

Introduction

1. In this lesson, we look at the martyrdom of John the Baptist, who was beheaded by Herod Antipas.
 - a. Martyrdom is the giving one's life for one's faith. It is not a thing of the past but something that still happens today.
 - b. ETHIOPIA -Survivors of a massacre at a school in the western Oromia region of Ethiopia reported that at least 54 ethnic Amhara, most of whom are thought to have been Christians, died, according to a body count made after gunmen opened fire on a gathering of about 200. Around 60 armed terrorists, identifying themselves as the Oromo Liberation Army (OLA), swept into Gawa Qunqaa village, Guliso District at around 5 p.m. on November 1, 2020. In the latest attack targeting ethnic Amhara, who are mainly Christian, some survivors were able to flee to a nearby forest while the assailants rounded up women, children and elderly who were unable to run away, before shooting at the defenseless group. . . . This is the latest deadly assault in a spate of massacres in the past month in Ethiopia, which have left several dozen dead, apparently targeting the Amhara, a mainly Christian ethnic group. (Source: barnabasfund; 7 November, 2020 on <https://www.martyrsforchrist.org/news>)
 - c. John the Baptist gave his life faithfully proclaiming God's truth, and Jesus would soon do the same.
2. **Read Mk 6:14-29.**

A. Herod Notices Jesus (14-16)

1. In today's passage, we come to the middle part of another Markan sandwich.
 - a. Remember that last week we laid down the bottom slice of bread in our latest Markan sandwich as Jesus sent out His twelve disciples two-by-two to minister with his authority.
 - b. Next week we will put on the top slice of bread (Mk 6:30) as Jesus' disciples return to report to Him on their ministry before moving on with Him to feed 5000+ people on a hillside.
 - c. The middle of this Markan sandwich addresses the ministry and death of John the Baptist, the forerunner of Jesus.
 - d. The two parts of this Markan sandwich—the disciples' ministry and John the Baptist's ministry and death—are connected.
 - e. James Brooks writes, "The account of Herod's reaction to John and Jesus (6:14-29) is inserted into the account of the mission of the Twelve (6:6b-13,30). The mission of the Twelve may have been one way in which Herod came to know about Jesus. Herod's execution of John suggests the extent to which opposition to the Christian mission may extend. The martyrdom of John anticipated that of Jesus. Disciples of Jesus must be prepared for the supreme sacrifice. Furthermore, the two accounts contrast the indulgence and cruelty of a secular ruler with the dedication and sacrifice of the disciples" (James A. Brooks, *Mark*, 100).
2. Through the preaching and miracle-working of Jesus thus far in His ministry coupled with the multiplication of ministry by the disciples, Jesus and His followers had come to the attention of Herod.
3. Who was "King Herod"? (14)
 - a. He was not a king but ". . . only a tetrarch, the ruler of a fourth part of the nation. When Herod the Great died, the Romans divided his territory among his three sons, and Antipas was made tetrarch of Perea and Galilee" (Warren Wiersbe, *Be Diligent*, 77).
 - b. Part of Herod's interest in Jesus was the fact that Jesus came from and initially ministered in Galilee, which comprised a large part of his tetrarchy.
 - c. "Herod Antipas had married the daughter of King Aretas IV and then had divorced her so he could marry Herodias, the wife of his half-brother, Herod Philip. It was a wicked alliance that was contrary to the law of Moses (Lev. 18:16; 20:21)" (Wiersbe, 77).
 - d. Akin adds, "Herod Antipas had met his niece, Herodias, in Rome. At the time she was married to his half-brother, Herod Philip, making her also his sister-in-law. He evidently seduced her (or she him!), she left her husband, and they married. This was a clear act of adultery and bigamy" (Dainel Akin, *Exalting Jesus in Mark*, 131).
 - e. "In AD 39, Herod Agrippa (Acts 12:1) nephew of Herod Antipas, denounced his uncle to the Roman emperor, and Antipas was deposed and sent into exile" (Wiersbe, 79).

4. Who did people think Jesus really was?
 - a. Jesus will himself ask this question of his disciples in Mk 8:27.
 - b. Some people believed that in Jesus “John the Baptist has been raised from the dead . . .” (14)
 - c. “Others said He is Elijah . . .” (15)
 - d. “. . . And still others claimed He is a prophet . . .” (15)
5. Herod believed that Jesus was John the Baptist raised from the dead. (16)

B. Flashback – Herod and John the Baptist (17-29)

1. So, a flashback is needed for the backstory on John the Baptist ministry, his entanglement with sinful Herod Antipas, and ultimately his murder.
2. John the Baptist had faithfully proclaimed the truth and called people to repentance. (17-18)
 - a. “John is the forerunner of Jesus’ message and ministry. He is also the forerunner of His death” (Akin, 129).
 - b. Remember, “. . . John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. 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” (Mk 1:4-5).
 - c. However, Herod was among those who did not confess sin and was not baptized by John.
 - d. John had continually preached against Herod’s sin of marrying his brother’s wife.
 - e. John spoke truth to power, and power sought to silence him.
 - f. So Herod “. . . gave orders to have John arrested, and he had him bound and put in prison.” (17)
3. The old saying goes, “Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned.” This was the case with Herod’s wife, Herodias. (19)
 - a. Having John quietly put away in prison was not enough for Herodias. She wanted him dead.
 - b. She “nursed a grudge against John and wanted to kill him” (19)
 - c. In spite of her incessant nagging, Herod would not kill John or allow Herodias to assassinate him in prison.
4. Herod “feared (Gk., *phobeo*) John and protected him.” (20)
 - a. Herod knew that John was a “righteous (Gk., *dikaion*) and holy (Gk., *agion*) man.” (20)
 - b. Herod also was “greatly puzzled” (Gk., *polla etorei*) and “liked to listen to him.” (20)
 - 1) In Mk 14:34, this same term “greatly puzzled” is used of Jesus before His crucifixion as He prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane (Wiersbe, 78).
 - 2) It carries a sense of painful suffering and perplexity about what to do. A choice must be made!
 - c. Herod was perplexed by the truth that John spoke but could not or would not apply it to his life and act on it.
5. John the Baptist’s Death (21-29)
 - a. It was Herod’s birthday, and he celebrated with his friends in elaborate, pagan debauchery.
 - b. Among his esteemed guests were “. . . his high officials and military commanders and the leading men of Galilee.” (21)
 - c. Herod lusted not only after his brother’s wife Herodias but also after Salome, his niece and step-daughter, who was the natural daughter of his half-brother Philip and Herodias.
 - 1) We know Salome’s name not from the account in Mark but from Josephus, a Jewish/Roman historian.
 - 2) She was sent in to dance for Herod by her mother Herodias, who had evil intentions.
 - 3) No Jewish or Gentile mother in her right mind would have sent her daughter into such a den of iniquity filled with devious and lustful men.
 - 4) Salome followed her mother’s instruction and danced a seductive dance for Herod and his cronies.
 - d. Herod was so pleased that he made a binding oath in front of his honored guests to give Salome “up to half my kingdom” (23)
 - 1) He made the oath without thinking, most likely in a drunken/lustful stupor, and could not take it back.
 - 2) Wiersbe notes, “The word *oath* in Mark 6:26 is actually in the plural—“for his many oaths sake”—because Herod had repeatedly declared his desire to reward the girl for her performance” (Wiersbe, 78).
 - 3) He would have lost face with his powerful guest had he not granted her what he promised on oath.

- 4) Salome consulted with her mother, who of course wanted only the life of John the Baptist.
- 5) So, Salome, as Herodias' surrogate, asked Herod "to give me right now the head of John the Baptist on a platter." (25)
 - a) There would be no delay in carrying out the execution as she wanted it "right now."
 - b) There would be no deception about his death as his head was to be presented "on a platter."
- e. Herod had no choice but to comply and to do so "immediately" (Gk., *euthus*).
- f. "Herod feared displeasing his wife and losing face with man more than he feared God. Pride took him down, just like it did Satan and Adam" (Akin, 133).
- g. Much like Jesus' later death, John's disciples came to claim and bury his body after his execution (29).
 - 1) Wiersbe concludes, "John's death was the first of three notable violent deaths in the history of Israel. The other two are the crucifixion of Christ and the stoning of Stephen (Acts 7). . . . No doubt the report of John's death deeply stirred our Lord, for He knew that one day His own life would be laid down" (Wiersbe, 78-79).
 - 2) Akin further concludes, "Isn't it amazing that John the Baptist was declared by Jesus to be the last and greatest prophet? Yet John died in his early 30s, never performed a single miracle, and had a public ministry that lasted only about a year. . . . John lost his head, but Herod and Herodias lost their souls. In the end there is no question who won and who lost. Bad things do happen to good people. But great things happen to godly people who put it all on the line, even their head on a platter, for the truth of God's Word and the glory of His name!" (Akin, 134)

C. Reflections

1. What is the most recent example you have heard of a martyr for Christ? What is the most recent example of persecution you heard of in your own country? (Akin, 134)
2. What unbiblical practices in your own country are popular, so that if you spoke out against them, you would be persecuted? Should you speak out anyway? (Akin, 135)
3. Is there any person or leader you fear more than God? Are you tempted to protect your own reputation rather than honoring God? (Akin, 135)
4. How would you explain to a non-Christian why bad things happen to good people and good things happen to bad people? How would you explain it in a Sunday school class? (Akin, 135)
5. Is it harder to live a long, faithful life for the Lord and die in old age or to live a short, faithful life and become a martyr like John the Baptist?