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“The Blessings and Consequences of Being Faithful”
Matthew 14:1-13

As a child, some Bible stories really stuck in my mind. My parents had one of those illustrated children’s Bibles and I vividly remember a number of scenes: The Red Sea closing in on the Egyptian troops, their faces filled with terror. Samson, blind, pushing the pillars of the temple of Dagon down, killing more Philistines in his death than during his turbulent life. Elijah in the whirlwind being taken to heaven in a chariot of fire. Even as a child, I knew that was the best way to go!

And then, of course, in the children’s illustrated Bible of my boyhood days was the gruesome painting of the head of John the Baptist on a platter. That scene always stuck in mind. If being caught up in a whirlwind and taken to heaven like Elijah was the best possible way to leave this earth, then getting your head removed at a drunken birthday party was the worst possible way to go.

I guess I’m not the only one who thinks that way. J.C. Ryle in his *Expository Thoughts on the Gospels* describes how John the Baptist was cut off by a violent death before the age of thirty-four. He writes: “The faithful preacher murdered for doing his duty, – and this to gratify the hatred of an adulterous woman, and at the command of a capricious tyrant! Truly there was an event here, if ever there was one in the world, which might make an ignorant man say, ‘What profit – what value – is it to serve God?’” (V-1; pg. 160).

The Cast of Characters

But I’m getting ahead of myself. John the Baptist is but one of the characters in this passage. If the passage was set up as a play, the cast of characters would include Herod in a leading role. After all, it was his birthday party, and being a king, he threw a very lavish, extravagant party for himself.

The party that he threw showed the wickedness that marked his character. Undoubtedly it was a drunken party. We might call it a stag party today. The liquor flowed freely, and if there was a woman around she would usually be a servant who was paraded for her beauty.

But at this birthday bash for King Herod, he had some unusual and special entertainment. His wife’s daughter, the daughter of Herodias, danced for them, and she was, in the view of many commentators, very young, possibly around twelve to fourteen years old at the time.

But here again, I’m getting ahead of myself. Another key person in this cast of characters is the mother of the dancing girl, Herodias. Herodias had been married to Herod’s brother, Philip; she was his sister-in-law, but they had become infatuated with each other. Both of them divorced their spouses and they married each other.

In the process of that marriage, God's laws, including the 7th commandment, were broken with impunity. Because Herod had clearly broken God's law, John the Baptist confronted him. The passage tells us, *John had been saying to him, "It is not lawful for you to have her."*

When verse 4 says that John the Baptist "*had been saying*" it shows us that John confronted Herod repeatedly. It wasn't a one-time reminder that Herod had broken the law of God. It is in the imperfect tense, meaning that it was a repeated admonition that the life he was living, and what he had done in marrying Herodias, was sinful.

Because of those constant reminders that their marriage was a great sin in the sight of God, both Herod and Herodias disliked John. Herodias, it seems, had it in for John the Baptist even more than Herod did.

Mark gives us a little more detail than Matthew; Mark describes how Herodias nursed a grudge against John the Baptist. He writes, in Mark 6:19-20, "*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.*"

Herodias was unable to get to John the Baptist. That is, until her husband threw his extravagant birthday party. Then she found a way to get to John the Baptist. She had her daughter, from her marriage to Phillip, dance for Herod and his guests.

The Bible never tells us the daughter's name, but we know from reliable historians, including Josephus, that her name was Salome. As mentioned, she was very young, perhaps a pre-teen or in her early teen years. While we cannot know for certain that the dance she performed was suggestive or immoral, most commentators believe it probably was, just from the nature of those types of parties.

What we do know is that her dance pleased Herod so much that he made that rash promise, there in verse 7, given on oath before his guests, to give her whatever she asked for. Is it any surprise that Salome, prompted by her mother who had been nursing this grudge against John the Baptist, would say, "*Give me here on a platter the head of John the Baptist.*"? (v. 8)

Consequently, John the Baptist, the godly prophet who announced the public ministry of Jesus – *a voice of one calling in the wilderness* – was put to death in a most gruesome way on the wishes of an immoral, ungodly king and queen. No wonder J.C. Ryle pointed out: "Truly there was an event here, if ever there was one in the world, which might make an ignorant man say, 'What profit – what value – is it to serve God?'"

However, there is, of course, a fifth person in the cast of characters, and He is the most important person – Jesus. The passage begins in verse 1 and 2 by describing how when Herod heard about Jesus he thought that it must have been John the Baptist. He thought John had risen from the dead, and was doing all these miraculous deeds. And verse 12 and 13 describe how when Jesus heard the news that John had been decapitated, He withdrew by boat to a solitary place.

Although not much is said directly about Jesus in these verses, He is yet the most central of all characters. It was because of Jesus, and the miracles He did, that caused Herod to exclaim to his attendants, *“This is John the Baptist; he has risen from the dead! That is why miraculous powers are at work in him”* (v. 2).

And that leads us to our first application: Those who refuse to repent and believe in Christ suffer in this life, even when it doesn't appear that way, and unless they repent they will suffer eternally in the life to come.

All external pictures paint just the opposite portrayal. John the Baptist is alone in prison while Herod is enjoying an extravagant birthday party. From the perspective of the world, the life of John the Baptist is the pits. He had served the Lord faithfully. He had sacrificed so much for the kingdom of God. And what is his reward? It's confinement in prison, leading to a gruesome death.

On the other hand, the king has all his guests. There is entertainment galore. Certainly, the finest food was served and the best of drinks. That's the life! Who's kidding who? From a worldly perspective it's much better to be Herod than to be John.

But that picture is exactly opposite of reality. A lot of anxiety is written in between the lines of verse 1 and 2: *“At that time Herod the tetrarch heard the reports about Jesus, and he said to his attendants, ‘This is John the Baptist; he has risen from the dead! That is why miraculous powers are at work in him.’”* This passage is a historical flashback. Verse 1 and 2 are describing Herod's thoughts when he heard about the miracles Jesus was performing. The miracles of Jesus caused him to think about what he had done in allowing John the Baptist to be decapitated, with his head served on a platter.

You see, there is such a thing even in a wicked person, as wicked as Herod and Herodias, called a conscience. The conscience can be ignored. The conscience can be hardened. It can be seared, in the words of 1 Timothy 4:2, as with a hot iron. But it can't be done away with completely. The conscience of an evil person may lie dormant for many years, but then an unexpected event, or series of events, bring to mind evil actions that were done before.

Consider Joseph's brothers. They had so cleverly concealed what they had done when they sold Joseph into slavery. They had convinced their father that Joseph had been torn to shreds by some wild animal. They lived with that evil buried inside for many years. But when they were confronted by a harsh ruler in Egypt, whom they did not recognize as their brother, they said to each other: *“Surely we are being punished because of our brother. We saw how distressed he was when he pleaded with us for his life, but we would not listen; that's why this distress has come upon us.”*

Reuben replied, “Didn't I tell you not to sin against the boy? But you wouldn't listen! Now we must give an accounting for his blood.” (Gen. 42:21-22).

In their case, God awakened their hardened consciences with an electrifying dose of reality, reminding them of what they had done. And a similar action was going on with Herod, except it was not leading to godly sorrow and repentance. Instead, his awakened conscience led him to the unrest that springs from guilt, described this way in Isaiah 57:20-21:

*But the wicked are like the tossing sea,
which cannot rest,
whose waves cast up mire and mud.
“There is no peace,” says my God, “for the wicked.”*

God gave Herod no rest from his wicked deeds and rash vow. When Herod heard reports of the miracles Jesus performed, he immediately was reminded of what he had done to John the Baptist.

It is only those who believe in Christ with saving faith who experience a peace which surpasses all understanding, who have inner peace even in the most horrifying external circumstances. By contrast, the wicked will always – even in their levity at drunken party – be like the tossing sea which has no rest, no peace, no contentment.

And that is, incidentally, how we should pray for those who refuse to repent and believe in Christ alone. Undoubtedly you have friends, neighbors or family members who have heard the gospel, yet refuse to come to Christ in repentance and faith. Pray that they have no peace, no contentment, no satisfaction from the world until they rest in Christ and find true peace in Him alone. Only through saving faith in Christ can anyone find peace with God, with others, and with circumstances. Augustine put it well when he wrote in his *Confessions*, “You have made us for Yourself, O Lord, and our heart is restless until it rests in You.”

A second application: The ultimate reward of the righteous is not found in this life, but it is the greatest reward this life offers, attainable through faith in Jesus Christ alone.

God often blesses the righteous here and now with great and wonderful temporal blessings. In *Hebrews 11* we have a description of the people of God in Old Testament times. Many of them were greatly blessed and persevered against all human odds. The author of Hebrews writes, in Hebrews 11:32-35a:

I do not have time to tell about... (those) who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, and gained what was promised; who shut the mouths of lions, quenched the fury of the flames, and escaped the edge of the sword; whose weakness was turned to strength; and who became powerful in battle and routed foreign armies. Women received back their dead, raised to life again.

That is often true for God’s people, but it’s not always the case. Sometimes the mouths of the lions were closed by God, as with Daniel. But many martyrs in the early church were shredded to bits by lions in the amphitheater.

It is true that God can quench the flames of persecution and spare His people, but that’s not always the case. Guildo de Bres, author of *The Belgic Confession*, was hanged on the gallows, one of a great multitude of martyrdoms that still continue today.

It is true that the Lord can enable His people to escape from the sharp edge of the sword, but at times He allows that sword to remove even the head of a faithful servant like John the Baptist. And the author of Hebrews also addresses that in Hebrews 11:35b-38:

Others were tortured and refused to be released, so that they might gain a better resurrection. Some faced jeers and flogging, while still others were chained and put in prison. They were stoned they were sawed in two; they were put to death by the sword. They went about in sheepskins and goatskins, destitute, persecuted and mistreated— the world was not worthy of them. They wandered in deserts and mountains, and in caves and holes in the ground.

But, regardless of the outcome of this life, all God's people receive the inheritance of heaven, given to them freely by the complete and perfect life, sacrificial death and glorious resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Our reward is not here in this life. We are to be thankful for every blessing God gives. But our real blessing, our eternal reward, is not in this life; it awaits us in heaven. And in whatever comes our way on earth we are to do as John the Baptist did: Boldly live the Christian life, confront sin, and be willing to sacrifice all, even our lives when that is what is required of us.

A third application: We see in this passage that the Lord uses all events for His purposes.

There are so many violent, cruel events in this fallen world that make absolutely no sense to us. Yet God uses them for His own purpose. In this case, the news of John the Baptist's martyrdom brought about a marked change in the ministry of Jesus. After John's martyrdom, Jesus spent more time teaching His disciples. He still taught the multitudes, but He spent more time with His disciples, equipping them to minister on their own after His work on earth was finished.

The death of John the Baptist caused Jesus to leave the great multitudes because He realized His time was short. The martyrdom of John the Baptist was a foretaste of the crucifixion. Jesus would withdraw, and although the crowds still would follow Him – as described in the next passage with the feeding of over 5,000 people – He would nevertheless spend more time equipping His disciples to carry on the work of the kingdom.

Events that make no sense to us are yet used by God for His own purposes and plans. As Proverbs 16:4 says: *The Lord works out everything for His own ends— even the wicked for a day of disaster.*

Of all the pictures in that old illustrated children's Bible, one of the most striking was that of the head of John the Baptist, on a platter, being carried to King Herod. I can understand why J.C. Ryle would write: "The faithful preacher murdered for doing his duty, – and this to gratify the hatred of an adulterous woman, and at the command of a capricious tyrant! Truly there was an event here, if ever there was one in the world, which might make an ignorant man say, 'What profit – what value - is it to serve God?'"

But those of us who know, by God's grace, the whole story – that Herod was a weak and sinful king while Jesus is the perfect, holy, eternal King of kings – know that there is no greater profit – no greater blessing – than knowing Christ through saving faith.

Herod never found that out. Herod listened; Mark tells us he even liked to listen (Mark 6:20), but he never believed. In Mark 6 we read of how he recognized that John was “*a righteous and holy man.*” Yet in Matthew 14:5 we read of how he wanted to kill John.

Later he would ridicule Jesus, and allow Him to be mocked. Yet all his worldly profit, all his kingly riches and pride, died with him, and he will spend eternity in hell. His life and death are summed by the question Jesus puts before each one of us, as recorded in Matthew 16:26, “*For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul? Or what shall a man give in return for his soul?*”

Herod forfeited his soul for the vain pleasures of this fallen world. Yet John the Baptist, who died without material wealth or riches – has through faith in the One whom he proclaimed – the eternal riches of the storehouse of heaven.

May you and I, like John the Baptist, recognize the value of the Kingdom of God, and consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus through saving faith in Him alone! Amen.

Now Herod had arrested John and bound him and put him in prison because of Herodias, his brother Philip's wife, for John had been saying to him: "It is not lawful for you to have her." Matthew 14:3-4

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Matthew 14:1-13

I. The cast of characters in this passage include:

- 1) Herod, guilty (2), weak (5) and thoroughly wicked (3-7)

- 2) Herodias, his sister-in-law, who became his wife through an incestuous relationship (3) and double divorces (Mark 6:17-19)

- 3) Salome, the daughter of Herodias who danced at Herod's drunken birthday party (7-8)

- 4) John the Baptist, *a voice of one calling in the wilderness* (Matthew 3:3), the courageous prophet who repeatedly confronted Herod (4)

- 5) Jesus (1, 12, 13), the true King, righteous, just, and eternal

II. Applications:

- 1) Those who refuse to repent and believe in Christ suffer in this life, even when it doesn't appear that way, and will suffer eternally in hell (1-2; Isaiah 57:20-21; Matthew 13:42-43, 49-50)

- 2) The reward of the righteous is not found in this life, but is the greatest reward this life offers (9-10; Matt. 16:26; Heb. 11:32-40)

- 3) The Lord uses all events and circumstances for His purposes (12-13; Proverbs 16:4)