

The lesson of Herod

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[0 : 00] The reading this morning is from Mark chapter 6, which, if you've got a church Bible, is! on page 1014. We're starting at verse 14. King Herod heard of it, but Jesus' name had! Some said, John the Baptist has been raised from the dead. That is why these miraculous powers are at work in him. But others said, He is Elijah. And others said, He is a prophet like one of the prophets of old. But when Herod heard of it, he said, John, whom I beheaded, has been raised. 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. For John had been saying to Herod, It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife. And Herodias had a grudge against him and wanted to put him to death. But she could not, 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. But an opportunity came when Herod on his birthday gave a banquet for his nobles and military commanders and the leading men of Galilee. For when Herodias' 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. And he vowed to her, Whatever you ask me, I will give you up to half of my kingdom.

And she went out and said to her mother, For what should I ask? And she said, The head of John the Baptist. 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. And the king was exceedingly sorry. But because of his oaths and his guests, he did not want to break his word to her.

And immediately the king sent an executioner with orders to bring John's head. He went and beheaded him in the prison and brought his head on a platter and gave it to the girl. And the girl gave it to her mother. When his disciples heard of it, they came and took his body and laid it in a tomb.

[2 : 35] Thanks, Emily. Let's pray as we begin. The word of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul. Father, we pray that your perfect word would be at work among each one of us today, reviving our souls. And we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen. What's the worst birthday party you've ever been to?

Well, mine actually was my own 18th, which was, I'm not going to go into any details on that. But it was definitely the worst birthday party I've ever experienced. But it wasn't as bad as bad as Herod's. We're back in Mark's gospel, where we left off. We're going to come back to Hebrews in a few weeks' time. And we're going to try and get to the end of chapter eight in Mark. So that's the first half of the gospel we will have been through in this year. So that's our aim. And we've come today to what I've called, what we might call the lesson of Herod. Herod is a case study in human nature and our natural response to God.

Have you ever wondered why, if Jesus really did the things that he did, if he really is the Son of God, if he really is the great Savior who can rescue us forever?

Why the tumbleweed in the office when we try to speak of him or after people hear of him? Why the blank faces in Dulwich? No thanks.

Well, if you've ever wondered that, then here is the answer. Just look down with me. We may be surprised to read that this is not new. Chapter six, verse six, we get the issue of this section.

[4 : 52] Chapter six, verse six, Jesus marveled because of their unbelief. Just a reminder of where we were last time. So this whole section, chapter four and five, we saw the great Savior. Jesus revealed himself as a very great Savior who can save us from death, from sickness, from Satan. He can raise the dead.

And yet, Mark puts here, immediately after that revelation, the response of his hometown is tumbleweed.

They hear of these things and they say, no, doesn't make sense. Verse two, how are such mighty works done by his hands? Is this not the carpenter?

They take offense. And Jesus is astonished. It's the only thing that Jesus marvels at in the whole gospel. Lots of people marvel at Jesus, but six, verse six, this is the one thing that Jesus marvels at, their unbelief. He's amazed, amazing unbelief. And well might we marvel today.

But the question is, why? Why such unresponsiveness? Why even despite so much revelation of Jesus, so much evidence given, he's raised a daughter, a girl from the dead. He's calmed a storm with a word.

[6 : 37] And perhaps we might think, in the context of the response, we might think, well there's something wrong with Jesus.

And there's something wrong with the gospel. We're very tempted to think that. I don't know if that's the case for you, has been for me. And Herod gives us the answer. That's why I think Mark puts in this long account of Herod.

Herod, the case study in human nature, the case study in the human response to the gospel. Who was Herod? Herod was one of the two key political leaders at the time of Jesus.

You had Herod and Pilate. They didn't get on, by the way. Herod was the king of the Jews. Pilate was the Roman governor. They didn't get on until actually the very end of Jesus' life, when they both bonded over their response and mocking of Jesus.

You can see that Herod was the Jewish king in verse 14 there. King Herod, that's how he's described. And he serves as a case study of human nature. Herod's story is the story of someone who was deeply struck by God's word, but in the end was unwilling to leave behind his sin.

[7 : 59] In recent weeks, we've had too many reasons to look under the bonnet of our car. I've been lifting the bonnet again and again. You might have noticed the sad absence of a Ford C-Max style in the car park.

It's been scrapped. Lifting the bonnet, though, here God lifts the bonnet. It's the illustration. Here God lifts the bonnet of unbelief to show us what's really going on underneath.

And when we lift the bonnet, we see that unbelief is not, as we think it is, a matter of the intellect and the mind, but it is a matter of the heart and the desires.

That's what we're going to see. Well, let's look at this together. At one point today, really, under the bonnet, the real reason people don't believe is that they don't want to repent. Look down at verse 14.

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.

[9 : 08] They can't deny, notice, they can't deny that the miraculous powers are at work in him. They're trying to draw a conclusion from that. Others say he's Elijah, and others said he's a prophet, like one of the prophets of old.

But Herod, when Herod heard of it, he said, John, whom I beheaded, has been raised. Herod hears, therefore, of all the great miracles that Jesus is doing.

He can't deny them. And he comes to this strange conclusion. Verse 16. Herod has been raised from the dead. John the Baptist has been raised from the dead.

Notice it is a confident conclusion from Herod. There's no shortage of confidence. I know who he is. He's a prophet. John the Baptist raised from the dead.

Notice it is the wrong conclusion. And we know that as readers of Mark's Gospel. Chapter 1, verse 1. Jesus the Christ, the Son of God. But Herod concludes that he is just a messenger.

[10 : 11] In other words, Herod will believe anything about Jesus. Except that he's the Son of God, the King of Kings. He has a claim on his life.

He's very happy to believe there's some kind of miraculous thing going on. But in the end, he's just a messenger. Anything but the Son. And that's what we see today, too.

Actually, this kind of conclusion about Jesus is everywhere. As long as Jesus is just a messenger, he can be a very special messenger.

He can be a great teacher. He can be a prophet. But as long as he's just a messenger and not God's eternal king who has a claim on our lives, well, then we can take him or leave him.

Islam, Jesus, one of the prophets. Secular humanism, Jesus, one of the great teachers, philosophers. It's the same thing.

[11 : 12] As long as he's just a messenger, that's okay. So Mark begins by describing Herod's unbelief, but the key here is in the rest of the section because he then gives the backstory of that unbelief.

What decisions led up to that conclusion? In other words, he lifts the bonnet. And we see that the real reason that Herod refused to accept the gospel is that he didn't want to repent of sin.

Just look at verse 17. 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.

For John had been saying to Herod, it is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife. Herod. Actually, his brother Philip is also a well-known character in history.

He was a ruler of another province. But Herod nabbed his brother's wife, entered into an adulterous relationship with her.

[12 : 25] Philip was still alive. Poor old Charles. He's going to be mentioned again now. He's mentioned at the beginning of the service. But remember Charles and Camilla, Charles admitted in the 90s that he had entered into an adulterous affair with Camilla while he was still married to Diana.

Well, Charles, as he did that, was following in Herod's footsteps. Don't get the wrong impression as well. Don't get the wrong idea of this relationship. I mean, perhaps Herod and Herodias were very much in love.

There's nothing to suggest that they weren't. They may well have been committed to each other. She's certainly very committed to him. She's a willing party. Love letters probably exchanged. Perhaps they realized that each other was the one, the love of their life.

Doubtless Herodias was a real beauty, hence why Herod wanted her. But it was an adulterous relationship outside of God's design for marriage between one man and one woman for life.

She was the wife of another man. And so John the Baptist openly said to Herod in verse 18, this is wrong. You need to repent of sin.

[13:43] And so Herod, like any self-respecting king, arrests John, puts him in prison, probably because of his hurt pride, but also for the sake of Herodias.

He wanted him dead. Do you see that? Herodias had a grudge and wanted him to be put to death in verse 19. But Herod couldn't bring himself to actually kill John.

Do you see that in verse 20? 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.

Now this is really fascinating. Herod knew deep down who John was. He knew that John was a prophet of God.

He feared to actually kill him. And more remarkable than that, do you see he loved listening to him? He heard him gladly.

[14:44] Can you imagine the scene? Herod nips down, perhaps every day, to the cellar prison, and says to John through the bars, tell me more.

I want to hear more. He heard him gladly. What was John saying to Herod through the bars of the prison? Well, we know what John's message was.

It was the gospel. Turn back in your Bibles to chapter 1, verse 4. Let me show you this. Chapter 1, verse 4.

John the Baptist appeared, baptizing in the wilderness, and proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. Verse 7, preaching after me comes one who is mightier than I.

He will baptize with the Spirit. What was John the Baptist's message? It was the gospel. That's what Herod was listening to in chapter 6, verse 20.

[15:45] Okay. Come back to chapter 6. When Herod heard the gospel, he was greatly perplexed. Do you see that? Now, literally, that word means confused, unsettled, caused to doubt his own position, caused to doubt his worldview.

He was unsettled. In other words, John's words cut deeper into him than he had bargained for. Am I right?

He began to ask. These words seem so true. Deep down, he knew that God's words to him in the gospel were true.

Actually, so many today experience the same thing when we come to the Bible and to the gospel, which, by the way, is, I think, why many don't even want to open the Bible.

We know what we'll find in the Bible. We'll find the penetrating word of God. That's what Herod found.

[16:55] And yet, he did not repent of his sin. He loved listening, but he held God at arm's length. Because in the end, why?

Because in the end, he did not want to let go of the life that he was making for himself or of the relationship that he desired. Even though to do so would be to come into and enjoy the relationship with God, with the Lord Jesus Christ, that would truly satisfy him forever.

Well, what happened next? I don't know if you remember snowballs. It's hard to conceive of a snowball at the moment. But, and I certainly can't remember the last time I actually had the pleasure of throwing a snowball at someone or being the recipient.

However, there are two things that you can do with snowballs. You can throw them at each other. The other thing is you can roll them down a hill. Have you ever done that? And it gathers more and more snow and more and more momentum. Now, Herod's sin, you might say, snowballs in the rest of this section.

section. This is a chain of events that led him from sexual sin to an even greater wickedness of murdering God's prophet in the most gruesome way, his head on a plate.

[18:11] It all happens because he doesn't repent of the original sin. At verse 21, do you see, an opportunity came. Puzzling that, isn't it?

An opportunity for who? Well, for Herodias. But actually, for sin. Herod, I think, gets trapped, in one sense, by Herodias, but really, in a greater way, he gets trapped by his own sin.

Herodias, after all, is only there because of his decision. It snowballs, this raucous party. Drunkenness, almost certainly. A sordid sexual immorality as Herodias' daughter, his own niece, comes in and dances for him.

It's not any kind of dance, is it? Foolish pride offering this girl half his kingdom by oath, intoxicated by his own power.

Have half my kingdom. And then trapped, in the end, with the choice between, on the one hand, murdering God's prophet, who he knew to be God's prophet, and, on the other hand, losing face.

[19:28] And we know which one he chose, albeit reluctantly. But in the end, he was trapped by his own snowballing sin to reject God in the most wicked way.

What is the point? Well, under the bonnet of unbelief is unrepentance. That's the point. Herod is a case study of human nature.

We might phrase it another way. And that is this. Even when Jesus has revealed himself clearly as the very great saviour, we, by nature, would rather have sin than the saviour.

We would rather cling to the fleeting pleasures of sin than to grasp hold of the eternal joys of God's salvation in Jesus Christ.

Does that not describe each one of us by nature? The problem is not with Jesus or with the gospel.

[20:40] unbelief is not a matter of the mind but of the heart. Now, this has all kinds of implications in all kinds of directions.

We're just going to pause on three. Number one, expectation, unbelief. but know the real reason why. I remember sitting, reading the whole of John's gospel with a really lovely guy in the city and he enjoyed our times together, I think.

I enjoyed our times together. He engaged. He really loved listening and asked questions and seemed to understand. But as far as I know, he never responded.

Always listening. Never acting. I'm thankful for many who have, and many of us are thankful for many who've come to faith through this course that is run across the country and across the world called Christianity Explored.

Some of us have done it and are actually doing it even now. But you ask anyone who's run one of those courses and they will tell you of many more who have engaged, seemed really struck, moved even by the words of Jesus and yet, in the end, no response.

[22:01] Why? Lift the bonnet. There will be an attachment there, a lifestyle that a person is not willing to give up. It's not an insignificant thing that Herod chose instead of Jesus a relationship.

He wanted Herodias, though she was not his wife. And so often, this is the way. It's a relationship, it's a lifestyle in this area of sex and relationships.

That is the thing so often that actually people go, I hear what you're saying, Jesus. To be honest, I've got no real reason to disbelieve, but I just want this instead.

And can I just level a warning at the Christian person here today? If you are engaging in any sexual activity of any kind outside of lifelong marriage between one man and one woman, that includes what we're watching online, you must repent.

You must repent. If you don't, your sin will snowball and you will end up like Herod did. An even more fundamental thing, I think, that Mark shows us than relationships, which is so often at the heart of our unrepentance.

[23 : 35] Even more fundamental thing, did you notice that repeated word, the way he describes Herod as king? King Herod, verse 14. And actually, towards the end, he just gives up on the word Herod and starts describing him only as the king, the king.

See verse 22, the king. He said to the girl, verse 23, or is it verse 25, I should say, the king.

Verse 26, the king was exceedingly sorry. Verse 27, the king. He said to the exodus. Herod was the king, but I think Mark's point here is that he enjoyed being the king.

There was no room in his life for any other king, only room in his life for one king. And that was himself. He would decide what relationships he engaged in, thank you very much.

He wouldn't let anyone tell him who he should be and who he should sleep with, not even God. Herod was not prepared to relinquish his self-rule.

[24 : 43] He was marching to the beat of his own drum. He made no apologies. This was him. The tragedy is that the rule of Jesus in our lives, as we've been seeing, is so much better than our own, overflowingly better.

Jesus sets us free. He gives us life, purpose, now and forever. But we say, by nature, with Herod, we say, no.

My life, my way, my autonomy, King Herod. In my experience, quite often, people are honest enough to say, when I'm reading the Bible with them, perhaps, look, I can't see anything wrong with Jesus.

I just don't want to give up control to him. I'm not ready to do that. I remember a lovely guy, another different guy, reading the Bible in the city. I kept asking him, what are your objections to the gospel?

And he said, none really. I just don't want to give up control. It's so tragic. Sin's pleasure is so fleeting.

[25 : 59] Just think of this relationship with Herod, with Herodias. How long did that last? What were the benefits of that? A few butterflies, at first, perhaps at best. Then what?

Where's Herod now? Expect unbelief, but understand the real reason. There is nothing wrong with Jesus. We talk about apathy in your workplaces, don't we?

Apathy to the gospel, apathy in our society. Is that really right? Is it apathy? I don't think so. Is it that we know what we'll find when we come to Jesus?

A saviour, yes, who calls us to repent. Secondly, a warning, there is no fence with Jesus.

Just to speak to someone who's looking in on the Christian faith and listening. Or to speak to you if you would call yourself a Christian, perhaps say many positive things about Jesus, but honestly, when you look at your life, there's no actual evidence of change.

[27 : 10] change. He's an idea rather than a king in your life. Well, the warning here is that there is no fence with Jesus and with the gospel.

Herod tried to sit on it, but he found that it did not exist. Herod wanted to be always listening and never responding. Herod wanted to stay neutral, but there is no neutrality with Jesus.

The question is not, do I like listening to the Bible? Herod did. The question is not, can I say positive things about Jesus, about God, about Christianity?

Herod could do all of those things. The question is, am I willing to surrender my life to Jesus, to leave behind my sin?

because without repentance, there is no Jesus. There is no Jesus without repentance. If we want to enjoy the forgiveness, the life, the hope that Jesus brings, we must repent.

[28 : 21] Just look down at verse 12. What message did he send his disciples out with? One word, repent.

There's no Jesus without repentance. But as we surrender our lives to Jesus, turn away from our old lives of sin, we find the very joy, the very life, the very freedom, the very love that we seek in sin, but we'll never find.

And just a very brief word, finally, gratefulness, but for the grace of God, Herod, go I.

Now, I said this in the city this week, and people just looked at me completely. What does that mean? There is a phrase, but for the grace of God, there, go I.

But for the grace of God, Herod, go I. It's my nature. I know it of myself. You should know it of yourself, too. None of us would have chosen the Savior instead of sin.

[29 : 31] None of us would have chosen the eternal joys of God's heaven instead of the fleeting pleasures of sin, were it not for God's gift of grace in our lives to rescue us from our sin.

And if you're following Christ, therefore, humble gratefulness in light of this passage that he has rescued you from the trap of our sin.

Well, let's pray. Father in heaven, we bow before you now as a very, very deeply gracious God who has rescued us from the trajectory of Herod that we all would have followed.

We praise and thank you that you have opened our eyes to save us, to give us the gift of repentance that we never would have chosen.

Father, thank you for your grace in each of our lives. Help us not to judge one another. Help us to be humble and grateful. Help us when we see others struggling in this area, not to judge but to help.

[30 : 54] And we pray that you would help us to be prayerful on our knees for those around us who we know who desperately need rescue and sight.

And we ask these things in Jesus' name. Amen.