

## **The Murder of the Greatest Prophet**

Scripture: Mark 6:14–29

Code: 41-29

We come now to Mark chapter 6 in our wonderful trip through the gospel, the story of the Lord's life from Mark, from his perspective, and we arrive at verse 14 in chapter 6. And we're going to be looking at verses 14 to 29, which is a fascinating incident. It is the account of the execution of John the Baptist, the forerunner to the Messiah and the last Old Testament prophet and the man of whom Jesus said, "He was the greatest man who ever lived up until his time." The greatest man - the greatest prophet of all before Christ. This is the story of His execution.

And by the way, it is the only account in the gospel of Mark that is not about Jesus. Every other account is about our Lord Himself. This alone, an account of someone else, not just anyone but John the Baptist. Not only the forerunner of our Lord but His cousin. The story is a riveting story, to put it mildly. Before we look at the story, just a little bit of background. If you go through the Old Testament and look at the history of Israel, come into the New Testament and continue to follow the history of Israel, and then bring it up to the very hour in which we live, you would realize that this is the most privileged people in human history.

Why? Because they were chosen by God to be the recipients of divine revelation. To them was given the Scripture, the Covenants, they were adopted as God's special people. To them were sent the prophets, to them the gospel was first preached. It is the Jews whom God used to write the Old Testament and to write the New Testament. This is a great privilege. What they did with this privilege, of course, is the tragedy of all tragedies, the ultimate tragedy of any people, to have such immense privilege and to turn against the very God who gave them that privilege.

The story of Israel is the story of the most highly privileged people who ever lived and therefore the most highly responsible people who ever lived and a people who wasted their responsibility. Worst than that, turned against the very God who gave them that privilege to such a severe degree that not only did they reject what the prophets said as they spoke to them for God, they killed the prophets. And they started killing the prophets very early in their history, and they kept killing the prophets until finally they killed the last of the Old Testament prophets, Zechariah, son of Barachiah, and they killed him somewhere near the temple itself, Jesus said.

It was five hundred years later that the very final prophet and the greatest prophet, John the Baptist, showed up and they stood by while he also was viciously murdered. Now, it was only a preview to what they would do to the prophet above all prophets, the very Messiah, the Son of God, the Lord Jesus Christ. The most heinous, devastating behavior imaginable is to be the nation chosen by God to receive His revelation, all His promises and covenants, and to reject that revelation and then regularly kill the messengers who brought that revelation. That is what they did.

Before we look at Mark, I want you to listen to me as I read the words of our Lord Jesus, which He spoke in the final week of His life to the leaders of Israel. He said this: "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites" - Matthew 23:29 - "for you build the tombs of the prophets and adorn the

monuments of the righteous and you say, 'If we had been living in the days of our fathers, we would not have been partners with them in shedding the blood of the prophets.'"

The Jewish leaders and people in Jesus' day were well aware that their ancestors had murdered the prophets, the messengers of God, and they claimed that "We would never have done that, we're better than they."

"So you testify against yourselves that you are indeed the sons of those who murdered the prophets." And why does He say that? Because He knows they are at that moment bringing to fruition the plot to kill Him. "Fill up, then, the measure of the guilt of your fathers. Go ahead and fill it up, you serpents, you brood of snakes, how will you escape the sentence of hell?" And then our Lord, having looked back, looks forward. "I am sending you prophets and wise men and scribes," those would be the New Testament preachers. "Some of them you will kill and crucify, some of them you will scourge in your synagogues and persecute from city to city so that upon you may fall the guilt of all the righteous blood shed on earth."

And then this pensive conclusion: "Jerusalem, Jerusalem, who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her. Behold, your house is left to you desolate." This is the most amazing, astounding, shocking indictment ever to be rendered on a people in human history. You, the chosen people, have systematically and consistently, through your entire history, refused to obey the revelation of God, and you have killed the messengers who brought that revelation. And now he says, "You'll keep doing it. You'll do it to the apostles and the prophets and those that come after them to preach the gospel."

The culmination of the killing of the prophets of the Old Testament era is given to us in this text as it records for us the execution of John the Baptist. The Jews rejected Jesus, we know that, and eventually, of course, they cried for His blood and said, "Crucify Him, crucify Him, we'd rather have Barabbas released to us," a common criminal. They rejected Jesus, but they also rejected John the Baptist. In fact, that's a package deal. If you reject Jesus, then it's clear that you have rejected John because John the Baptist was the prophet who pointed to Jesus and said, "Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world."

It was John the Baptist who said, "I must decrease and He must increase." It was John the Baptist who said, "He is far greater than I, I'm not even worthy to loose the strings on His sandals." So if you reject Jesus, you have rejected John. If you reject John, you've rejected Jesus. If they had received John the Baptist as a true prophet, if they had received his message as God's true Word, of necessity they would have had to receive Jesus Christ of whom John spoke. You receive them both, or you reject them both.

Well, they rejected them both and both were murdered. Before us in the text in Mark 6 is a monumental account of the murder of John the Baptist. It is a preview of the murder of Jesus Christ. And though the Jews didn't actually kill John the Baptist with their own hands, Herod did. And though the Jews didn't actually kill Jesus with their own hands, the Romans did. Still, the Jews stood by while the murders occurred. The story of John the Baptist's murder is drama. It is as dramatic as any story in the New Testament, perhaps only exceeded by the story of the crucifixion of our Lord Himself. It is, at the same time, an unbelievable soap opera of intrigue, iniquity, rebellion.

Now, by the time you get to chapter 6, John the Baptist is already in prison. Mark 1:14 says that John the Baptist had been arrested and put into prison. Compared to Luke 3:19 and 20, this would indicate that it was soon after the temptation and baptism of Christ that John was arrested. He is then a prisoner and he's been a prisoner for a long time, certainly over a year in prison. That's where he's been sitting under the incarcerating power of Herod. In this text, we're going to read the account of his execution.

Before we do that, we need to understand what triggers this text and this record itself. Let me read it to you, starting in verse 14. "And King Herod heard of it." We'll stop right there. Heard of what? What just was recorded. Verse 7, "He summoned the twelve, began to send them out in pairs, gave them authority over the unclean spirits." Verse 12, "They went out and they preached that men should repent, and they were casting out many demons and anointing with oil many sick people and healing them." And we know that they were also able to raise the dead.

Remember last time we talked about the fact that our Lord had done everything Himself, all the miracles and all the preaching. But in the final sweep through Galilee for the third and last time, visiting all the towns and villages, He multiplied the messengers and multiplied the power by twelve, sending out the twelve apostles. He delegated His power to them, power over demons, disease and death, and He gave them the message, "The Kingdom of God, preach repentance and entrance into the Kingdom of God by faith in me, the Messiah." And they went.

And it was a blitz. It set loose a greater influence for the gospel of Jesus Christ than had occurred prior in the ministry of our Lord, when He was doing it all Himself. Miracles were happening everywhere they went, dead people coming back to life, people with diseases being healed, demons being cast out, and the gospel being preached. There's never been anything like this explosion of miracles, the explosion of gospel preaching, and it led to an expanded buzz all through Galilee. The buzz finally reaches Herod.

Herod lives in the lap of lust and luxury and laziness. Maybe prior to this he was away or maybe he was just indifferent because Tiberius was a place Jesus never visited and that's where he lived. Tiberius was a place where the Jews didn't go because it had been built by Herod on top of a cemetery and they thought it was desecrated ground and wouldn't set foot in it. So whatever secondhand reports may have come to Herod if he was in fact in that city would have been just that, secondhand reports.

But now, when the impact of Jesus has been multiplied by a dozen times, it cannot escape traveling back to him. And so it says, in verse 14, he heard of it - he heard of it, "for His name had become well known." What does that tell you? That everything the disciples were doing, all the preaching, all the healing, all the deliverance was being done in the name of Jesus Christ. Okay? Christ, of course, was the source of power. And I think the twelve made it crystal clear that the power was not theirs. After all, everybody in Galilee would have been familiar with these men and their families. They had lived their whole lives there.

It was a small area. They had never had this kind of power before - even when they were with Jesus, they hadn't had it before. They made sure that everyone knew this was a delegated power and it came from Christ and what they did they did in His name. You can see an illustration of it, Peter and John, two of them, they go into the temple in the third chapter of Acts, they find a lame man and they tell him to get up and walk in the name of Jesus. So it comes back to Herod that this name has

mighty, mighty power and he is concentrating on it maybe for the very first time.

Now, what is happening, this explosion of power has created a buzz that is essentially saying this is not just another prophet. Early, the word was that He's a great prophet, that's what it says in Luke 7:16. But they were getting beyond that. While prophets in the past had been known to do a miracle, even a resurrection in the case of Elijah and Elisha, no prophet ever had released this kind of explosive power where everywhere He went, everyone was healed and delivered. There was no real human explanation.

So word began to circulate that maybe this was someone who had come back from the dead with supernatural power. The people were saying, according to verse 14, "John the Baptist has risen from the dead." That's one explanation. They know that John is dead by now. Herod has executed him by this point, they know that. And maybe he's come back from the dead and that's why these miraculous powers are at work in Him. He is really a resurrected - this Jesus is a resurrected John the Baptist.

Well, Herod doesn't like to hear that, not at all. According to Luke 9:7, "Herod the Tetrarch heard of all that was happening, was greatly perplexed because it was said by some that John had risen from the dead and by some that Elijah had appeared and by others that one of the prophets of old had risen again. Herod said, 'I myself had John beheaded. But who is this man about whom I hear such things?'" And he kept trying to see Him. I mean the worst possible scenario for Herod was to have the man he beheaded back from the grave. So he has reason to be concerned.

Some of the people are saying John the Baptist has risen from the dead, verse 15. Others were saying He is Elijah because, you remember, before the arrival of Messiah, Elijah was to come, according to the book of Malachi, the last book we have in our Old Testament. The prophet said that Elijah was to come before the great and terrible day of the Lord, before the Lord arrives, and maybe this is that Elijah who's come, or one of the other prophets. But when Herod heard of it, he kept saying, "John, whom I beheaded, has arisen." Why does he say that?

This, my dear friends, is a projection of his deepest anxiety, his greatest terror, his greatest fear. He knows John, he knows him well. He kept him incarcerated in his own palace fort prison for over a year. He knew him face-to-face. He will give testimony that he was a righteous and godly man. He also knows that he had him executed in a bizarre, lecherous, wicked party to satisfy his own pride and the vengeance of his own wife. And so he projects his worst fear. This must be John back from the dead. Now, that's why he wanted to see him. He knew John. He looked into his face many times. He wanted to check and see if in fact it was John.

Now, that brings us to the point of why did he arrest him and why did he execute him. A little bit of background about Herod. Herod is called in Luke 3:1 a tetrarch - a tetrarch. That means a ruler of a fourth of a region - a ruler of a fourth of a region. Israel had come under Roman power many, many years before. But wherever Rome exercised its power, it had regional rulers who were really serfs under Caesar who did Caesar's bidding. Whatever power they had was minimal and one false move, and they would be replaced, if not exiled, executed.

So they held their little petty territories with a very light hand, although they wielded a heavy hand on top of the residents in the areas where they ruled. They were low-ranking rulers who took the term

king because it tended to elevate them and it was very popular in the East.

The father of this Herod, who really is known as Herod Antipas, the father of this Herod, and there are many Herods in the scriptures, the father is Herod the Great. Herod the Great compounded your difficulty and understanding what Herod you're talking about in the New Testament because he had ten wives. So there were a lot of little Herods running all over the place who ended up in all kinds of situations.

Herod the Great was not a Jew, he was a descendant of Esau. So he's outside the covenant that God made with Jacob, but he had attached himself to the Jewish people and on the surface was a proselyte to Judaism, Herod the Great was. He was given the rule of the whole land of Israel, which he held under Rome for thirty-six years. He was an evil man, a lustful man, a vicious man, a murderous man. He made a will and requested that when he died, Rome would divide the kingdom into four parts and give a part to each of four of his sons. That's what happened.

He died in 4 B.C., if you calculate the calendar, and when he died, it was a very notable moment when he died because it was when he died, remember, that Joseph and Mary brought Jesus back from Egypt because they were fearful of Herod because he slaughtered all the male infants because he heard there was a king from the wise man. So when Herod the Great died, Joseph and Mary and Jesus came back to Nazareth, but the political scene changed. He had been a ruler of a unified Israel and now it was split into those four parts.

Herod the Great had indulged every evil desire one could imagine. Was the worst of men. The temple that stood in the time of Jesus was a product of his building, much to his own ego rather than to the honor of God. He was not impressive, and his death is described by Josephus who lived, I think, to write this about fifty or sixty years later, he died of ulcerated entrails, putrefied and maggot-filled organs, constant convulsions - and foul breath, I would think.

Just prior to his death, Herod the Great had murdered all the people he thought might be a threat to his throne and he murdered his own son, Antipater, five days before his own death. He killed all the Sanhedrin, the seventy ruling elders of Israel. After his death, the kingdom was divided. The first one was Archelaus, one of his sons who received the rule over Judea, Samaria and Idumaea. He only lasted a few years. In 6 A.D., he was deposed and Rome replaced him with a series of governors, one of them being Pilate from 26 to 36, who was critical in the role of execution of our Lord.

The second area of Israel, Ituraea Trachonitis, which is north and east of Galilee, was given to Philip, one of the Philips, there are two of them. We'll meet the other one in a moment. He didn't last very long and he was succeeded by Herod Agrippa. He didn't last very long - in Acts 12, he got eaten by worms. The third area was northwest of Galilee, called - that third area, under the rule of Lysanias, and the fourth one was Galilee itself, all the way down Perea down the east side of the Sea of Galilee, all the way down almost to the Dead Sea, that area went to Herod Antipas and that's who this man is.

Now, all four of these men had their little piece of Israel under the rule of Tiberius Caesar, a wretched, wretched man who succeeded Caesar Augustus. Tiberius was a pedophile of the rankest kind. To describe his life would be a wrong thing to do. Just the discussion itself would be sinful.

Well, Herod Antipas was put under Tiberius in this position, and while the others didn't last very long, he lasted 42 years - 42 years, through the entire life of our Lord Jesus. This man was the petty ruler for Rome over the realm of Galilee. He is the one, then, who has the most to lose if a power movement starts, if a populist movement rises. And like the rest of the Herods, they're all paranoid about their power. And if indeed this is John the Baptist risen from the dead and he has the power to conquer death, then Herod is in some serious trouble - serious trouble. And that's what he is convinced has happened.

Verse 16: "He kept saying, 'John, whom I beheaded, has risen.'" And the egō, the "I" in the Greek, is emphatic. "John, whom I, beheaded." And as I said in Luke 9:9, he kept trying to see Jesus, thinking He was a risen John the Baptist. His intentions were not good. Some Pharisees came to Jesus in Luke 13 one day and said to Him, "Herod wants to see you because He wants to kill you." Killed him once, I'll kill him again.

Jesus said, "He'll never be able to do that, you tell that fox that I will do my ministry today, tomorrow, and the third day until I reach my goal." A kind of Jewish expression to say, "I'm invincible until I've accomplished my purpose - today, tomorrow, and all future days. He's not going to take me like he killed John until my work is done."

Where does this fear come from? Why is he so afraid? Well, because he had him beheaded. That's what he says in verse 16. In verse 17, you have a flashback. The first question is, "Well, how did that happen," right? He had him beheaded. How did that take place? And so the Holy Spirit inspires Mark to tell us the story.

Two points I want to give you: Herod's fear and Herod's folly. His fear is a real fear. It's a panic. It's terror. "A resurrected man that he beheaded is alive and he must be coming after me. I want to see him. I want to see if in fact he is John the Baptist." And you can believe that if he was going to allow - if that was going to be allowed to happen, he would have created an environment in which he would have had his greatest forces on display to do again to John the Baptist what he had done before.

It was not John the Baptist back from the dead, and our Lord never let him have that opportunity until at the very end of his life. Here's the flashback in verse 17 that raised the fear. Herod himself had sent - the point of the "Herod himself" is to say this was a personal act on Herod's part. This wasn't precipitated by any movement among the people. This wasn't asked for by Rome. Herod himself had sent and had John arrested and bound in prison.

Where was John? According to John's gospel, chapter 3, verses 22 to 24, he was down at Aenon near Salim, baptizing by the River Jordan, in the River Jordan. Herod must have sent some men down there and in the middle of the ministry of John the Baptist, the ministry of calling the Jews to repentance and pointing to the Messiah, the Lord Jesus Christ, and saying, "I'm not worthy to loose His shoe laces, He's greater than I, turn to Him," they arrest John the Baptist and they throw Him in prison.

Now, this prison is very likely at a place called Machaerus, near the northeastern shore of the Dead Sea, all the way down in the southern tip of Perea. There, Herod had built this massive stone fortress/palace/prison, it served all those three purposes. John was there, as I said, over a year. We don't know exactly how long, but His disciples, according to Luke 7:18 where allowed to visit him, to

see him there. He had many who had followed him, who had listened to him, for whom he was their preacher and their teacher and they were allowed to visit and talk to him.

The question is: Why did he do this? Why did Herod arrest him in the first place and then behead him? Well, here's the rest of the story. Why did he put him in prison? On account of Herodias, the wife of his brother Philip, because he had married her. Now we're into the soap opera. And if you can follow this the first time, you're better than most. It is so convoluted. Please notice: Herodias is not called his wife but called the wife of his brother Philip. He married her, but the technicality is it was an illegitimate marriage because she should have remained the wife of his brother Philip.

He literally seduced and stole her from his brother. She is not, then, designated as his wife, though they were married. She is legitimately still the wife of his brother, Philip. Scripture in that sense doesn't recognize her marriage to Herod because of its evil nature.

Now, there are some women that you just want to stay away from. Read Proverbs 6 and 7 and you'll meet the style of that kind of woman. Herod was already married, and he was married to a very prominent girl whose father was the king of Nabatean Arabia, another area to the east. His name was Aretas. And the kings made these alliances, these marriages. You're well aware of that even from any form of ancient history. So Herod was married to the daughter of the king of Nabatean Arabia, a man named Aretas.

Herod had a brother, one of the many sons born of the ten wives of Herod the Great. This was a brother also named Philip but a different Philip than the one who had been given a portion of Israel to rule over. This Herod Philip lived in Rome. He stayed in Rome as a private citizen. He was disinherited. We don't know all of the story behind the story, but anyway, he had been disinherited by the Herod family, so he stayed in Rome as a private citizen and lived without the benefits of whatever the royal line would have brought to him.

He had a wife and her name was Herodias. She was the daughter of another son of Herod the Great. He was a son of Herod the Great, she was a daughter of one of his half-brothers. So she married her uncle, her father's half-brother. Philip, then, is in an incestuous relationship with her. Philip is one generation from the loins of Herod the Great;= she is two generations from the loins of Herod the great. Her brother, by the way, was Herod Agrippa, the one who was eaten by worms. The whole family is caught up in incest.

So Herod goes to Rome, Herod Antipas, and he's going to visit his brother. He visits his brother and he is attracted, or she seduces him, and so they plan to divorce their spouses. She will divorce his brother, Philip. Herod will divorce his wife, the daughter of the King Aretas, and they will get together. This doesn't sit well with Aretas, it happens. They did it. Aretas gets mad, amasses an army, and comes and wins a great victory over Herod, who also has an army, and Herod is only saved when the Roman army comes to his rescue. So blood is shed, lots of blood is shed over this marriage.

When Caligula came to the throne in Rome as the Caesar, the Philip who had been tetrarch over Trachonitis and Ituraea had died, and Caligula gave it to another Herod, Herod Agrippa, whom we mentioned. Herodias was angry about this. She thought it should have been added to the territory of her husband, Herod. So she forced Herod to go to Rome and to seek the title, to have a bigger kingdom so she could be a bigger queen. He didn't want to do it, but he had long since lost the battle

to her. So he set sail for Rome.

Agrippa beat him to Caligula, and when Agrippa got to Caligula, in order to seal the deal for him to get the kingdom, he bad-mouthed Herod. And by the time Herod arrived, starting to make his case, Caligula had been convinced that he was a treacherous and dangerous man to Caligula's power, and so both he and Herodias were exiled and died in exile. It was a bad day when Herod met Herodias - a bad day.

Now you know the background. Well, how did John the Baptist play into this? Oh, verse 18: "John had been saying to Herod, 'It's not lawful for you to have your brother's wife.'" That's what we call the direct approach. "It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife." And he is saying this all over the place. I mean the language here, he had been saying - one translation, he kept saying. Everywhere he would preach, he would say, "You know, Herod shouldn't be having Herodias as his wife, that woman belongs to his brother, Philip, this is wrong, this is incest."

He probably quoted Leviticus 18:16, Leviticus 20:21, which describes the iniquity of this kind of incestuous relationship. He was saying it publicly and publicly and also after he was arrested for saying this publicly, he must have been saying it privately because it says, "John had been saying to Herod, 'It's not lawful for you to have your brother's wife.'" And believe me, it wasn't a once-sentence sermon. That again is the cryptic approach. I'm sure it had three points and a poem, I'm sure he piled it on. I'm sure he explicated all the biblical reasons why this was wrong and called down the judgment of God on his head and on her head.

Truly, he is a powerful, confrontive prophet and part of the mark of his greatness is his fearlessness to confront the sins of people, even the highest leaders, even those who hold his life in their hands, whatever the consequences.

Well, as a result of this, Herodias is really angry, and so it's become a settled grudge, verse 19, against him. She wanted to put him to death - couldn't do so. Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned, of course. She wants him dead. He keeps saying this, he keeps saying it, he preached it publicly, it's the buzz. He says it every time he is seen by Herod. It reminds him of how horrible it is. He probably tells the guards at the prison about it. She's tired of it. She wants him silenced. She wants to put him to death.

She can't do it. Why? Because her husband is restraining her, for Herod was afraid of John knowing that he was a righteous and holy man. And he kept him safe. Safe from whom? From her. I can imagine what he told the people at the prison. "If Herodias tells you anything to do with John the Baptist, don't do it, protect him from her." I think Herod would have wanted John dead. I don't think he liked this. I think he despised it. I don't think he wanted the reiteration of his evil, iniquitous life. I don't think he wanted to hear it all the time. I think he was reminded by John of the consequences of this kind of behavior before God.

I think John would be a judgment preacher. I think he must have said to Herod something like he said to the Pharisees and scribes, "Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come, you snakes?" He was sort of like Pilate, though he really didn't want to go to the degree of killing him because he knew he was a righteous and good man and he didn't want to compound his situation before God. He would be like Pilate, right? Pilate just said, "Beat Him up, maybe that will satisfy the mob." But that



was not going to satisfy Herodias.

Interestingly enough, when he heard him, which he must have done on perhaps numerous occasions, he was very perplexed. He couldn't understand the message of John the Baptist. He couldn't figure out what he was saying about the Messiah, about judgment. But he used to enjoy listening to him. It was kind of a curiosity. I mean, he was a very - he was a very great preacher. He must have been at the lowest level at least amazingly entertaining. And he enjoyed listening to him.

So the combination of the novelty of John and the fear of even greater consequences to come against him in the judgment of God if he did anything to this obviously righteous and godly man restrained him from taking his life. But he lived in fear of the man. Fear, first of all, to kill him, and then after he did kill him, fear that he'd come back from the dead.

That leads us to the second scene here in the flashback. We go from Herod's fear to Herod's folly. A strategic day came. It became strategic because it was Herod's birthday. Herod, on his birthday, gave a banquet, a birthday celebration. The Jews hated pagan celebrations, basically ignored birthdays in their culture, but the Romans made a huge issue out of birthdays. They were excuses for lecherous, lewd revelry. Some say Herod's birthday celebrations were more wicked than any, so that the phrase, Herodes deus, meaning Herod's birthday, became a proverb for a wicked, excessive celebration. That was this. And every one, I suppose, had to top the last one.

So he invites to this banquet his lords and military commanders and the leading men of Galilee. This is important. His "lords," meaning nobles, the social elite in Galilee and Perea, the area over which he had some jurisdiction. These would be the powerful persons. These would be the upper level tax collectors, the officials under him. They would include Jews, Jews who had bought the tax franchises, Jews who had risen in the establishment economically, the business community, Jews who thought they could gain by having some kind of an alliance with this non-Jewish ruler.

It would include those who are identified in Mark 3:6 as Herodians, people who wanted to be associated with Herod. You remember the Herodians and the Pharisees got together in chapter 3, verse 6, and were plotting the death of Jesus. It also included military commanders, chiliarchos. That would be a man who was command over a thousand. So he had multiple commanders over a thousand, so he had an army in the thousands.

These would be typically Romans. He had leading men of Galilee. Well, that again would be the Jews who were part of the Herodian party. It's very important to understand that this is an event that's going to be attended by Jewish people, those people who are in the upper echelons, those people who were power brokers, people who had alliances with Rome and with Herod. These Jews then become guilty by complicity in the execution of this prophet, as their forefathers had the prophets of the past, as their nation would, the prophet of all prophets, the prophet over all prophets, the Lord Jesus Christ.

Since John the Baptist was in prison in Machaerus, that must be where the party was held. The Jews would likely have shunned having a party at Tiberius because it had been built on a cemetery. This is a male event, by the way. This is a men's event. This is the worst that a men's event could possibly get. This is gluttony, drunkenness, lasciviousness at its rankest level. This is conversation and laughter unmitigated, unrestrained, untempered by female presence. And the low point comes at the

high point, from their perspective - verse 22 - when the daughter of Herodias herself came in and danced.

Herod had no concern for the purity of his own daughter. Purity was not an issue in that wretched family, it hadn't been for generations - it really never would be. As the adoptive father of this, his niece, the daughter of his brother Philip, he had no desire to protect her in any sense. For a young girl aged 15 or 16, as she probably was, to dance like this was a shame, for a princess to dance like this was a double shame, for a mother to let her daughter dance like this is a triple shame.

But "shame" doesn't exist in the vocabulary of the family of Herod. So she comes in to dance her evil dance when the leering men have reached the right proportion of satiation both with food and alcoholic drink. In she comes, immoral, suggestive, shameless, dancing. That's what happens. And she pleased Herod in the basest way and his dinner guests. And so he's going to throw his braggadocio around a little bit. He's looped, as you would say. He's inebriated. He's feeling his petty power. And being excited by this girl's dance, he says, "Ask me for whatever you want and I'll give it to you."

Truth of the matter is he didn't have anything to give. He held what he held only because Rome let him hold it. One false step and he was done. And I already told you that happened when he tried to overstep his bounds one time. He couldn't take any more territory. When he did, he was exiled. He couldn't give up any territory, it didn't belong to him. This was just sheer braggadocio, "I'll give you half my kingdom," and then he swore to her - this now is an oath in verse 23 - "Whatever you ask of me, I'll give it to you, up to half my kingdom." This is folly. This is over-the-top braggadocio. And he takes an oath, binds himself. His perverted lust mixed with his foolish pride has led him to a promise that is going to be very costly.

Well, what did she do when she heard this? She was a pawn in her mother's hands. So was he. Everybody in the family must have been. So she went where she had to go. She went out and said to her mother, "What shall I ask for?" Right on the top of the list of priorities for this woman was John the Baptist's death. So she said, "The head of John the Baptist."

Of all the things that maybe he could have given to the girl, maybe he could have rearranged some things, maybe within the framework of what he possessed, he could have given her some kind of paper ownership of something. Maybe he could have let her have some responsibility over some aspect of life in that little realm. Maybe he could have given her a few more horses or a few more jewels or a few more dresses or a few more men to consider. But her mother was after none of this. She wanted the prophet who had maligned her dead.

That's what she says, "The head of John the Baptist." The daughter goes back in a hurry. Immediately - Mark loves that word - immediately she came in a hurry to the king and asked, saying, "I want you to give me at once the head of John the Baptist on a platter." Wow. On a platter. That's a presentation fit for cannibals. What kind of people are we dealing with here? And although the king was very sorry in verse 26, "Yet because of his oaths," and again it's all about his pride.

Instead of saying, "I was wrong, I said a horrible thing, I wasn't thinking," he will maintain his petty pride. And because of the dinner guests, he was unwilling to refuse her. Immediately the king sent an executioner and commanded him to bring back his head. And he went and had him beheaded in the

prison and brought his head on a platter and gave it to the girl and the girl gave it to her mother.

Broadus writes, "When the dish was brought with the bleeding head on it, no doubt she took it daintily in her hands, lest a drop of blood should stain her gala dress, and tripped away to mother, as if bearing her some choice dish of food from the king's table. It was not uncommon to bring the head of one who had been slain to the person who ordered it as a sure proof that the command had been obeyed. For example, when the head of Cicero was brought to Fulvia, the wife of Mark Antony, she spat on it, and drawing out the tongue that had so eloquently opposed and condemned Antony, she pierced it with her hairpin with bitter ridicule."

Jerome refers to this incident and says that Herodias did likewise with the head of John. We know not his authority for this assertion, but the desire of the Herod family seems to have been to ape the worst follies and cruelties of the Roman nobility.

So after imprisonment over a year, John is dead. His work is done. And the one of whom it is said, "There has not risen a greater than John the Baptist," went into his glorious eternal home, received his full reward for faithful, uncompromising service to his blessed God. And the Jews who were at the party never protested at all. John was incidental to them. John was nothing to them. They had rejected the Messiah. The Herodian party had already been in commiseration with the Pharisees to kill Jesus, reject Jesus. John doesn't matter. Anything for entertainment.

And so they killed the last of the prophets and the best of the prophets. Verse 29 closes out Mark's account. "When his disciples" - that is, the disciples of John the Baptist. He had many followers who came to the Jordan, who came repeatedly, who listened to him preach about repentance and righteousness and the Kingdom. He had many disciples, "When they heard that he had been beheaded, they came and took away his body and laid it in a tomb."

His disciples. Must have been a sad day for them. Must have been a day when they began to wonder because he had been telling them, "Messiah is coming, the Kingdom is coming." It all seemed to come to a screeching halt. The prophet is beheaded.

That's not the end of the story. There's one final scene. Turn in your Bible to Matthew 14 - Matthew 14, verse 12. This is Matthew's parallel account without as much detail as Mark gives us. "After his head was brought on a platter" - verse 11 - "and given to the girl and brought to the mother, his disciples - John's - "came, took the body" - just as Mark said - "and buried it." And then this, "And they went and reported to Jesus."

They knew Jesus. It was John who said, "Behold the Lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world." It was John who said, "I'm not worthy to unloose His sandals." It was John who said, "He's greater than I. I must decrease, He must increase." They knew who Jesus was. They - and they knew Jesus was John's cousin. His forerunner was now dead. Jesus would need to know. This had to be - this had to be important to Jesus. So they tell Him. And then you look at verse 13, "Now when Jesus heard about John, He withdrew from there in a boat to a secluded place by Himself."

Why? It's a big event. This is a crushing event because it's the most dramatic preview yet of what is going to happen to Him. This grips the heart of the incarnate Son of God. It calls for silence. It calls for seclusion. The murder of John, the attitude of Herod, the complicity of all the elite Jews of Galilee,

this is a blow that makes the cross soon to come very, very vivid. Is He afraid of Herod? No. He sent a message, "Tell that fox he can't touch me until my goal is reached." He's not afraid of Herod, but He needs time. He needs some solitude to contemplate what this means. Herod wanted to see Him. He won't see Him - not now, at least.

He did see Him finally. Turn to Luke 23. Pilate - verse 6 - sent Jesus to Herod - verse 7 - who happened to be visiting Jerusalem. So Pilate thought, "You know, I don't find any guilt in this man." - verse 4 - "I'm going to have to pass this judicial decision on to somebody else. Herod's in town, let him make it." So he sent Jesus to Herod. Verse 8. Now, Herod is very glad when he saw Jesus. Why would he be very glad? Because now for the first time, looking into the face of Jesus, he would know He wasn't John the Baptist, back from the dead.

He'd wanted to see Him for a long time because he'd been hearing about Him, was hoping to see some sign performed by Him. Here again is this superficial curiosity that so marked so many. And he questioned Him at some length, but Jesus answered him nothing. Jesus treated him as if he had no authority, no power, as in fact he did not. But the chief priests and the scribes were standing there accusing Him vehemently. And Herod with his soldiers, after treating Him with contempt and mocking Him, dressed Him in a gorgeous robe and sent Him back to Pilate. Now, Herod and Pilate became friends with one another that very day for before that, they had been enemies with each other.

They hated each other but they finally found something they could agree on, their common rejection of Jesus. Herod got to see Him. But once he realized that it was John the Baptist back from the dead, Jesus became a novelty and a curiosity. He's a tragic, superficial, sad man, the worst of the worst, the lowest of the low, lost forever to hell. For fear of a woman, fear of losing his throne, foolish pride, he damned his own soul. And sadly, the words of Jesus come back, "Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you that stoned the prophets, kill those sent to you, your house is left to you desolate."

Hours after that meeting with Herod, they screamed for the blood of Jesus and asked the Romans to do the dirty work. And they executed Him. The nation received the greatest prophet up to his day, the greatest man up to his day, and the very prophet above all prophets, the Son of God, rejected them both, executed them both. As I said, the Jews didn't kill either one of them. Herod killed John and the Romans killed Jesus, but the nation had rejected both.

It's a horrible tragedy when such privilege is given and privilege is spurned. They went on to chase the prophets and the preachers of the gospel until eleven of the twelve apostles were martyred. And the persecution even went on after that. The rejection of the true gospel is so tragic. You say, "I would never do that." You might want to join the speech of those in Matthew 23 who say, "We're not like those people, we would never do that. We would never do that." Look, if you reject Jesus Christ, you stand with the executioners. There's no escaping it.

You either embrace Him as Lord and Savior or you reject Him. And if you reject Him, you put Him to shame by that rejection. You stand in agreement with the rejecters and the crucifiers. But Jesus welcomes your repentance and welcomes you into His Kingdom if you turn from your sin of rejecting Him, confess your sin, acknowledge Him as Lord and Savior, and receive His forgiveness. You go from death to life, from darkness to light, from blindness to sight, from hell to heaven, from tragedy to bliss. This is the gospel.

Yes, they put Him on a cross in rejection, but in that very act of dying on the cross, He paid the penalty for all the sins of all who would ever believe. And if you believe, then you're part of that all. The point of application here is just make sure that you're on the right side of how Jesus can be treated, rejected or received. To as many as receive Him, He gives the power to become sons of God. What a promise.

Father, thank you for again the wonderful insights that the Word of God has. Yet when we read this, it's not a happy text, it's a heart-breaking, grievous, agonizing reality that the whole nation would be complicit in the execution of the greatest of men and even in the execution of the Son of God. How can anyone turn against the prophets who spoke for you? How can anyone turn against your own Son? And yet it happens all the time. Lord, I pray that you'll deliver those who, even in our midst today in the hearing of this message, have been guilty of a rejection of Christ, who stand with the crucifiers, the executioners, in rejecting the only hope of salvation, forgiveness, escape from judgment, and eternal joy in heaven. Do your work in hearts, we pray, Lord. Make the gospel live. Make Christ alive. Make the dead come to life by your power, we pray in your Son's name. Amen.

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