



THE FINAL SOLUTION, OR IS IT?

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Mark 6:14-29

17th Message

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In our studies in the gospel of Mark, we have noted the repeated theme of the rejection of Jesus and his ministry, a rejection that intensified in each of three scenes. In the first scene, Jesus returned to his home town of Nazareth. There, his family, using only the lens of family origin and occupation, was unable to enter into anything of who he was or what he had accomplished. This was a painful rejection for Jesus, but coupled with it was his sense of amazement at their unbelief. In the aftermath, he commissioned the twelve and sent them out to multiply his work and mission, with his full authority. Just as he himself had received a dual reception in Israel, so he prepared them for the same. Like him, they would not be immune to rejection in their announcement of the kingdom of God.

Today we come to the climactic third scene, which is a flashback to Herod's treatment of Jesus' forerunner, John the Baptist, and his gruesome execution. This is a sordid story of evil in its rawest form, driven by lewd pleasure and naked ambition. I feel tempted to skip this account, especially on graduation Sunday, but it too is part of the sacred story; thus we must enter into it and stare evil in the face and be shocked by it. We can judge the impact of this account on the disciples by the amount of space which Mark devotes to it. He carefully places it here to prepare them for the ultimate rejection Jesus would face from the leadership of Israel and Rome. So we cannot skip this aspect of our spiritual education. Understanding how the kingdom of God interfaces with rulers and authorities who are hell-bent on its annihilation is a critical part of our maturity as Christians. No spiritual training is adequate unless it prepares us for the worst, and identifies where hope is found when darkness reigns.

Our story begins with the news of Jesus' fame spreading into the royal press corps, provoking a strong reaction from King Herod.

I. Herod's Paranoia over Jesus' fame (6:14-16)

And King Herod heard of it, for His name had become well known; and people were saying, "John the Baptist has risen from the dead, and that is why these miraculous powers are at work in Him." But others were saying, "He is Elijah." And others were saying, "He is a prophet, like one of the prophets of old." But when Herod heard of it, he kept saying, "John, whom I beheaded, has risen!" (NASB)

As Jesus' fame spreads to the royal palace, everyone

seems to be grappling with his identity in the face of his amazing miracles. Some say he was Elijah, Israel's ancient worker of miracles. Elijah was sent to reform the nation from the reign of terror of Ahab and Jezebel, when Baal-worship became the official state religion. Malachi had predicted that Elijah would return to be the forerunner to prepare the way for the Messiah—an event for which many Jews today are still waiting. Yet others identified Jesus as one of the prophets.

Each view had a degree of truth associated with it, but the more Jesus' fame spreads, the more distorted the interpretation becomes. Jesus was a prophet, yes, but he was more than that. Furthermore, his ministry closely paralleled Elijah's in kind. But, according to Jesus, the Elijah for whom Israel was waiting had come in the person of John the Baptist (Mark 9:11-13).

Mark records that of all the reactions provoked by Jesus' reputation, no one expressed more amazement than Herod. The Herod referred to here is "Herod Antipas, son of Herod the Great and Malthace, tetrarch of Galilee and Perea from his father's death in 4 B.C. till A.D. 39."¹ Mark refers to him as "King Herod." This seems a bit ironic, because it was this man's ambition to gain this title that officially led to his downfall (Josephus, *Ant.* 18.240-56). When Herod got wind of what was happening in his district of Galilee, he was deeply alarmed. Through the lens of a guilty conscience, he thought that John, whom he had earlier beheaded, had come back from the dead in the person of Jesus, and this explained why he was able to work such wonders, far greater than anything he had done prior to his execution.² This serves to highlight the fact that so powerful were Jesus works, "that even the king who had John beheaded thinks that Jesus is this same John risen."³

Mark uses this mention of John as the opportunity to give the details of his execution at the hands of Herod.

II. Herod's Arrest of John (6:17-20)

For Herod himself had sent and had John arrested and bound in prison on account of Herodias, the wife of his brother Philip, 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 and could not do so; for Herod was afraid of John, knowing that he was a righteous and holy man, and kept him safe. And when he heard him, he was very perplexed; but he used to enjoy

listening to him.

Here is an immoral king who, although he has a sense for what is right, is ruled by the fears and opinions of others. Herod had unlawfully taken his brother Philip's wife, Herodias, as his own. Things become even more complicated when we learn that "Herodias was the daughter of Aristobulus, the son of Herod the Great and Mariamne, and so the niece of Herod Antipas."⁴ To Herod's surprise, the affair would not go unchallenged. He was denounced by the revolutionary prophet, John the Baptist, who carried much weight in Israel. John Calvin applauds this outstanding characteristic in John: "We behold in John an illustrious example of that moral courage, which all pious teachers ought to possess, not to hesitate to incur the wrath of the great and powerful, as often as it may be found necessary: for he, with whom there is acceptance of persons, does not honestly serve God."⁵ And, as history records, most prophets in Israel did not fare well when they confronted a king with his sins.

In response, Herod acts decisively, arresting John and placing him in prison. Josephus tells us "Accordingly, he was sent a prisoner, out of Herod's suspicious temper, to Machaerus, the castle I before mentioned and was there put to death" (*Ant.* 5.2). This Machaerus was in the southernmost part of Perea, to the east of the Dead Sea. "Archaeological discoveries of a prison as well as a palace there, and of two dining rooms (*triclinia*), one large and one small, fit John's imprisonment, Herod's banquet, and the separateness of Herod and Herodias during the banquet, presumably because the men were eating in the large dining room, the women in the small one."⁶

It's not clear whether the impetus to arrest John came from Herodias. What is obvious, however, is that she felt her husband did not go far enough. But Herod was afraid of John. He knew he was a righteous man, and he loved to hear him preach the announcement of the coming kingdom of God. So imprisonment became a way for Herod to keep John safe from execution. But Herodias was not satisfied with imprisonment; she wanted John dead. On Herod's birthday, the opportune time presented itself.

III. Herod Parties and Salome Dances (6:21-23)

And a strategic day came when Herod on his birthday gave a banquet for his lords and military commanders and the leading men of Galilee; and when the daughter of Herodias herself came in and danced, she pleased Herod and his dinner guests; and the king said to the girl, "Ask me for whatever you want and I will give it to you." And he swore much to her, "Whatever you ask of me, I will give it to you; up to half of my kingdom."

Herod hosts a huge birthday party for himself and invites all the courtiers, the top ranking military officers and leading Galilean provincials. This seems an august

group, but on closer examination, we discover it was really a stag party, with no women present, except the ones who performed. Amazingly, the young princess enters, the very daughter of Herodias, and dances like a paid harlot. Some scholars think she was as young as 12 or 13, because of the word "little girl" used to describe her, in v. 28. Her risqué dance brings the house down. Fueled by lust and the perverted pride of the moment, Herod seeks to seal this festival of family perversion with a rash vow: "Ask me whatever you wish, and I will give it to you." Then he stumbles all over his words, repeating himself vociferously (seen in the Greek word "much" and the plural form of "oaths," in v. 26). This was likely due to the fact that he was drunk. "Up to half of my kingdom!" he drunkenly exclaims. All eyes are focused on this young girl who now has been given a blank check for her dreams.

But before a word is spoken, she leaves the all-male hall as surprisingly as she entered it.

IV. Salome's request: The head of John the Baptist (6:24-29)

And she went out and said to her mother, "What shall I ask for?" And she said, "The head of John the Baptist." And immediately she came in haste before the king and asked, saying, "I want you to give me right away the head of John the Baptist on a platter." (6:24-25)

Now we learn the mastermind of the moment: it is her mother. Seizing the stage of Herod's self-indulgent birthday party, and sacrificing her daughter's purity and respectability, Herodias has won Herod's favor and placed him in just the right frame of mind to suit her purpose. "What shall I ask for?" inquires the daughter. "The head of John the Baptist," is her mother's response. Without even a word of objection or a semblance of horror (she might just as well be asking for a pony), the girl instantly obeys. Quickly returning to the hall, and before the gazing eyes of the drunken guests, she adds a word of haste to the request, "I want you to give me right away the head of John the Baptist." Then, despicably, she adds her own words, "on a platter." Like mother, like daughter. The urgency of her request is designed to accomplish the vile deed before Herod sobers up and comes to his senses.⁷

And although the king was very sorry, yet because of his oaths and because of his dinner guests, he was unwilling to refuse her. And immediately the king sent an executioner and commanded him to bring back his head. And he went and had him beheaded in the prison, and brought his head on a platter, and gave it to the girl; and the girl gave it to her mother. (6:26-28)

Herod gasps at the portent of his daughter's words. His reckless gaiety quickly evaporates into deep sorrow. However, he is not man enough to be ruled by his convictions. Instead, the prospect of losing face before

his guests and having to say no to his daughter overrules his sense of what is right. The weight of the moment presses upon him so heavily that, even as king of the land, he cannot buy a moment's time to consult his own conscience; and so he caves in, agreeing to her request. What a sordid scene, as the "king" of Israel, a pawn of sensuality, caves in to his wife's lurid ambition, in front the leading men of his kingdom. The order is given, and an executioner is sent for. In the breath of a moment, sudden and swift, the deed is done. The bloody head of John the Baptist is brought on a platter and given to the girl. She carries it to her mother, who receives it as her waiting crown. John, Israel's greatest prophet, who came to anoint Israel's final King, is decapitated as a party favor for a 12-year old girl. It is too horrific for words.

But Herod doesn't have the final word, nor does his vile palace become John's final resting place. Verse 29:

And when his disciples heard about this, they came and took away his body and laid it in a tomb. (6:29)

Some disciples who loved John come and, at great risk to their own lives, acquire his body and prepare it for burial. Our story ends with John's body lying in a tomb, awaiting vindication from the only One who can give it. Herod never got over John. Though his body was dismembered and buried, his memory lived on to invade the king's subconscious and assail him in his dreams every night. Even when the report came of a prophet in Galilee doing all kinds of miracles, all Herod's guilty conscience could think was, "It must be John the Baptist, risen from the dead!"

Why does Mark place such a lurid tale in the middle of the gospel story? Why does he care to show us this perverted family affair? Why does he want us to stare such evil in the face?

V. Implications of our story

A. Looking back to the story of Esther

My desire is to make you sensitive to the shape of Biblical stories so that as you are drawn into them, you will not only feel their power, you will be sensitive to the shape God is giving your life, which is a story that is as holy as these gospels. Like any scene in a good story, this tale derives its power both by what has preceded it and what follows. Upon hearing this story, a sensitive Jew could not help but hear echoes of another ancient story, in which, once again at a royal banquet, a drunken king made a vow to a beautiful young woman, promising her up to half his kingdom.

The story of Esther begins with King Ahasuerus giving a banquet for all his princes and attendants, the army officers of Persia and Media. After much drinking, the king requests his Queen, Vashti, to show off her beauty before the gazing eyes. But she refuses, which is an insult to the king. For shaming not only him but all the princes and all the peoples, she is dismissed, and Esther is made Queen in her place. But then, through a

turn of events, Esther learns that the evil Haman has used his power to have the king enact a decree "to destroy, to kill, and to annihilate all the Jews, both young and old, women and children, in one day, the thirteenth day of the twelfth month, which is the month Adar, and to seize their possessions as plunder" (3:13). This is a foretaste of Hitler's "Final Solution"—the annihilation of the Jewish race.

In response to this horrific threat, Esther holds another royal banquet, and uses her beauty to win the favor of King Ahasuerus. He, captivated by her beauty and purity, makes a vow, promising her up to half his kingdom (like Herod, he reiterates it, 5:3, 6; 7:2). But, rather than making a personal request, she uses her favored position to risk her life to save her people: "Let my life be given me as my petition, and my people as my request; for we have been sold, I and my people, to be destroyed, to be killed and to be annihilated" (7:3-4). When the drunken king finds out who the culprit is, Haman is quickly executed (7:10). Then a new decree is given, that the Jews have the right "to assemble and to defend their lives, to destroy, to kill, and to annihilate the entire army of any people or province which might attack them" (8:11). A holiday was then decreed, the Feast of Purim, celebrating the miraculous survival of the Jewish race from annihilation. As successive generations re-enact the story of the joy of Purim, Esther's courage is inscribed into the soul of every Jew.

With this background, the story of John the Baptist's death becomes even more horrific. It is much more than a mere case of isolated evil. At first reading, we are appalled by a king's immorality and lust, a queen's raw ambition which sacrifices her daughter's purity, and a daughter who doesn't even flinch at the thought of decapitating a prophet for a door prize. But when it is seen against the backdrop of Esther, a story of salvation is subverted to destruction, and the framework of our universe is shattered. Instead of Jews arming and defending themselves, evil is allowed to exhaust itself upon a righteous prophet. And so the reader must ask, "Where was God to protect Israel's final prophet, the new Elijah. Will the feast of Purim be undone? Will God's people be annihilated in the paradigm of the new kingdom?"

B. Preparation for the cross of Jesus

Mark doesn't answer these questions yet. They are designed to go deep into the reader and to prepare him for what is to come later in the story. At the climax of the gospel, Jesus enters Jerusalem and, like John, is seized (6:17; 14:46). His execution is likewise *delayed* because of the fear of those in power (6:20; 11:18, 32; 12:12; 14:2), until the *opportune* time (14:11), and then it appears that evil exhausts itself upon this prophet. John is decapitated as a door prize, and Jesus is crucified as sport by the Romans. Like John, his body is acquired by a disciple who, at great risk to himself, lays it in a tomb. By Mark having us live through this story, the cross provokes much more emotion and grief in us, for we

have already lived through it once.

Thus our consummate sorrow is fully lanced. But our grief intensifies even more when it dawns on us that it was our lurid sin that crucified our Lord. So now the shock and violent horror of sin fall upon us with its full weight.

Isaac Watts (1674-1748) captured the thought well in the poem:

Infinite grief! amazing woe!
Behold my bleeding Lord;
Hell and the Jew conspired his death,
And used the Roman sword.

Oh the sharp pangs of smarting pain
My dear Redeemer bore,
When knotty whips, and ragged thorns
His sacred body tore!

But knotty whips and ragged thorns
In vain do I accuse,
In vain I blame the Roman bands,
And the more spiteful Jews.

'Twere you, my sins, my cruel sins,
His chief tormentors were;
Each of my crimes became a nail,
And unbelief the spear.

'Twere you that pulled the vengeance down
Upon his guiltless head:
Break, break my heart, oh burst mine eyes,
And let my sorrows bleed.

Strike, mighty Grace, my flinty soul
Till melting waters flow,
And deep repentance drown mine eyes
In undissembled woe.

C. A vision of new hope

Thus we come face to face with evil, and we grieve. But we are also forced to grapple with the ultimate question: Doesn't God have the last word, as he did in the story of Esther? Or has that moral framework that holds our universe together been shattered? The story gives its clues, for it ends not with Herod, Salome, or Herodias, but with the decapitated body of John being handled only by those who loved him, and being placed in a tomb, awaiting vindication. And the memory of John lives to haunt Herod, so that when he hears about the miracles of Jesus, he exclaims, "John, whom I beheaded, has risen!" Yes, there is a new paradigm for the kingdom of God. We are not given arms to defend ourselves by destroying our enemies, but in the path of the Suffering Servant, we are given the role of absorbing evil. In some cases, like Stephen, in the book of Acts, that will involve martyrdom. At about the time this gospel went to press (in the early 60's A.D.), Peter was crucified. But our hope in that darkest hour when evil reigns is in the resurrection, one which vindicates the victim in heaven and multiplies the kingdom on earth. This is our true hope.

I am reminded of my friend's poem to his 16-year old daughter upon her baptism,

Oh you will know pain and sorrow,
and it will take your breath away
but you will never die.

1. C. E. B. Cranfield, *The Gospel According to St. Mark* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1959), 206.

2. Robert Gundry, *Mark: A Commentary on His Apology for the Cross* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 303.

3. Gundry, *Mark*, 305.

4. Cranfield, *Mark*, 209.

5. Cranfield, *Mark*, 209.

6. Gundry, *Mark*, 313

7. Gundry, *Mark*, 321.

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