then arraying him in splendid clothing, he sent him back to Pilate. In the end, Herod did see Jesus. Herod was undoubtedly relieved that Jesus was not John, risen from the grave.

But in truth, Jesus was far more than that. However, to Herod, Jesus seemed like far less, nothing more than a novelty whom Herod ridiculed and sent back to Pilate.

[33 : 04] When Herod first heard of Jesus, Herod's conscience told him that it was John, risen from the dead. When at last Jesus did stand before Herod, Jesus refused to speak to Herod.

Herod responded by jeering at him. So having first murdered John, Herod ended up mocking Jesus. Herod's actions should serve as a warning to unbelievers.

In his interactions with both John the Baptist and Jesus, Herod Antipas stands like Judas as a monumentally tragic figure in history.

He had John the Baptist, whom Jesus called the greatest man who had ever lived and who was the most honored prophet of God in his hands. Herod locked John in a dungeon until Herod later had John executed.

More importantly, Herod had an audience with the king of kings. Herod mocked Jesus and turned him away. Such wasted opportunity was the result of Herod's love for sin, his arrogant unwillingness to believe, and his cowardly fear of the truth.

[34 : 17] Herod claimed to rule over others. In reality, he was a man controlled by his own fear of man. His fear of the people initially kept him from killing John.

His fear of his friends finally compelled him to authorize John's execution. His fear of John made him anxious when he heard about Jesus, but his fear turned to scorn when he finally had an audience with the Son of God.

Herod feared everyone except the Lord, and he lost his soul as a result. Let that last part sink in. Herod feared everyone except the Lord, and he lost his soul as a result.

We should never let that be our story. Remember Jesus' words in John 3, verses 16 through 18. Here are the words of Jesus in John 3, 16 through 18.

For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whomever believes in him should not perish, but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.

[35 : 37] Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God.

Daniel Akin said, For those of us who already are believers, we never need to defend ourselves if we walk with God.

We never need to employ methods of violence and coercion as we represent King Jesus and his kingdom. Our good works will honor us before men, and our good works will haunt those who oppose us, now or in eternity.

Akin continued with these words. He said, Death cannot silence a life. Murdering someone will not put an end to their testimony.

Remember Hebrews 11.4. Hebrews 11.4 says, And through his faith, though he died, he still speaks. Then he says, Today, no one names their son Herod.

[36 : 43] Millions, on the other hand, bear the name of John. One's tombstone may serve as a trumpet. One's grave a megaphone of a life well lived for the glory of a great king whose name is Jesus.

Throughout history, the message of the martyrs continues to ring loud and clear. These choice servants of Jesus are a wonderful source of strength and encouragement.

None fulfills that assignment better than John the Baptist. Herod and Herodias may have received John's head on a platter, but our Lord received John's soul into heaven for all eternity.

John lost his head, but Herod and Herodias lost their souls. In the end, there is no question who won and who lost. Great things happened to godly people who put it all on the line, even their head on the platter, for the truth of God's word and for the glory of God's name.

The world and our country appear to be getting more hostile to Christians, but our text tonight reminds us that hostility to Christians is nothing new.

[37 : 59] Whatever happens in this life, believers have the assurance of God's word. Remember Romans 8, verse 18. In Romans 8, 18, Paul wrote, For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed in us.

Let's pray. Father, we thank you for the reminder that as Christians we shouldn't be surprised if we face persecution.

It's a reminder that we would rather not have seen, but it's one that we need to be aware of. If we do face persecution, help us to be as strong in the face of that persecution as John the Baptist was. And let us do everything we do for your glory. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen. Amen. Amen.