

# **FOLLOWING IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF JOHN THE BAPTIST**

## **An Exposition of Mark 6:14-29**

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### **INTRODUCTION**

There are two reasons why it is especially fitting that Mark 6:14-29 is the sermon passage for today – Sunday November 1. First, November 1, 2020 is the International Day of Prayer for the Persecuted Church – and our passage tells us about the martyrdom of one of God's faithful servants. Second, November 1, 2020 is the Sunday before the general election that is taking place in our country on Tuesday November 3 – and our passage tells us about how a political ruler put that faithful servant to death. What will it cost us to be the Lord's faithful witnesses in the midst of a harsh political and troubled cultural climate?

There is a sense in which Mark 6:14-29 seems like an interruption within Chapter 6. In verses 7-13, Jesus sent His twelve apostles on short mission trips to the towns and villages of northern Israel. Then in verse 30 we are told: "The apostles returned to Jesus and told him all that they had done and taught." (Mark 6:30) So today's passage – Mark 6:14-29 – is sandwiched between the sending and the returning of the apostles. But of course the passage is ultimately not an interruption – it is placed precisely where the Holy Spirit intends it to be placed. And so one of the lessons is very clear: John was sent by the Lord, the apostles were sent by the Lord, and the church is sent by the Lord – and carrying out the Lord's mission is going to cost you your life, just as it cost John his life.

### **THE SCRIPTURAL TEXT**

Holy Scripture says:

<sup>14</sup> 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.”<sup>15</sup> But others said, “He is Elijah.” And others said, “He is a prophet, like one of the prophets of old.”<sup>16</sup> But when Herod heard of it, he said, “John, whom I beheaded, has been raised.”<sup>17</sup> 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.<sup>18</sup> For John had been saying to Herod, “It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife.”<sup>19</sup> And Herodias had a grudge against him and wanted to put him to death. But she could not,<sup>20</sup> 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.

<sup>21</sup> But an opportunity came when Herod on his birthday gave a banquet for his nobles and military commanders and the leading men of Galilee.<sup>22</sup> For when Herodias's daughter came in and danced, she pleased Herod and his guests. And the king said to the girl, “Ask me for whatever you wish, and I will give it to you.”<sup>23</sup> And he vowed to her, “Whatever you ask me, I will give you, up to half of my kingdom.”<sup>24</sup> And she went out and said to her mother, “For what should I ask?” And she said, “The head of John the Baptist.”<sup>25</sup> 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.”<sup>26</sup> And the king was exceedingly sorry, but because of his oaths and his guests he did not want to break his word to her.<sup>27</sup> And immediately the king sent an executioner with orders to bring John's head. He went and beheaded him in the prison<sup>28</sup> and brought his head on a platter and gave it to the girl, and the girl gave it to her mother.<sup>29</sup> When his disciples heard of it, they came and took his body and laid it in a tomb. (Mark 6:14-29)

### **A BRIEF OVERVIEW OF THE PASSAGE**

This passage subdivides quite easily into two parts. In verses 14-16, we learn about King Herod's unsuccessful effort to identify who Jesus is. In verses 17-29, we learn about King's Herod's unsuccessful effort to manage his baggage of mixed motivations – he didn't want to put John to death, but he ended up doing so anyway. Of course, none of this is to suggest that the passage is mainly about King Herod – but King Herod's thoughts and actions form the backdrop to the passage.

Who was King Herod? The Herods were a prominent family of rulers in Israel during this time period. There was a King Herod – Herod the Great – in Matthew

2. Herod the Great ordered the slaughter of the innocent children in Bethlehem in his attempt to kill the Messiah. There was another King Herod – Herod Agrippa, a grandson of Herod the Great – in Acts 12. Herod Agrippa persecuted the church, killed the apostle James, and imprisoned Peter – although at the end of Acts 12 “the Lord struck him [Herod] down” because of the king’s pride (Acts 12:23). The King Herod of Mark 6 – thirty years after the events of Matthew 2 and some years before the events of Acts 12 – is different from the other two. The King Herod of Mark 6 is Herod Antipas – a son of Herod the Great, and an uncle of Herod Agrippa. Herod Antipas was the political ruler in Galilee (northern Palestine). He was part of a family that was addicted to its own power, glory, and self-preservation, and that was willing to employ violence and murder against perceived threats.

Herod the Great (Matthew 2) had attempted to kill Jesus. Herod Agrippa (Acts 12) had succeeded at killing the apostle James. And Herod Antipas (Mark 6) had recently succeeded at killing John the Baptist – and it haunted him. It appears that Herod Antipas had a tenderer conscience than some of his relatives. And he knew that John the Baptist was a “righteous and holy man” (v. 20). It is never a good idea to get yourself on the wrong side of someone you know to be righteous and holy, but wicked people like Herod can’t help themselves. But Herod knew, and his heart was troubled.

### **HEROD ANTIPAS TRIES TO MAKE SENSE OF JESUS’ MINISTRY (v. 14-16)**

So what is happening, as we come to verses 14-16, is that King Herod heard about the ministry of Jesus. The “it” in “King Herod heard of it” (v. 14) probably refers generally to Jesus’ ministry (His teaching, healing, and miracles) that have been recorded in Chapters 1-6. The word about Jesus was getting out, and it was obvious that Jesus was no ordinary man. And Herod, being the ruler of the region and being interested in holding onto his power and wanting to understand any possible threats against it, sought to understand who this Jesus man was.

Herod wasn’t the only person interested in understanding Jesus – many people, in fact, were attempting to make sense of Jesus. Earlier in Chapter 4 Jesus told us that outsiders are unable to perceive and understand the realities of God’s kingdom (Mark 4:11-12) – which means that they will not be able to perceive and understand the reality of Jesus as the true King. But such men will make their attempts anyway, and that’s what we see happening in verses 14-15.

One possible answer about the mystery of Jesus' identity is given in the middle of verse 14: "John the Baptist has been raised from the dead. That is why these miraculous powers are at work in him [Jesus]." *John the Baptist Version 1.0* had an influential ministry, but it was a ministry limited to preaching, baptizing, and discipling. There is no report of John the Baptist performing any miracles. But they reasoned that *John the Baptist Version 2.0* – the resurrected and upgraded version – might have "miraculous powers". If he could conquer the grave, then surely he could also conquer demons and diseases.

A second possible answer about the mystery of Jesus' identity is given at the beginning of verse 15: "He is Elijah." The prophet Malachi, at the end of the Old Testament, had said that Elijah would return "before the great and awesome day of the LORD comes" (Malachi 4:5). Some guessed that Jesus was *Elijah Version 2.0*.

A third possible answer is given in the middle of verse 15: "He is a prophet, like one of the prophets of old." There was a long line of teaching prophets throughout Israel's history. And some of those prophets, like Moses and Elijah and Elisha, were not only messengers who spoke on God's behalf, but also men through whom God accomplished miracles. So maybe Jesus is another prophet like that.

We know, of course, that they were all wrong in their speculations. We know that Jesus is God's beloved Son. We know that Jesus is God-in-human-form. We know that Jesus is the Lord of glory who has authority over the spiritual universe and over the physical universe. We know this, because Mark has been telling us this in Chapters 1-6. But the people who were speculating in verses 14-15 didn't know this, and they're doing their best to make sense of Jesus in view of their limited information. But limited information doesn't cut it when we're talking about Jesus. We need the blinders removed from our eyes, and we need the light of divine truth shining on our hearts – otherwise we will never succeed at knowing Jesus.

As King Herod considered the possibilities, he opted for *Option #1*, but with a very sobering twist: "But when Herod heard of it, he said, "John, whom I beheaded, has been raised."" (v. 16) It cannot be soothing to the mind to think that the person whom you killed unjustly has come back to life and is now brokering in

“miraculous powers” right beneath your nose. That would be profoundly unsettling to your conscience and to your sense of well-being.

Of course, Herod’s speculation was entirely wrong – and one of the purposes of this passage is to tell us that Jesus is *not* John the Baptist risen from the dead. Who is Jesus? He is *not* John the Baptist Version 2.0. All the way back in Chapter 1, John made it clear that Jesus is someone else, someone far greater: “After me comes he who is mightier than I, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. I have baptized you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.” (Mark 1:7-8)

As for John – by the time we get into Chapter 6 – he is dead, and he remains dead. And now we are taken into the backstory of how John died in the first place. As we journey through verses 17-29, we get some remarkable lessons about discipleship. For in many ways John’s story represents what it means to follow Jesus in an unruly world.

## **HEROD ANTIPAS’ DEALINGS WITH JOHN THE BAPTIST (v. 17-29)**

### ***The Ministry of John the Baptist***

When John came onto the scene, he “[proclaimed] a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.” (Mark 1:4) John was earnest about calling all kinds of people to repentance for all kinds of sins.

He had some tough words for the religious bigwigs: “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruit in keeping with repentance.... Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees. Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.” (Matthew 3:7-10)

John said to people with excess wealth: “Whoever has two tunics is to share with him who has none, and whoever has food is to do likewise.” (Luke 3:11)

He said to tax collectors: “Collect no more than you are authorized to do.” (Luke 3:13)

He said to soldiers: “Do not extort money from anyone by threats or by false accusation, and be content with your wages.” (Luke 3:14)

Repentance is a profound internal transformation that takes place in your heart and mind, but it doesn't remain in your heart and mind. True repentance is an energizing force that flows outward in terms of character and demeanor, action and speech. Repentance is expressed in such things as contentment and generosity, honesty and integrity, gentleness and kindness. Repentance is also expressed in sexual purity and marital fidelity: "For you may be sure of this, that everyone who is sexually immoral or impure, or who is covetous (that is, an idolater), has no inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and God." (Ephesians 5:5)

### ***John Confronts Herod***

Sexual immorality – and specifically adultery – was one of the sins that had caused King Herod to stumble. Herod had a brother named Philip, and Philip's wife was named Herodias. Philip and Herodias should have remained faithful to their marriage vows, and Herod should have respected the sanctity of his brother's and sister-in-law's matrimonial bond. But he didn't. Herod wanted Herodias for himself, and apparently Herodias was happy to ditch her husband for her husband's brother. And so they did what was not lawful to do: they obtained an adulterous marriage and shacked up in the royal palace (see Leviticus 18:16 for biblical instruction regarding this situation).

Now John, being an equal opportunity confronter of sin, did not hesitate to shine the spotlight on the king's grievous sin. Verse 18: "For John had been saying to Herod, "It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife.""

### ***Herod's Torn Response***

Now John's rebuke must have annoyed the wicked king. In fact, Luke tells us that John had reprovved Herod "for all the evil things that Herod had done" (Luke 3:19). So Herod's adultery was one sin among many sins of which he was guilty. And godless rulers really don't like it when popular preachers rail against them. But it is interesting to learn in Mark 6 that for Herod's part, he had something of a soft spot for John. He was a wicked man with a half-tender conscience, and he was reluctant to do violence to John. But Herodias had no such soft spot for the obnoxious preacher: "And Herodias had a grudge against him and wanted to put him to death" (v. 19). Those who refuse to repent are eager to silence the preacher, sometimes by killing him.

When we look at verses 17-20, it seems likely that Herod imprisoned John in order to appease Herodias *and* protect John. Verse 17: “For it was Herod who had sent and seized John and bound him in prison *for the sake of Herodias*” (v. 17, italics added). And verses 19-20 tell us that “Herodias... wanted to put him [John] to death. But she could not, for Herod feared John, knowing that he was a righteous and holy man, and he kept him safe.” That could possibly mean that Herod kept John safe *while* John was in prison. But it might actually imply that Herod kept John safe *by* having him in prison.

But whatever the exact details might have been, what we learn here is that Herod was a complex figure who was torn between two loyalties. On the one hand, Herod had an obvious loyalty to Herodias, his unlawful wife that he gained through adultery. He acted *for her sake* – to appease her, to placate her, to keep the peace on the home front. But on the other hand, Herod felt a sense of loyalty to John because Herod understood that John “was a righteous and holy man” (v. 20). “Herod feared John” (v. 20). Herod didn’t want to do violence to a holy prophet. Think about it: if you have any proper sense of objective right and wrong, righteousness and unrighteousness, holiness and unholiness, then you really don’t want to play the fool and kill a man who represents goodness and truth. So Herod “kept him [John] safe” (v. 20). Moreover, Herod enjoyed listening to John: “When he [Herod] heard him [John], he was greatly perplexed, and yet he heard him gladly.” (v. 20) Even though Herod didn’t understand much of what John taught, Herod found himself captivated and drawn in to what John was saying.

### ***The World is Full of Herods***

Before we go on, let me just pause and say that the world is full of Herods. Like Herod, they hear gospel preachers gladly. Like Herod, they know that nonsense Christians are righteous and holy people. Like Herod, they know that they have better things to do than to throw stones at God’s people. Like Herod, they think that biblical religion is interesting and thought-provoking. And yet, like Herod, they are stuck in their sin and they refuse to turn away from it. They like their worldly power and worldly pleasure a little bit too much. They prefer the comfort of their adultery. They might fear John, but they don’t fear God! And so they never have the courage of their half-formed convictions. They are always on the fence, leaning the wrong way. But when push comes to shove, given the right

circumstances, they will persecute God's people. They are reluctant persecutors, but they are persecutors nonetheless.

The aggressive persecutors like Herodias look for an opportunity to manipulate the reluctant persecutors like Herod into wholesale violence. And opportunities are sure to come when the reluctant persecutors let down their guard – for example, when they're having a good ol' birthday party in the presence of all the cultural elites: "But an opportunity came [i.e., for Herodias] when Herod on his birthday gave a banquet for his nobles and military commanders and the leading men of Galilee." (v. 21)

### ***A Birthday Party Turns Deadly***

Up until this moment, Herodias "could not" (v. 19) succeed at getting John killed, because Herod "kept [John] safe" (v. 20). "But an opportunity came" for her at Herod's birthday banquet. The eating was good, the drinking was exceptional, and the atmosphere was merry. As glee filled the party hall, "Herodias's daughter" – Herod's step-daughter – "came in and danced, [and] she pleased Herod and his guests." (v. 22) Now to be fair, Mark doesn't tell us the details of the dance. It may have been alluring and provocative, but we don't know for sure. At the same time, it is highly unlikely that in this setting the dance was something like a wholesome ballet from a five-year-old girl. In fact, my understanding of this banquet is that it was a *men's banquet*, and that socially significant women would not have been present – in fact, note that Herodias herself was not in the banquet hall (clearly implied in v. 24). In any case, the dancing entertained and captivated Herod and the other men who were present.

Now at this point, as Herod was overtaken by the entertainment – and as "Herod and his guests" were possibly drunk with wine *and* drunk with lust – calm reasoning and judicious thinking left the room. Herod, like the demoniac of Chapter 5 before he was delivered, is *not* in his right mind – and he is prepared to issue a blank check and throw half of his kingdom away and violate the precepts of his own conscience, all because there is a pretty girl dancing in front of him. Sin is insane. So the king, in high spirits, says to the girl: "Ask me for whatever you wish, and I will give it to you." (v. 22) "And he vowed to her, "Whatever you ask me, I will give you, up to half of my kingdom." (v. 23) Do these promises sound familiar?

When the courageous Queen Esther went uninvited into the throne room in order to seek the king's help on behalf of her people, "she won favor in his sight" (Esther 5:2). "And the king said to her, "What is it, Queen Esther? What is your request? It shall be given you, even to the half of my kingdom." (Esther 5:3) Promising "up to half of [the] kingdom" is a way of saying: *I'll do anything for you!*

As for the other promise, Jesus told us: "[Ask] whatever you wish, and it will be done for you." (John 15:7) Of course, there is a theological and moral context to Jesus' promise: "*If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you.*" (John 15:7, italics added) And in the case of Queen Esther, we also understand that there is a moral weightiness to the situation, and the invisible hand of God's providence is stretched forth to preserve His people.

By way of comparison, Herod's promise to his step-daughter is frivolous. A ruler is obliged to engage in careful reasoning, logical thinking, and moral discernment. But Herod has thrown care and caution to the wind, and he stands in gross violation of the principles of leadership that were given to us by the mother of King Lemuel. She had taught her son:

"Do not give your strength to women, your ways to those who destroy kings. It is not for kings, O Lemuel, it is not for kings to drink wine, or for rulers to take strong drink, lest they drink and forget what has been decreed and pervert the rights of all the afflicted." (Proverbs 31:3-5)

Herod stands as a clear example of what a leader should *not* do. He has given too much of his strength to women – first to Herodias, then to her daughter. He makes a politically momentous decision in the midst of a party while he is being entertained by a dancer. His decision is to hand a blank check to the dancer – and she cashes the check in a way that leaves the king "exceedingly sorry" (v. 26). But the king has no one to blame but himself.

After the king invites his step-daughter to request anything she wants, she consults with her mother Herodias, and finally she sees her opportunity to slay John the Baptist (v. 24). Thus Herodias' daughter asks for "the head of John the Baptist" to be served up "on a platter" (v. 25). This request is utterly perverse. One commentator suggests that the girl, presumably caught up in the wickedness

of her mother, is essentially saying to Herod: “Let’s make this a really wicked dinner party!”[1]

Herod was “exceedingly sorry” about the girl’s request, because there was part of him that really “feared John” and he didn’t want to murder “a righteous and holy man” (v. 20). At the end of the day, though, Herod feared others more than he feared John. He had made a vow to his step-daughter in the presence of “his guests”, and breaking his promise would be bad politics and would damage his ego (v. 26). So, acting against his better judgment, he ordered that John be beheaded and that his head be brought to the girl (v. 27-28). The deed was done: John’s head was given to the girl who in turn “gave it to her mother” (v. 28).

A birthday banquet was turned into the scene of a vicious beheading. A foolish invitation to request “up to half of [Herod’s] kingdom” turned into the murder of God’s messenger who had come to prepare people for God’s kingdom. And so it is that the partying and unprincipled world treats God’s faithful prophet with contempt. But the members of God’s family show up and treat their deceased brother with the respect he deserves: “When his [John’s] disciples heard of it, they came and took his body and laid it in a tomb.” (v. 29)

The cold blood of Herodias the aggressive persecutor was satisfied, but the conflicted heart of Herod the reluctant persecutor was haunted by the wicked deed – and months later he found himself thinking, “John, whom I beheaded, has been raised.” And perhaps Herod found himself missing the pleasant conversations that he once had with John the Baptist.

### **APPLICATION: WE MUST FOLLOW IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF JOHN THE BAPTIST**

There are a number of important applications that flow out of this passage. All of these applications are inter-related and help us to see the world rightly. And these applications also help us to see our own God-given role in our world.

#### ***We Need to Understand the Spiritual Conflict within the World***

This passage is a miniature picture of the conflict within the world at large. On the one hand, you have God’s kingdom – a spiritual kingdom that has broken into this present world. John the Baptist is representative of God’s kingdom. In fact, John proclaimed: “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” (Matthew 3:2) John the Baptist was a preacher of righteousness whose main job was to prepare the

people to receive the Lord. On the other hand, you have the kingdoms of this present world that are at odds with God's kingdom. King Herod, Herodias, Herodias' daughter, and the "nobles and military commanders and the leading men of Galilee" (Mark 6:21) are representative of a worldly kingdom. The mini-portrait of Herod's world in verses 17-28 is unflattering: committing adultery, holding a grudge, putting a righteous man in prison, throwing parties, making foolish vows, and co-opting your daughter in a murderous plot. The world is not all right – it is, in fact, all wrong. And the only way out is for divine grace to rescue you out of the world.

Now as you can see, there is conflict between God's kingdom and the world's kingdom. John confronts Herod by speaking truth: "It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife." (Mark 6:18) Herod retaliates by "[seizing] John and [bounding] him in prison" (v. 17). And eventually Herodias gets her revenge by influencing Herod to kill the prophet. The weapons of God's kingdom are spiritual weapons: truth and righteousness and sacrificial love, lived and proclaimed. The weapons of the world's kingdom are carnal weapons: handcuffs, prison cells, and sharp swords. When Jesus was being arrested in the garden of Gethsemane, one of his disciples "drew his sword and struck the servant of the high priest and cut off his ear." (Matthew 26:51) Jesus rebuked his disciple: "Put your sword back into its place. For all who take the sword will perish by the sword." (Matthew 26:52) God's kingdom is *not* of this world – and therefore we fight with weapons that are *not* of this world.

### ***We Need to Have Three Things Settled in Our Minds***

So if you are a disciple of Jesus, then you need to get at least three things settled in your mind.

First, *don't be surprised at the worldliness of the world*. Imagine a possible headline in *The Galilean Times* daily newspaper: SEX OVER RELIGION: ADULTEROUS KING MANIPULATED BY UNLAWFUL WIFE AND HER DAUGHTER-ENTERTAINER TO KILL FAMOUS BAPTIST PREACHER. Now transpose that headline into a 21<sup>st</sup> century headline: SEX OVER RELIGION: ADULTEROUS POLITICIANS MANIPULATED BY SEXUALLY INTOXICATED WORLD TO SUPPRESS RELIGIOUS FREEDOM. Old news, new news – "there is nothing new under the sun" (Ecclesiastes 1:9). Americans, so many of them reluctant persecutors with half-tender consciences like Herod, have been pressured by the aggressive

persecutors to exalt sexual liberty and decimate religious liberty. Disappointing, but not surprising. Don't be surprised at the worldliness of the world.

Second, *be resolved to proclaim the truth to the world*. That's what John did: he spoke truth to all kinds of people – to the powerful Herod, to the powerful Pharisees and Sadducees, to tax collectors, to soldiers, and to a large number of very ordinary people. He proclaimed the nearness of God's kingdom, the beauty of God's righteousness, the certainty of God's judgment, the necessity of heartfelt repentance, and God's gracious offer to forgive our sins. Most important of all, John proclaimed Jesus: "Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" (John 1:29)

Friends, our world is stuck in an intricate web of lies, and sinners are always ready to tell one more lie in order to make the deceitful web seem okay. Our job is to present the truth about Jesus to a confused and dying world. We don't present the truth callously, but compassionately. We don't present the truth contemptuously (as if our goal is to beat down), but winsomely (because our goal is to see fallen sinners restored to their dignity as image-bearers of God). We don't present the truth hypocritically (in which our speech is mere talk unaccompanied by action), but genuinely as people who have been transformed by the Word. We *practice* the truth and *proclaim* it. We are *doers* of the Word and *declarers* of it.

Third, *be ready to suffer and die for your loyalty to the truth – for your allegiance to Jesus*. Since we are not surprised at the worldliness and grudges and spite of the world, and since we cannot escape our responsibility to call the world to repentance, then we must not be surprised when the world in its folly schemes to silence us and kill us. According to Romans 1, sinners suppress the truth. Our job is to expose the truth. This results in a clash. Sinners who refuse to repent will suppress the speakers of truth – by slandering them, by canceling them, by imprisoning them, by killing them. Brothers and sisters, you need to put your spiritual armor on!

Think about it: when the New Testament begins, we meet a preacher named John the Baptist whose job was to introduce the Lord Jesus to the world. What happened to John? Arrested, imprisoned, and beheaded. And what happened to Jesus? Arrested, beaten, and crucified. Are you expecting to coast? In Chapter 4,

Jesus told us that we should expect “tribulation or persecution [to arise] on account of the word” (Mark 4:17). In Chapter 6, Jesus encountered resistance in His hometown (Mark 6:1-6). And in Chapter 8 He will tell us,

“If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel’s will save it. For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his soul? For what can a man give in return for his soul? For whoever is ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of him will the Son of Man also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels.”  
(Mark 8:34-38)

The choice is clear: either you will attempt to preserve your life and your reputation in the eyes of the world *and* you will be esteemed by the world but disowned by the Lord; *or* you will willingly share in the sufferings of Christ and the sufferings of John the Baptist as you live and proclaim the truth *and* you will be disowned by the world but honored by the Lord.

On his birthday of all days, Herod sealed his pact with evil and plunged himself on the path of death. But on his death-day, John finished his course as a faithful man who sealed his faith with his own blood. The world held John in contempt, but “[precious] in the sight of the LORD is the death of his saints” (Psalm 116:15). As for you, you must decide whether you are going to play games like Herod, or run the race like John. Today is the day – choose well!

### **THE GLORIOUS TRUTH OF THE GOSPEL**

Yes, John sealed his faith with his own blood, but he was saved by the blood of another. In a stroke of literary genius, the Holy Spirit has foreshadowed the glorious truth of the gospel through this passage about John. Think about how John foreshadows Jesus.

John was a preacher whose words cut to the heart and got him in trouble with the bigwigs. Jesus was a preacher whose words cut to the heart and got him in trouble with the bigwigs.

John was arrested by the political authorities. Jesus was arrested by the religious authorities and then handed over to the political authorities.

John's fate was decided, humanly speaking, in a mockery of justice: a little dancing, a foolish vow, and a vindictive woman. Jesus' fate was also decided, human speaking, in a mockery of justice: false accusations, envious religious leaders, and a manipulated and loud mob.

John was known to Herod as a "righteous and holy man" (v. 20), but Herod had him killed anyway, because Herod wished to satisfy his family and entourage. Jesus was known to Pilate as an innocent man who didn't deserve to die (Mark 15:14), but Pilate had him killed anyway, because Pilate "[wished] to satisfy the crowd" (Mark 15:15).

After John was beheaded, his followers "came and took his body and laid it in a tomb." After Jesus was crucified, the honorable Joseph of Arimathea "[took] him down, wrapped him in the linen shroud and laid him in a tomb" (Mark 15:46).

Do you see?

But at the point of their tombs is where the similarity ends. This kingdom of God, which involves so much opposition and suffering, looks beyond death to resurrection and glory. After John was "laid... in a tomb," he remained there. No resurrection for John until the end of the age! But after Jesus was "laid... in a tomb," something earth-shaking took place: on the third day, the tomb was empty, and the Lord was risen and alive forevermore (Mark 16:1-7).

By the wise design of God the Father Almighty, the beloved Son had entered into the darkness of death. As the Lamb of God, He shed His blood as the all-sufficient payment for the sins of His people. And as the King of glory, He shattered the bonds of death and secured eternal life for everyone who trusts in Him.

And the question is: which banquet table will you feast at? At the banquet table of the world – famous people, cheap entertainment, foolish scheming, moral corruption, drunk on the blood of the saints? Or will you feast at the Lord's banquet table – where there is no silliness, but there is serious joy because the

one Righteous Man in the universe gave Himself in love and laid down His life in order to win His bride?

Herod attempted to save face at John's expense. Jesus saves us at His own expense.

Let us pray.

#### **ENDNOTES**

[1] James W. Voelz, *Mark 1:1–8:26 (Concordia Commentary)*. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2013: p. 410.

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