

INTRODUCTION

You might recall a few years ago when the U.S. was part of a coalition to invade Iraq and depose Saddam Hussein. Not all Americans were in favor of that war and I recall seeing some protestors on the news. They interviewed one angry young man and asked him why he opposed the war. His answer was one that I haven't been able to forget. He said, "Nothing's worth dying for!"

I disagree. We're going to see in this message that there ARE things worth dying for. Over the last few months, we've been shocked by the brutality of ISIS as they have released videos of captured British and American citizens just before they were beheaded. ISIS is trying to use shock tactics to scare us and to enlist other radical Muslims.

But you must understand that this kind of barbaric brutality has been a part of the Roman Empire and the Middle East for centuries. The Romans executed criminals and slaves by crucifixion, but they executed their own citizens in what they considered a more merciful punishment by beheading them. Tradition tells us the Apostle Paul was beheaded in Rome. In Acts 12 we read that Herod Agrippa killed the Apostle James with the sword, which referred to beheading. In our passage today, we're going to read about the drama of the day John the Baptist lost his head for the sake of truth.

This message is going to be a little different, because I'm going to read a portion of the scripture, then I want to introduce the characters and tell you the full story of the drama. Besides the Bible, there are numerous histories that tell us about the characters and the events. Primarily, the Jewish historian Josephus writes about it. In addition, we have additional historical information from the Church Father Jerome and Roman historians Tacitus and Cassius Dio.

Mark 6:14-20. "King Herod heard about this, for Jesus' name had become well known. Some were saying, 'John the Baptist has been raised from the dead, and that is why miraculous powers are at work in him.' Others said, 'He is Elijah.' And still others claimed, 'He is a prophet, like one of the prophets of long ago.' But when Herod heard this, he said, 'John, the man I beheaded, has been raised from the dead!' For Herod himself had given orders to have John arrested, and he had him bound and put in prison. He did this because of Herodias, his brother Philip's wife, whom he had married. For John had been saying to Herod, 'It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife.' So Herodias nursed a grudge against John and wanted to kill him. But she was not able to, 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."

With that background, let's first examine:

I. THE CHARACTERS

This story has been the subject of hundreds of works of art. In one particular painting we see John the Baptist pointing his bony finger at Herod on the throne. Herod can't make eye contact. The two women are Herodias and her daughter. Let's learn a little more about each of these characters.

A. I introduce to you Herod Antipas, an arrogant ruler

The name "Herod" was almost like a family name; it meant "heroic" but there weren't any heroes in the bunch. It can be confusing because no less than eight Roman rulers used the name Herod. This was Herod Antipater, whose nickname was Antipas. He was one of the sons of the ruler who is often called Herod the Great. Herod the Great was the ruler when the wise men came asking, "Where is the one born King of the Jews." Herod was a great builder, but he had a great capacity of hatred and violence as well. He attempted to kill the Messiah by ordering that all the male toddlers in Bethlehem be slaughtered.

Herod the Great was paranoid and jealous. He ordered the death of several of his wives and sons. The Jewish rabbis had an inside joke that it was safer to be Herod's pig than to be Herod's son. Herod the Great was plotting to murder his son Antipas, when he himself died. So Antipas was named the ruler of four small areas so he was called a Tetrarch. But he always wanted to be called a king. To be more like a king, Antipas married an older Arabian princess, the daughter of King Aretas IV. He married her for the royal connection.

B. I introduce to you Herodias, a wicked woman

Herodias was the Jezebel of the New Testament. Jezebel wanted the head of the prophet Elijah, but she wasn't successful. Herodias was the granddaughter of Herod the Great. She visited Rome and met her uncle, Philip, the half-brother of Antipas. Philip wasn't in politics; he was a wealthy Roman businessman. Herodias seduced her much-older uncle Philip and they were married.

One day, Antipas left his Arabian princess-wife and visited his brother Philip in Rome. Herodias had grown tired of her husband, so she seduced Antipas, her brother-in-law, who was also her uncle. In a scandal worthy of the Kardashians, Antipas and Herodias eloped back to Galilee. Antipas' Arabian princess had gotten word of the scandal, before her husband could return with his younger trophy mistress. They were never divorced; she just packed up and ran home to her daddy, who vowed to extract vengeance on his two-timing son-in-law.

C. I introduce to you Salome, a victimized daughter

This daughter of Herodias and Philip is not named in the Bible, but Josephus tells us her name was Salome. The really sad thing about Salome is the word used to describe her indicates that she was a very young teen or even a pre-teen. It was a word to describe a young girl not yet of marriageable age. And girls often married at age 16 in this time. The same word is used to describe Salome is used to describe the daughter of Jairus who was twelve years old. Her wicked mother used her as her pawn to get to John the Baptist.

D. Finally, I introduce to the true hero of the story, John—God's faithful prophet

This is John the Baptist, six months older than his cousin Jesus. Like Samson, John had taken a Nazarite vow and had never cut his hair or beard. He was a man of the wilderness and ate locusts and wild honey and wore a camel's hair garment. His favorite clothing label was Camel Klein.

He had baptized Jesus even though he felt unworthy to do so. When they asked John if he was the Messiah he denied it. John's job was to introduce Jesus and then to move off the scene. In fact in John 3:30, John said about Jesus, "He must increase, and I must decrease."

The Baptist preacher, John, publicly preached that it was both illegal and immoral for Herod to be sleeping with his niece and sister-in-law. This public disgrace infuriated Herodias and she demanded that Herod kill him. Can't you just hear Herodias whining to Herod, "You've got to do something to shut up that stinking Baptist preacher. Kill him, or I'm gone!" But Herod recognized that John was a man of God, so to make his wife happy, he arrested John and put him in jail. We know from Josephus that John was imprisoned in the desert fortress called Machaerus near Jericho. You can visit the ruins today and still see the remains of the iron rungs in the wall where prisoners were chained. Now that you know the characters in this story, let's go straight to

II. THE ACTION

Lights! Camera! Action! As I mentioned earlier, this part of the world has always been known for the brutality and violence of the rulers. There are two scenes:

A. Scene One: A birthday party

It was the birthday of Herod Antipas, so he invited in many special guests to the party. Herodias saw this as an opportunity to get what she wanted so she hatched a wicked plan. She knew the wine would be flowing and Herod had a weakness for dancing girls. So she coached her young daughter to perform a sensual, seductive dance.

The Bible says, "When the daughter of Herodias came in and danced, she pleased Herod and his dinner guests. The king said to the girl, 'Ask me for anything you want, and I'll give it to you.' And he promised her with an oath, 'Whatever you ask I will give you, up to half my kingdom.'" (Mark 6:22-23) The funny thing about that was that Herod didn't have a kingdom to give her. He was the man who wanted to be king, but was only a provincial ruler over four districts. He was just bragging in front of his guest.

Salome ran back to her mother and said, "What should I ask for?" She was probably thinking maybe a pony or a doll. But her wicked mother cackled with glee and said, "Tell him you want the head of that Baptist preacher, John, on a food platter!"

The Bible says, "At once the girl hurried in to the king with the request: 'I want you to give me right now the head of John the Baptist on a platter.'" (Mark 6:25) I'm sure Herod sobered up in a hurry. He was in a quandary. He knew John was a man of God, but he had made an oath in front of his guests. I wondered if he tried to negotiate with Salome. "Wouldn't you rather have horses, chariots, clothes, or jewelry?" I can just imagine Salome stomping her feet, wanting to please her mother and, "I want his head on a platter, and I want it now!"

Herod had made an oath in front of his guests. He would lose face if he didn't keep his promise. So he decided it was better for John to lose his head than for him to lose face.

B. Scene Two: The dungeon

Let's join the great prophet preacher in the dungeon. He hears the soldiers approaching and wonders what's happening. When he sees the sword, he probably realizes what's going to happen. I wonder what went through his mind as they held his head down and he heard the whoosh of the sword. I wonder if he thought, "Jesus must increase, and I must decrease."

The Bible says, "So he immediately sent an executioner with orders to bring John's head. The man went, beheaded John in the prison, and brought back his head on a platter. He presented it to the girl, and she gave it to her mother. On hearing of this, John's disciples came and took his body and laid it in a tomb." (Mark 6:27-29)

As I mentioned this story has been a favorite subject of artists through the centuries. There are many famous paintings that depict the final scene. But one of my favorites is by a relatively unknown Italian artist name Onorio Mariani. In 1680 he completed a piece in which Herod can be seen beside Herodias as she stares at her daughter. I think the artists has captured the youth and spoiled innocence of Salome.

Jerome writes that Herodias' toward John was so intense that she pulled John's tongue out and pierced it through with a large sewing needle. It was like she was saying, "Now let me hear you speak against me you ignorant Baptist preacher." But we're going to see God always has the last word.

III. LIFE LESSONS

There are some life lessons we can learn from the characters in this story.

A. Herod: A guilty conscience is a cruel companion

Months later, when Herod heard about the miracles of Jesus, he was certain it was John the Baptist who had come back to life to haunt him. He would probably wake up in the middle of the night with his pajamas soaked with sweat because of a bad dream about a headless prophet.

God has given every person a conscience to know right from wrong. The reason we often feel guilty about sin is because we ARE guilty. But you don't have to live with a guilty conscience. The good news is that the Bible says in 1 John 1:9 that if you confess your sins He if faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us of all unrighteousness. You can live a life free of guilt. When you give your life to Jesus, all your sins are forgiven. God has promised He will put our sins behind His back and will remember them no more. He has promised to separate our sins as far as the East is from the West. He had promised to bury our sins in the depth of the sea. He has said, "Though your sins be as scarlet they can be as white as snow."

B. Herodias: Hateful anger spills out and hurts those close to you

The sad story of Herodias is that her rage at John was like a deadly infectious disease that destroyed her husband and daughter. There is a sad principle in effect that our sin not only

affects us, it affects those around us. A pregnant woman who injects crack cocaine into her body also endangers the life of her unborn child. A man who smokes like a chimney is affecting his family with the effects of secondhand smoke.

You never really sin personally. Every sin we commit is like a pebble dropped in a pond. The ripples spread out and touch those around us. Her sin had destructive consequences on Antipas and her daughter.

Remember his scorned wife who returned to her father, the Arabian king? Two years after Jesus was crucified, the father of his ex-wife, King Aretas, attacked Antipas, slaughtered his soldiers and conquered his territory. In shame, Antipas and Herodias fled to Rome. Antipas' jealous nephew, Herod Agrippa, the brother of Herodias, had convinced the Emperor that Antipas was guilty of treason. So Antipas, the man who would be king, was stripped of his titles and property and was banished into exile in Gaul. The worst part of the punishment was that the wicked Herodias was sent with him, and they both died in obscurity and were buried in unmarked graves.

C. Salome: Be sure, your sins will find you out

In fact, the Bible says exactly that in Numbers 32:23, "You may be sure that your sin will find you out." The story of Herod's family was fascinating to the Romans, like the stories of the Roosevelts and Kennedys are to Americans. History records that Salome's life was filled with tragedy. She moved back to Rome where she went through several failed marriages.

According to Cassius Dio, Salome died tragically when she was vacationing in the Northern Alps. She and her party were crossing a frozen river when the ice cracked. In the efforts to extract her from the frozen water, a jagged piece of ice severed her head from her body.

Salome's life is a sad reminder of the principle of Galatians 6:7 which says, "Whatever a man (or woman) sows, that he will also reap."

D. John: There ARE things worth dying for

Remember the war protestor I mentioned at the beginning of this message? He said, "Nothing's worth dying for." He was wrong. I can think of several things worth dying for.

First, I believe that FREEDOM is worth dying for. We are enjoying our precious freedom to worship today because there were thousands of men and women who have died fighting for our nation. They realized that freedom isn't free. It comes at a high cost.

On November 19, 1863 President Abraham Lincoln traveled to Gettysburg, Pennsylvania to participate in the dedication of the Soldier's National Cemetery. Edward Everett gave a two-hour oration. Then Lincoln got up and spoke for less than two minutes. He concluded his famous remarks by saying, "...The world will little note, nor long remember what we say here; while it can never forget what they did here... from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion—that we highly resolve these

dead shall not have died in vain—that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom—and that government of the people, by the people, for the people shall not perish from the earth.”

The second thing I think is worth dying for is our FRIENDS and FAMILY, which are often the same. John the Baptist was a friend of Jesus as well as his cousin. Jesus was willing to die for His friends. He said to the disciples, “Greater love has no man than this—that a man lay down his life for his friends.” (John 15:13)

Jesus went to the cross to die for us, even though He was a sinless Savior. Chuck Colson told the story of a group of World War II American Prisoners of War who were made to do hard labor in a Japanese prison camp. Each had a shovel and dug all day. They were required to return their shovels each evening.

One evening, twenty prisoners lined up by the guard and the shovels were counted. The guard counted only nineteen shovels. He turned in rage toward the POWs and demanded to know which prisoner had kept his shovel. No one responded. The guard drew his pistol and said he would shoot five American prisoners if the guilty prisoner didn't confess.

After a moment of tense silence, a nineteen-year-old prisoner stepped forward with his head bowed. The guard pointed his gun at the prisoner's head and fired. As the young man's body fell to the ground the guard warned the others that they must always return their shovels. Then the guard recounted the shovels and found that all twenty were accounted for. He had simply miscounted earlier. The young soldier had died for his friends.

Would you like to have a friend like that? You have one. His name is Jesus. It was not some split-second decision. Jesus planned to die for you from the foundation of the world. He laid down His life for you, His friend.

The final thing that is worth dying for is your FAITH. John the Baptist had pointed to Jesus and said, “Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world.” (John 1:29) But after he was arrested and put in prison John started having some doubts. In Luke 7 we read that John sent word to Jesus to ask Him, “Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?” I'm not surprised that this great outdoor prophet had a few doubts when he was restricted in a tiny jail cell chained to the wall. It would have been like putting an eagle in a canary cage, or restricting a great whale to a swimming pool. John began to have a few doubts.

Jesus sent word back to John to tell him that scripture was being fulfilled, miracles were being done, and lives were being changed. If Jesus had only been a man He might have rebuked John for doubting Him. But on the day that John said the worst thing he ever said about Jesus; Jesus said the BEST thing He ever said about John.

Jesus said John was more than a prophet. He said among men born of women (and that includes most of us), there is NONE GREATER than John.” Wow. Jesus was saying that of all the people in the Old Testament period, John was the greatest—greater than Abraham; greater than Moses; greater than Elijah. But then Jesus said, “There is no one greater than John; yet the one who is

least in the kingdom of God is greater than he" (Luke 7:28)

John stood for the truth of his faith, and he ended up dying for his faith. The moment the whoosh of the sword removed his head from his body John was immediately transported into heaven into the presence of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. As they welcomed this hero of the faith into heaven, I wonder if John smiled and thought, "Why did I ever doubt?"

CONCLUSION

Freedom, Family, and Faith are at least three things worth dying for. Would you be willing to die for your faith? Warren Wiersbe relates a story from China during the Communist purge of Mao Zedong in 1949. Churches were closed and Christians were arrested and executed. Wiersbe tells the story of a small group of Christians meeting in private. Suddenly the door flies open and three communist soldiers are standing there with weapons drawn. They ordered all the Christians to line up against the far wall to be executed. The soldiers said, "IF you are not a believer you are free to leave." Some of the group hurried from the room. But a group of faithful followers of Jesus joined hands and stood together waiting to die for Jesus. When the unbelievers left, the soldiers lowered their weapons and said, "We are believers, too, and we wanted to find a group of Christians who are willing to die for their faith. May we join you?"

Here's rhetorical question: Would you be willing to die for your faith? Here's a much more practical question: Are you willing to LIVE for your faith seven days a week? I hope your answer to both is YES because there are some things worth dying for.

OUTLINE

I. THE CHARACTERS

- A. Herod Antipas, an arrogant ruler
- B. Herodias, a wicked woman
- C. Salome, a victimized daughter
- D. John—God's faithful prophet

II. THE ACTION

- A. Scene One: A birthday party
- B. Scene Two: The dungeon

III. LIFE LESSONS

- A. Herod: A guilty conscience is a cruel companion
- B. Herodias: Hateful anger spills out and hurts those close to you
- C. Salome: Be sure, your sins will find you out
- D. John: There ARE things worth dying for

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David O. Dykes, Pastor
Green Acres Baptist Church
Tyler, Texas

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For the Joy...
Pastor David Dykes