

Introduction

Weeks ago a date was selected on which to highlight and remember the persecuted church. It was more of a logistical decision than anything else. It was to be today, November 10. In the good and sweet providence of God, he wed together this emphasis with this morning's text. As you will soon discover, there could hardly be a more appropriate text when thinking on those who are persecuted for the name of Jesus Christ. And that is just the way the Lord works. Working through this text this week, I realize in a deeper way the importance of our remembering the persecuted church. It is as much for our own sake as it is for theirs. I hope that will become abundantly clear to you as we study the execution of John the Baptist this morning.

[Read Text; Pray]

The scene set before us by this text is filled with images that are graphic and lead to sensations that are charged with drama. It feels as if we've been dropped off in the middle of an ancient soap opera. We have an adulterous ruler. He is identified as Herod the tetrarch. Tetrarch means ruler of one-fourth of a kingdom. His name was Antipas. He was one of several sons of Herod the Great. That Herod was the king in Jerusalem who slaughtered all the male children in and around Bethlehem at the birth of Jesus. He even executed his own sons for suspicion of conspiracy. Antipas was one he did not execute. Philip was another. They were made rulers over separate territories near Galilee. Antipas resided in Tiberias, a city on the western coast of the Sea of Galilee.

He married the daughter of a king of another nearby territory, whose name was something close to "Phyllis." But on a visit to Rome, Antipas met Herodias. She was the daughter of Aristobulus, another son of Herod the great and half-brother to Antipas. When they met, Herodias was the wife of Antipas's half-brother Philip. Antipas seduced and persuaded Herodias to come to Tiberias and become his wife. Phyllis was humiliated, as was her

father, Aretas. He went to war against Antipas and defeated him. Roman intervention alone kept Herod Antipas from losing everything.

The adulterous and incestuous marriage also came to the attention of a prophet who was preaching in the area. A revival was taking pace among the locals, the Jews. They were pouring out of the cities and villages to the barren wilderness to hear the convicting and revivalistic preaching of a man who wore rough clothing and lived off of locusts and wild honey. The prophet was John the Baptist. This prophet was announcing the nearness of the kingdom. He was preaching against sin and urging people to prepare for the kingdom by repenting of their sins. He was not a leaf blown about by the wind but a fearless preacher of truth. At some point, he directly and ongoingly confronted the tetrarch for his lawless relationship with Herodias. He had been saying, "It is not lawful for you to have her."

People do not like to be accused of sin. Their guilt is heavy enough without it. Neither Herod nor Herodias appreciated the public reprimand, to say the least. So Herod seized John and bound him and put him in prison. It was a dungeon deep under Herod's second palace near the Dead Sea. It would have been a most unpleasant experience—no natural light but plenty of foul, dank air. John spent at least a year in those conditions.

Finally he was executed. It came about on the birthday of Antipas. The Romans were known for their extravagant parties. Rich and exotic foods were served impressively on ornate platters. Wine and strong drink flowed freely. And there was always entertainment. Center-stage at Herod's party was a dancer. Her name was Salome. Herodius's daughter delighted Herod with her dance so much that he offered her anything she might want up to half of his kingdom. That is a mind-boggling offer. After consulting with her mother, she asked for the head of John the Baptist on a platter. What a grizzly request! Herodias and her daughter appear to have been psychotic. What evil resides in the sinful nature! If left to ourselves, the darkness in the heart of every person has horrific potential for unimaginable wickedness. People love the darkness and hate the light. And they hate the light shone by the bearers of light with incredible acrimony.

The book of Revelation (11) depicts disciples of Christ as two witnesses. At a climactic moment, they are killed and the nations gaze at their bodies in triumph. They rejoice over them and make merry and exchange presents in celebration because these two prophets had been a torment to them. That same sense of jubilation permeates the depiction of Salome as she receives the party platter bearing the head of the slain prophet and presents it to her mother. She could have had anything at the disposal of Herod, and she chose the head of a prophet. Killing the messenger of God, they deceived themselves thinking they had escaped God himself.

Quite in contrast to the glee of the palace, the disciples of John are grieved. They treat his headless body with honor taking and burying it. Then they carry their broken hearts and the sad news to Jesus. He is exactly the one to whom we can go when our hearts are heavy. He heals the broken hearted and binds up our wounds.

And all of this is a flashback. The details of John's arrest and execution are provided by Matthew to explain what was being said by Herod Antipas. Word of Jesus' growing fame spread through the walls of his palace in Tiberias. Hearing of the miraculous works, Antipas concluded it must be a resurrected John the Baptist.

A number of important truths are highlighted vividly in this text. I want to present them to you this morning under two headings.

First, I want you to see . . .

I. The Misery of Living in Fear.

A. When we consider Matthew's account, Herod stands out as a miserable and fearful man. He fears everyone and everything but God. And he is tormented. It jumps out at us at the outset of the chapter. The fame of Jesus was spreading throughout Galilee which was part of Herod's territory. It is no wonder that news of the miracles and of the preaching reached his palace. What is interesting is how he interpreted the news. He said to his servants, "This is John the Baptist. He has been raised from the dead; that is why these miraculous powers are at work in him."

As we know, Jesus was not John the Baptist. But Herod's conscience was weighed down with guilt and fear. He concluded that in killing John, he had unleashed a greater threat to himself than John had been when he was alive. Herod was paranoid. It would be completely reasonable to see how a man such as Herod could be prone to such a delusion. Clearly he was not a man of great skill or wisdom. He was a man of privilege in a world of dog-eat-dog. And his selfish pursuits had embittered people against him. He feared that John the Baptist was reincarnated from the dead with supernatural powers. Undoubtedly John would be visiting him soon to exact vengeance. Killing John had not eliminated the threat. It had only made him stronger. Herod was haunted by his evil actions and he could not escape.

He not only feared a resurrected John. He also feared the people. Verse 5 indicates that Herod had wanted to kill John all along, but he had arrested him and put him in prison because he feared the people. He had been afraid that if he killed John, the public would rise up against him.

That's not the end of Herod's fear. He also feared for his reputation. After the dance of Salome, Herod made a ridiculous offer. Who could have imagined that given the opportunity for anything in the territory, she would ask for the head of John the Baptist. But he SWORE with OATHS he would do ANYTHING she asked. Because of his guests and because of his oaths he gave the command. Still fearing for the consequences of executing John, he feared even more the loss of his reputation. So in fear against fear he fulfilled the request for the head of John the Baptist on a party platter.

He is a man who feared everyone and everything but God. Fear and anxiety engulfed his soul. And there was no escape. The result was an insane paranoia. Clearly, Herod had the sense that his wrongs and his guilt would catch up to him and that there was no escape. It was just a matter of time. He lived in agitation from a haunting fear.

In actuality, this fear was completely legitimate. It is not irrational at all. The Bible says, "Be sure your sin will find you out." You cannot commit sin without it coming back to bite. You can't escape your wickedness. It will

catch up to you. God holds all people accountable for their wickedness. We often look at sin as offense and injury we do to other people, but fundamentally, all sin is committed against God. And no one will escape answering to God for it. No one wants to believe this. They think by ignoring it, it will just go away. So when someone reminds you of your sin, you do not like that person. That is why Cain killed Abel. It is why the Pharisees wanted to kill Jesus. It is why the world mistreats the followers of Christ who seek to live in holiness and who call a sin a sin. The hostility towards light-bearers indicates an inward misery that is an inescapable result of fear. There is the fear of being found out. There is the fear of justice being carried out. And it will be. God will do it. He will by no means clear the guilty.

None of us have executed John the Baptist, but we have murder in our hearts. People have offended us. People have wronged us. And we have hated them. Anger is the root of hate and murder. 1 John 3:15 tells us that everyone who hates his brother is a murderer. We have all sinned and fall short of the glory of God. We bear the guilt of our sins.

But guilt can actually be your friend! Thank God for guilt. Thank God for conviction. If that guilt will drive you to the God against whom you have sinned, it is a very good thing. The fact of the matter is that the preaching ministry of John not only uncovered and disclosed sin but actually also offered hope of forgiveness. The apex of his message was this: he pointed to Jesus and cried out, "Behold, the Lamb, that takes away the sin of the world!"

You do not have to live in the misery of fear. You can live in the joy and peace. Isaiah cries out, "Come, let us reason together, says the Lord, though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; and though they are red like crimson, they shall become like wool."

God has provided Jesus, the lamb of God, to restore sinners and to spare us from what we deserve. But sinners must acknowledge their sin. They must leave it; they must turn from it; and they must trust in the sacrifice provided. Guilty sinners are declared righteous as God's gift. This gift is received by those who believe, who trust in Jesus Christ and his justice-satisfying death on the cross. This is good news to people who live in the

misery of fear. There is peace with God in Jesus Christ for those who will believe. Herod lacked this peace. What about you?

II. The Blessing of Living in Faith.

There is misery living in fear, but there is incredible blessing living in faith.

A. Living in faith is set before us by the life of John the Baptist. He was a fearless prophet. What a blessing to be fearless! On the one hand we have a ruler who is full of fear, and on the other hand we have a prophet who is fearless. The ruler feared everyone and everything but God. The prophet feared nothing and no one except God. He loved and sought first the kingdom of God and his righteousness. And he was not ruled by fear but experienced peace.

I would not be surprised if John regularly meditated on Psalm 27. "The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? The Lord is the stronghold of my life; of whom shall I be afraid? When evil doers assail me to eat up my flesh, my adversaries and my foes, it is they who stumble and fall. Though an army encamp against me, my heart shall not fear; though war arise against me, yet I will be confident. One thing have I asked of the Lord; that will I seek after: that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to gaze upon the beauty of the Lord and to inquire in his temple."

There are several marks of John the Baptist that indicate he was at peace in the Lord, that he feared him only, and that he sought him above all things. He went out to the wilderness to live. He wasn't in search of material wealth and prosperity. He ate honey and locusts. He was not dependent upon rich and wonderful foods; he lived meagerly. He devoted his life to preaching the coming of the kingdom. He was willing to confront sin on God's behalf. He did not let his popularity go to his head. When Jesus came along and he declared him to be the lamb of God for which he was sent as a forerunner, he also declared, "he must increase, and I must decrease." He preached the truth without compromise. Even when he stood before rulers possessing the authority to arrest him and even kill him, he did not compromise the message. And when persecution came he did not flinch.

They call it the age of sail. They were the days when battleships were powered by the wind. In those days navies would engage in combat only when flying their nation's flag. If a ship reached a point of surrender, the crew would lower the flag; they would take down the colors. They were conceding defeat. On occasion a captain would be determined that there would be no concession, no surrender, and no turning back. He would give the order to "nail the colors to the mast." The order demanded that nails would be driven through the colors into the mast because no circumstance was going to arise in which the ship would back down from the fight.

That is John the Baptist. No flinching, no compromise, and no retreat even in the face of persecution and even with the threat of death. He was a man of faith and peace.

B. We must not be startled as we see here the outcome of such living in faith. John was hated. He was treated with contempt. He was imprisoned. He was executed. John fits the profile in Hebrews 11 of those who BY FAITH endured great suffering. There we read, "Some were tortured, refusing to accept release, so that they might rise again to a better life. Others suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. They were stoned, they were sawn in two, they were killed with the sword. They went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, afflicted, mistreated—of whom the world was not worthy." All these were commended through their faith.

We need to pay close attention to our understanding of suffering. We tend to associate God's blessing with the absence of suffering. However, John the Baptist's experience challenges that notion. Truly, if we fear God and live in faith, we can experience peace, true peace, deep peace. But it does not necessarily mean no suffering. To suffer for the name of Christ is NOT a strange thing. To NOT suffer for the name is the strange thing. Peter writes, "Beloved, do NOT be SURPRISED at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though some STRANGE THING were happening to you. **But rejoice insofar as you share Christ sufferings . . . If you are insulted for the name of Christ, you are blessed.**" (1 Pe 4:12-13)

Listen, Peter is telling his readers to do just like he did. In Acts 5, the apostles found themselves in prison for teaching in the name of Jesus. They were then beaten and told to cease speaking in his name. Verse 41 says, "then they left the presence of the council, REJOICING that they were COUNTED WORTHY to suffer dishonor for the name."

How do we know that we are blessed in this life? What is the true indicator of blessing? If we ask the disciples on their way out of the council, they tell us, the blessing is in the beating. Why does that sound so strange to us? Is it perhaps that we have come to equate blessing with material wealth? And with good health? And with smooth circumstances? And with people treating us nicely?

But the Bible teaches us that it is not the king in the castle who is blessed; it is the prophet in the dungeon for the sake of righteousness who is blessed. Suffering for Christ is an honor and privilege. It is hard and it is painful. But pain is not proof of God's displeasure. Do you hear what the Bible is saying? If John the Baptist, a man of such great faith, humility, and boldness was blessed to suffer for the cause of Christ, why should we expect anything else?

Conclusion

Like John, large numbers in the world experience many of the blessings of pain that result from following Christ. Christians all over the world are pressured, arrested, attacked, imprisoned, tortured, and killed for their faith. We need to be mindful of their plight. There are two really good reasons.

1. So that we can minister to them in their suffering, like John's disciples must have been ministering to him. Hebrews 13:3 says, "Remember those who are in prison, as though in prison with them, and those who are mistreated, since you also are in the body." We can pray for them. We can support Christian ministries, such as Open Doors, which seek to stand with persecuted Christians around the world.

2. And yet there is another incredible reason why we need to be mindful of persecuted believers. It is so we can serve them, but also to allow them to

serve us. The persecuted church can greatly help us who live in the lap of relative ease and luxury here in the United States. You see, when we consider the persecuted saints in the world, when we come face-to-face with the kinds of things they suffer, we are treated to a glorious display of faith. We see in them how much they value Jesus, how much they love the kingdom of heaven; how much they value righteousness. They show us the kind of mindset we ourselves need to have for living in righteousness, for being faithful in obedience to Christ no matter what the cost.

Maybe we will not have to be beaten for Jesus' sake, but are we willing to receive insults? We too are called to deny ourselves and take up our cross. That is essential to considering the interests of others more important than ourselves. It is imperative to cultivate the heart of a servant, to be willing to absorb the mistreatment of others without harboring bitterness. Are we willing to pay whatever the price to do the right thing? Can we do it with joy for the Jesus' sake who suffered so much for us?

Persecuted saints teach us that the height and depth of our blessings must not be measured in terms of our comforts and our ease and our health and how smoothly things go for us. They teach us to be bold in our public confession of Christ. Many risk their lives. We should be emboldened by their example, counting it a blessing for anything we must suffer for the name of our glorious Lord.

A question arises out of this text for every Christian. The question is whether we can embrace pain and suffering, not just persecution or beating for being a Christian, but loss to ourselves for the purpose of serving Christ and blessing others in his name, for the purpose of simply living in godliness? Can we consider John this morning and the persecuted church of today and the centuries, can we consider them and let ourselves be encouraged to selfless living? Can we learn to see that faithfulness to Jesus itself is blessing? I pray we can.