

Jesus Feared by Herod

After the Murder of John the Baptist

Matthew 14:1-12; Mark 6:14-29; Luke 9:7-9

The mission of the twelve disciples coupled with Jesus moving through Galilee, must have been successful, for word of Jesus' ministry reached the palace.

Herod Antipas – Herod Antipas was a son of Herod the Great, the ruler at the time of Christ's birth who had the babies killed around Bethlehem. In 4 BC, when Herod the Great died, the kingdom was divided by Rome and split between four sons. Antipas was given Galilee and Perea and ruled for 43 years. It must be understood these kings had no land of their own, they were puppet rulers of Rome. In the book of Matthew, he is called "king." To Matthew, a Galilean, Antipas was his king. This whole family is known as the Mafia of the first century. They were ruthless, power-hungry, and had little regard for the people they were to oversee. Antipas' life was marked by uncontrolled lust, indecisiveness, superstitious, self-indulgence, selfishness, being easily influenced by others, prideful, and all of this leaving him a very weak leader. I'm afraid over the ages many rulers and politicians have been like Herod! He married the daughter of the king of Petra in Arabia to build an alliance, but later shamed her by taking his brother's wife Herodias. This caused a war between Herod and the king of Arabia in which Herod lost a significant number of men. Antipas is the most prominent Herod in the Bible and was involved in two significant events; the killing of John the Baptist and being part of the trial of Jesus. Later in his life, Herodias urged her husband to travel to Rome to request the title of king be taken from his brother and given to him. The Roman powers were so disguised with Antipas' poor judgment and extravagant lifestyle they banished both him and Herodias to the frontier of Spain to die in obscurity.

Herodias – Not unlike many royals of old, this family sought to keep power within the family so therefore close family marriages were the norm. Herodias was Antipas' half-brother's daughter. Her first husband was Antipas' brother, another of the Tetrarch rulers. She married two of her uncles. Antipas' selfishness and ambition were second to that of Herodias. Her whole life was a story of climbing the ladder of wealth and power, and she was willing to sell herself, her family, and her soul for it. She is only mentioned in the Scriptures in this event, and we see her vindictive heart that patiently waited for just the right time to trick her predictably weak husband.

I. Herod's Misunderstanding of the Person of Jesus

“And (“at that time” Matthew 14:1) king Herod (“the tetrarch” Matthew 14:1) heard of (“all that was done by him:” Luke 9:7) (“the fame of” Matthew 14:1) him; (for his name was spread abroad:) (“and he was perplexed,” Luke 9:7) and he said (“unto his servants” Matthew 14:2), That John the Baptist was risen from the dead, and therefore mighty works do shew forth themselves in him. ¹⁵Others said, That it is Elijah. And others said, That it is a prophet, or as one of the (“old” Luke 9:8) prophets (“was risen again” Luke 9:8). ¹⁶ But when Herod heard thereof, he said, (“John have I beheaded: but who is this, of whom I hear such things?” Luke 9:9) It is John, whom I beheaded: he is risen from the dead. (“And he desired to see him.” Luke 9:9)” Mark 6:14-16

Word of Jesus reaches Herod – It does seem strange that with the great popularity of Jesus in Galilee: the great crowds he drew, the healings, raising ones from the dead, and His preaching, that it is only now that Herod hears of Him! Jesus has been in ministry for 1 ½ to 2 years already. This is a testament to the disconnect Antipas

had with his people. Perhaps with the six pairs of disciples and Jesus' touring Galilee preaching and healing, the word about Christ finally reached the palace!

Confusion on the Person of Jesus – When Herod heard of Jesus and His great works, his mind immediately associated it with John the Baptist whom he had killed. He was very perplexed about the person of Jesus and asked the men of his court what they had heard about Him.

- The first answer was that Jesus was actually Elijah. Jews believed Elijah would come again and preach before the Messiah appeared. Mal. 4:5
- Secondly, they reported that Jesus was a prophet. The people had counted John the Baptist a prophet and now some were seeing Jesus as another prophet.
- Lastly, it was thought that Jesus was one of the Old Testament prophets that had risen again. Deut. 18:15

Please realize, what these men of the court were saying was basically the same as many of the Jews in Jesus' day. Matthew 16:13-14 All saw Jesus as special, from God, and somehow supernatural. They viewed Christ's work and message with the highest of Jewish religious figures in their history! Jesus, John the Baptist, and the prophets preached repentance from sin and a turning to God. This was why the people associated all these men together. But with the addition of Jesus' miracles and His message they would not believe the obvious; He was their Messiah! Instead, they worked very hard to believe any strange, superstitious thought and explain the person of Jesus away!

Fearful, Superstitious, Guilty Conscience – Herod admits that he killed John (Luke 9:9) and it was his guilty conscience that was feeding the superstitious fears associated with word about Jesus. Twice it is recorded here that he said that John had risen from the dead. But the Greek tenses show this was a repeated talking point of Herod. He was now consumed with the fact John had risen from the dead! At this point, Herod seems to feel more than guilt but also fear. In his mind, John not only had risen from the dead but now had great powers! Had John come back to haunt and condemn him again? Luke tells us Herod had a desire to see Jesus, but we know he never made any attempt to do so. Jesus will not present Himself to Herod or interact with him until His trial the night before His death. Then Jesus will stand silent before this rejector of truth!

This event of Jesus is different from most that are straightforward, real-time occurrences in the life of Christ. Chronologically, we have Herod just hearing of Jesus and immediately wondering if Christ could be John the Baptist raised from the dead. It is at this time both Matthew and Mark give us a flashback to John's rebuking of Herod, his arrest, imprisonment, and then death.

II. Flashback to Herod and John the Baptist's Interaction

1. John Condemnation of Herod's Sin in Public

“For Herod himself had sent forth and laid hold upon John, and bound him in prison for Herodias' sake, his brother Philip's wife: for he had married her. ¹⁸ For John had said unto Herod, It is not lawful for thee to have thy brother's wife.” Mark 6:17-18

Don't miss who was the driving force behind the arrest of John the Baptist. It was Herodias! John was a public preacher who didn't refrain from condemning sin and giving truth. Like Jesus, his audiences included both religious and sinners, soldiers, publicans, and men of all kinds. All were challenged with their sinful lifestyle and disobedience to God. John called them all to repent: the common man, the religious man, and the royal

man! Luke 3:3-20 Specifically, John called out Herod's blatant disobedience to the law found in Lev. 18:16; 20:21 concerning him taking his brother's wife in both incest and adultery. That preaching landed him in prison.

2. John's Impact on Herod in the Palace

“Therefore Herodias had a quarrel against him, and would have killed him; but she could not: (‘‘And when he would have put him to death, he feared the multitude, because they counted him as a prophet.’’ Matthew 14:5) ²⁰ For Herod feared John, knowing that he was a just man and an holy, and observed him; and when he heard him, he did many things, and heard him gladly.’’ Mark 6:19-20

You find two emotions going on in these verses. Herodias had an extremely vindictive hatred for John because he dared preach against their unlawful marriage. Her greatest desire was power and position. She had gotten Herod Antipas and didn't want to lose this marriage because of John the Baptist's influence on Herod. Herodias would have killed him if she had the power. But Herod was fearful of both the people and John. The people viewed John as the prophet he was, and honestly, it seems Herod feared John because he too saw him as a prophet. We have a few phrases and words in verse 20 that have lost the strength of their meaning since the translation of the King James Version in 1611. Here are a couple of other versions that clear up the Greek meaning.

‘‘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.’’ ESV

‘‘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.’’ NIV

Here we see that Herod would bring John out of the dungeon for one-on-one discussions. What do you think John spoke with Herod about during these meetings? The Greek tenses of Mark 6:18 are clear, ‘‘John said over and over again, It is not lawful for thee to have thy brother's wife.’’ John preached to Herod repentance of his sin, the need to obey God, to set things in order in his house, to be the leader of Israel God would have desired, and to prepare for the kingdom of God! This was John's regular message, and he would not have changed his message because he sat in prison or the palace! What was Herod's reaction? We are told he ‘‘heard him gladly’’ and ‘‘he was greatly perplexed.’’ Herod admired the righteousness of John, and the fact that he was a prophet, but he would not repent! John's words and his wicked lifestyle caused Herod great inner conflict. No wonder Herod felt such guilt about John's death and feared Jesus!

3. Herodias' Evil Plan Unfolds at a Banquet

‘‘And when a convenient day (Lit. opportune; strategic) was come, that Herod on his birthday (probably the anniversary of his coming to power – Ascension Day) made a supper to his lords, high captains, and chief estates of Galilee (the who's who of Galilee – nobles, military, social, and economic leaders); ²²And when the daughter of the said Herodias came in, and danced, and pleased Herod and them that sat with him, the king said unto the damsel (Gk - same word which described Jarius' 12-year-old daughter), Ask of me whatsoever thou wilt, and I will give it thee. ²³And he sware unto her, Whatsoever thou shalt ask of me, I will give it thee, unto the half of my kingdom. ²⁴And she went forth, and said unto her mother, What shall I ask? And she said, The head of John the Baptist. ²⁵And she came in straightway with haste (Gk - immediately; great urgency) unto the king, and asked, saying, I will that thou give me by and by (Gk - immediately) in a charger (Lit. platter) the head of John the Baptist.’’ Mark 6:21-25

Two key thoughts in this passage are **opportunity** and **urgency**. Bible teachers believe John was in Herod's prison between 10-18 months. Two things were happening in the palace those days, Herod was having meetings with John, and Herodias' hatred for John was growing. Patiently she waited for an opportune time. She

understood her husband's weakness and pride. We read of the dancing princess daughter, but this was not the norm in ancient royal households. Putting a family member of the king on display before a drunken audience would not have happened in most palaces, so many believe this was all controlled by the evil Herodias. I read much about the probability of the dance being seductive and wicked. But then add the Greek usage of the word “damsel,” the girl being about 12 years old, and it adds to a very disgusting affair that night.

Foolish Herod, in his pride, offered the girl, “whatsoever” she wanted, “unto the half of my kingdom.” The Greek tenses show a repeating of this boastful offer. Remember, Herod actually owned little and most of what he had was given to him on behalf of the Roman government. This was a foolish statement, driven by pride and probably alcohol. The girl immediately runs to the source of the trap, her mother, and it is then Herodias reveals her sadistic heart. She told her daughter to request, “The head of John the Baptist.” The girl immediately runs back to Herod with this surprising request, “I will that thou give me at once on a platter the head of John the Baptist.” Herod had no time to recant his foolishness, his guests looked on, the girl wanted it now.....

4. Herod’s Cowardly Murder of John in the Dungeon

“And the king was exceeding sorry (Gk - greatly sorrowful; distressed); yet for his oath's sake, and for their sakes which sat with him, he would not reject her. ²⁷And immediately the king sent an executioner, and commanded his head to be brought: and he went and beheaded him in the prison, ²⁸And brought his head in a charger, and gave it to the damsel: and the damsel gave it to her mother. ²⁹And when his disciples heard of it, they came and took up his corpse, and laid it in a tomb (“and went and told Jesus” Matthew 14:12).” Mark 6:26-29

He knew he was trapped into something he didn’t want to do. The word translated as “exceeding sorry” is the same word translated as “greatly sorrowful” in Mark 14:34 speaking of Jesus in the garden of Gethsemane. The very lifestyle John warned him about and told him to repent of was continuing to ruin both him and those around him. Edersheim, the converted Rabbi had this to say about Herod, “Unfaithful to his God, to his conscience, to truth and righteousness; not ashamed of any crime or sin, he would yet be faithful to his half-drunken oath, and appear honorable and true before such companions!’ p. 463 So Herod moved from guilt to more guilt and from wrong thinking to even more wrong thinking! He was on the downward spiral of sin!

The passage ends with John’s disciples coming and burying the headless body of John and going to tell Jesus all that had happened. This probably brings us back to the chronological real-time of Jesus’ life, and perhaps a close to the mission of the twelve disciples.

Believers Application:

God loved and desired to bring Herod to righteousness and truth. In His mercy, God gave Herod many chances to come to repentance and become a positive influence in Israel. Unfortunately, Herod would not repent. Let’s look at those God-given opportunities Herod received and apply them to ourselves. Let’s have Herod’s story encourage us to listen to the witnesses of truth in our lives and be faithful in giving truth to others.

1. The Witness of John the Baptist – In this event of Christ, we have the closing chapter of John the Baptist, the forerunner of Jesus. He had fulfilled his mission, preaching repentance in preparation for the coming kingdom. He had introduced Jesus the Messiah as “the Lamb of God” who had come to take away the sin of the world. In a period of doubt concerning the person of Jesus, John had sent messengers to Christ and the gentle reply gave John the confidence to continue in His ministry, probably now having moved to the dungeon of Herod. John was faithful until his death. Please remember that John had Holy Spirit power from his mother’s womb. He spoke truth with the power of the Spirit on his life. Herod did not respond and repent, **but John was faithful.**

2. The Witness of the Scriptures – John the Baptist used the truth of the Scriptures to bring repentance. Not only with Herod but with all the people. In Luke 2:4-5 we read from a message of John, “As it is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet, saying, The voice of one crying in the wilderness, prepare he the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be brought low; and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways shall be made smooth; and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.” These are words from Isaiah 40:3-5. John used the Scriptures. **He was faithful**, yet, Herod rejected the truth of the law, and would not repent.

3. The Witness of Herod’s Conscience – God reminded Herod of right and wrong found within the law of Moses. The Scriptures Herod knew coupled with John’s bold preaching pressed on Herod’s heart. His conscience burned! It should have helped bring him to repentance. He should have cried out with the publicans and soldiers, “what shall I do?” **John had been faithful** but instead, Herod continued to live with a troubled, unrepentant heart.

4. The Witness of Jesus – In Luke 23:6-12, we have the account of Jesus standing before Herod at His trial. Approximately twelve months had gone by since Herod had heard of Jesus, and the past fear of Christ seemed to have passed. Now the Scriptures tell us that Herod only desired to be entertained with a miracle or great deed of Jesus, but Jesus stood silent! **John the Baptist had been faithful** in boldly preaching the Scriptures to Herod; Herod’s conscience had been pricked, but Herod had consistently rejected the truth. And when the very essence of Truth stood before Herod it was silent!

Let’s learn two things here:

- 1) **Man can choose** to reject Jesus, reject righteousness, reject repentance, reject the truth, reject their conscience, and in doing so doom themselves to a Christless eternity. Herod had amazing opportunities; both John the Baptist and Jesus the Messiah stood before him. But His lust for power, poor companions, weak choices, and refusal to repent of his sin gave him an eternity in hell! In Herod’s case, the day came when God stopped giving him any more opportunities. Gen. 6:3; Rom. 1:20-22, 28-32
- 2) **We are to be faithful** to tell others. As John the Baptist was faithful from the wilderness to the prison, and to all people, prominent or plain, his message was the same, the gospel of the kingdom. John didn’t know the final outcome of who would believe and who wouldn’t, but he was a student of the Scriptures, and he would have known these words from Isaiah teaching the truth of God’s heart and strength of His word. Isaiah 55:8-11

“For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, saith the LORD. ⁹For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts. ¹⁰For as the rain cometh down, and the snow from heaven, and returneth not thither, but watereth the earth, and maketh it bring forth and bud, that it may give seed to the sower, and bread to the eater: ¹¹So shall my word be that goeth forth out of my mouth: it shall not return unto me void, but it shall accomplish that which I please, and it shall prosper in the thing whereto I sent it.” Isaiah 55:8-11

It is interesting to note that Herod did have a close associate or relative who was a believer in Christ who later traveled with Paul. (Acts 13:1) Perhaps it was at the time of John’s imprisonment that Manaen repented and understood that Jesus was the Messiah. We never know the influence or who God will use us to touch with truth. So, **we must be faithful**. Faithful with the message of the gospel, faithful with the scriptures, faithful with every opportunity, because God will always save some, even from a palace!