

# The Faithful Courage of John the Baptist

*Matthew 14:1-12*

At that time Herod the tetrarch heard the news about Jesus, and said to his servants, "This is John the Baptist; he has risen from the dead, and that is why miraculous powers are at work in him." For when Herod had John arrested, he bound him and put him in prison because of Herodias, the wife of his brother Philip. For John had been saying to him, "It is not lawful for you to have her." And although Herod wanted to put him to death, he feared the crowd, because they were regarding John as a prophet. But when Herod's birthday came, the daughter of Herodias danced before them and pleased Herod, so much that he promised with an oath to give her whatever she asked. Now having been prompted by her mother, she said, "Give me here on a platter the head of John the Baptist." And although he was grieved, the king commanded it to be given because of his oaths, and because of his dinner guests. And he sent and had John beheaded in the prison. And his head was brought on a platter and given to the girl, and she brought it to her mother. And his disciples came and took away the body and buried it; and they went and reported to Jesus. (Matthew 14:1-12)

## LET'S TALK ABOUT HEROD ANTIPAS

Antipas was the son of Herod the Great and his sixth wife, Mariamne. He was raised and educated in Rome, where he made a lot of political connections. His father, Herod the Great, died in 4 B.C. Antipas had been led to believe that he would inherit his father's kingdom (which was just a region of the Roman empire). Antipas learned, though, that right before his death, his father had changed his will and divided his territory between his sister Salome and his sons Antipas and Archelaus. Both Antipas and Archelaus traveled to Rome to convince Augustus Caesar to choose just one ruler, but Augustus followed their father's will. Archelaus became the ruler of Judah, Salome ruled over several smaller areas, and Antipas became the ruler of the regions of Galilee and Perea, east of the Jordan River and part of the Dead Sea. Antipas was a builder; he constructed walls around Sepphoris, making it the capital of Galilee, and built the city of Tiberius on the Sea of Galilee.

Antipas was first married to Phasaelis, the daughter of Aretas IV, king of Nabaetha; the capital city was Petra (from Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade). While on a trip to Rome to visit his brother Philip, Antipas began an adulterous relationship with Philip's wife, Herodias. Each of them divorced their spouses and married each other. Herodias brought with her Salome, her daughter with Philip. Aretas, the father of Phasaelis, was understandably angry that Antipas had insulted his daughter that way. Tensions rose for several years until war broke out in 37 A.D. Antipas was rescued by the Roman army, which was not defending him but the territory he governed. Emperor Gaius Caligula banished Antipas and Herodias to Gaul, modern-day France, considered the boondocks at the time.

But our story takes place several years before the war broke out. At the time that concerns us, Antipas was a man under many pressures. He was certainly under pressure from Aretas IV who was deeply offended at the insult shown to his daughter. He was under pressure from Rome to resolve the conflict with the Nabatean kingdom; Rome valued peace because peace was profitable. He was under pressure from the people of Galilee, who despised him as an ungodly, violent despot. He was under pressure from John the Baptist, who was publicly calling him to repent for his sin of marrying Herodias. And he was under pressure from Herodias because of the preaching of John the Baptist.

**TRANSITION:** Let's talk about John.

## **SO LET'S TALK ABOUT JOHN THE BAPTIST**

John was the son of the priest Zacharias and his wife, Elizabeth. Elizabeth had

been barren her whole life, but they continued to pray for a child. The time came when Zacharias was offering incense in the sanctuary and praying for a child, and the angel Gabriel came to him in the sanctuary. Among other things, Gabriel said this about the son to be born:

“he will turn many of the sons of Israel back to the Lord their God. And he will go before Him in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers back to the children, and the disobedient to the attitude of the righteous, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.” (Luke 1:16-17)

How would the child do this? We learn once his ministry begins:

the word of God came to John, the son of Zechariah, in the wilderness. And he came into all the district around the Jordan, **preaching** a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins (Luke 3:2-3)

He preached repentance to everyone: crowds, tax collectors, soldiers, Pharisees, Sadducees, and so on. John didn't filter his preaching based on his audience. He called men and women from every layer of society to repent of their sins and return to Yahweh.

**TRANSITION:** And that leads us to our passage today.

## JOHN'S BOLDNESS

At that time, Herod the tetrarch heard the news about Jesus and said to his servants, “This is John the Baptist; he has risen from the dead, and that is why miraculous powers are at work in him.” For when Herod had John arrested, he bound him and put him in prison because of Herodias, the wife of his brother Philip. For John had been saying to him, “It is not lawful for you to have her.” And although Herod wanted to put him to death, he feared the crowd, because they were regarding John as a prophet. (Matthew 14:1-5)

John preached repentance to Antipas. Antipas had violated Leviticus 18:16,

You shall not uncover the nakedness of your brother's wife; it is your brother's nakedness. (Leviticus 18:16)

**Here's a point to remember:** the moral Law of God applies to all humanity. The civil law applied to Israel as a nation. The ceremonial Law applied to Jews as worshipers of God. But the moral law applies to all men and women everywhere.

If you read the moral Law of God, which is summarized in the 5<sup>th</sup> through 9<sup>th</sup> commandments but expanded on elsewhere in Scripture, you will find the same moral standards that have been recognized by every culture through the millennia. Parents are to be honored. Murder is prohibited. Adultery was completely wrong until not very long ago; even today adulterers might defend THEIR immorality but hate it when their spouses commit adultery. Obviously, no culture values stealing or lying. And you don't go and steal your brother's wife. It's wicked. It's wrong.

This morality isn't historical Jewish morality. It is also Chinese morality, British morality, German morality, and Ethiopian morality. There are many variables in cultures and many different values and concerns. But these basics are almost entirely universal.

We see in the Scriptures that John preached the same message of repentance to everyone. He preached to people from Jerusalem, Judea, and all around the Jordan, which would include Antipas' territory. He preached to Pharisees and Sadducees and priests and Levites. He preached to the crowds at large, to the rich and poor, to tax collectors and soldiers. There was just one requirement to receive John's baptism:

confession of sin.

John came as the fulfillment of prophecy,

as it is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet, “The voice of one crying in the wilderness, ‘Make ready the way of the Lord, make His paths straight. Every ravine will be filled, and every mountain and hill will be brought low; the crooked will be straight, and the rough roads smooth. And all flesh will see the salvation of God.’” (Luke 3:4-6)

Hearts were made ready to see the salvation of God through repentance and confession. Every obstacle to redemption was to be removed. And all flesh – not every person without exception, but every kind of person without distinction – would see the salvation of God.

And Antipas was included in John’s preaching.

Matthew 14:4 says that John **had been saying to Antipas, “It is not lawful for you to have her.”** The verbal form of **had been saying** tells us that he repeated it over and over. John didn’t say it once to make his point and then move on. As long as Antipas and Herodias continued to flaunt their sin publicly, John continued to rebuke them for their sin publicly.

I should say that John was not trying to legislate morality or change the culture through protest and opposition. John was simply preaching the Word of God and calling every person within hearing to respond positively with repentance, confession, and faith. John was not trying to reform government; he sought to bring Antipas and Herodias, and everyone who heard him, back to their Creator.

And he will turn many of the sons of Israel back to the Lord their God. And he will go before Him in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers back to the children, and the disobedient to the attitude of the righteous, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.” (Luke 1:16-17)

But unlike most of the people who John confronted, Antipas had power. He was like a coiled snake, filled with fear, ready to strike. He had power, soldiers, and a fortress prison called Machaerus, in Perea, well out of the reach of angry crowds. Antipas wanted John dead, but he was afraid of the people, who rightly considered John a prophet of God.

**Here’s another point to remember.** There may be nothing as dangerous as a weak man who possesses power. Antipas was being pressured from every side: by his former father-in-law, Rome, the people of Israel, the religious establishment, and his wife, Herodias. He could do very little about them, but he could do something about John. So he had him arrested . . . but then what? He wanted to silence John forever but was afraid of the people. He couldn’t admit he made a mistake in arresting John; weak men with power never do that. And he wasn’t about to repent of his sin; his worldly position meant too much to him. So he kept John imprisoned for two years (according to Josephus).

And then his birthday rolled around, and he threw a party in his own honor.

But when Herod’s birthday came, the daughter of Herodias danced before them and pleased Herod, so much that he promised with an oath to give her whatever she asked. Now having been prompted by her mother, she said, “Give me here on a platter the head of John the Baptist.” And although he was grieved, the king commanded it to be given because of his oaths, and because of his dinner guests. And he sent and had John beheaded in the prison. And his head was brought on a platter and given to the girl, and she brought it to her mother. (Matthew 14:6-11)

We are told that Antipas was grieved at this. He wanted John dead, so I don't think his displeasure was over John's death as much as not wanting to face the consequences that would surely follow. But, being a weak man, he had John beheaded, and not only beheaded but shamed. His head was placed on a platter and brought to the girl, who gave it to her mother, Herodias. Antipas rolled up his sleeve and flexed his arm, and proved to everyone just how powerful he was. Yet all he proved, in the end, was his weakness.

**TRANSITION:** Let's go back to the beginning.

## SUPERSTITIOUS FEAR

At that time Herod the tetrarch heard the news about Jesus, and said to his servants, "This is John the Baptist; he has risen from the dead, and that is why miraculous powers are at work in him." (Matthew 14:1-2)

Edgar Allen Poe wrote a story called *The Telltale Heart*, about a man who murdered someone and buried him under the floorboards. Eventually, the police come to investigate the man's disappearance and sit in the very room beneath which the victim is buried. The murderer begins to hear the victim's heart beating, louder and louder until he bursts out a confession of his crime. Of course, the heartbeat he heard was not the poor victim's, but his own. Guilt threw him into a panic.

Antipas' reaction to the news about Jesus was not the reasoning of a rational man. It is the panicked speculation of a guilty soul. Here's the thing: his sin and guilt made him fearful of the only Man who could have relieved his guilt and offered him peace.

## COURAGEOUS FAITH

John possessed courageous faith, faith worth emulating. Here's what I see in John that should be an encouragement to us.

**John was firmly rooted in the truth of God's Word.** God's Law carried authority over every human being: Jew and Gentile, slave and free, male and female. God's Law ignores social barriers, wealth, education, and privilege. It also ignores poverty, injustice, and victimhood. Our biggest problem is not how we are treated by others, but how we relate to our Creator.

**John was utterly convinced of God's righteousness and justice.** He didn't think that God showed special favor to the rich, or to victims. He knew that God was not on the side of Jews or of anyone else. He knew that every human being stood beneath the spotlight of God's Law, the microscope of God's truth, and their true character was revealed.

**John knew without question that judgment was going to fall upon every human being.** The Savior was not coming to save people from meanness in the world. He was not coming to save the poor from the rich. He was not coming to save victims from aggressors. He was coming to save sinners from the judgment of God that they unquestionably deserve.

**And, I believe, John rejoiced that His purpose was not to curse the wicked and watch them die but to passionately appeal to them to repent, confess, believe, and be saved from the judgment to come.** John was not a Jonah, glad to pronounce a message of judgment against a violent nation. He committed his life to



urging men and women to publicly repent of their sins and be prepared for the coming Savior. The only anger John ever displayed was toward religious people who believed that they had no need for repentance and taught others to think the same.

## **BRINGING IT HOME**

For those of us who have come to know Christ, John is an example of the kind of boldness that we should have. We are not to stand in personal judgment against others; we are to recognize the terrible danger they are in, and never give up hope of reaching them with the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Like John, we should reserve our strongest words for those who think they can escape judgment some other way than the cross of Christ.

For those who don't know Jesus, we Christ-followers pray that you will turn from your sins and turn to the Lord and be saved. Give up your self-confidence, your self-approval, your personal morality. True Christianity is not theoretical but practical. The judgment we face is deadlier than cancer. The cure is perfect: trust in Jesus Christ as Savior and commit your life to Him as Lord.