

THE MARTYRDOM OF JOHN THE BAPTIST

Mark 6:14-29

Key Verse: 6:18

"For John had been saying to Herod, 'It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife.'"

In the last passage we learned that we should not accept the word of God with our feelings only. If we do so, we will be like Jesus' hometown people. We also learned that the disciples of Jesus, who were not yet clear about themselves and about Jesus' messianic ministry, obeyed Jesus' word. As a result, they experienced the great power of God. Even though the disciples had no power of God, when they obeyed Jesus' instructions, they could experience the great power of God working through them. They preached and people repented. They drove out many demons and anointed many sick people with oil and healed them (6:13). We are living in the age of reason. It is very difficult for people to obey what they do not understand or when they do not know what will happen to them if they obey. Generally, people in the age of reason want to know or want to see first, and, if it is reasonable, they apply themselves to action. These people who are living in the age of reason are always ready to escape from reason. They think through and through and their thinking becomes negative. So they escape from reason and live in despair. We are the children of God. Therefore, we must have faith in Jesus and experience mountain-moving power. Without experiencing the power of God we cannot be real Christians in the age of reason. Today's story is the story about the martyrdom of John the Baptist. It tells us how John the Baptist was martyred and who martyred John the Baptist. John the Baptist's martyrdom involves two people. One is a man and one is a woman.

I. Promiscuous King Herod (14-17)

As we studied in the former passage, the disciples obeyed Jesus' instructions absolutely, even though they thought it was ridiculous, very ridiculous. His disciples went out to all the villages and proclaimed the gospel of Jesus and the kingdom of God. They drove out many demons and anointed many sick people with oil and healed them. It was a marvelous evangelistic campaign. The disciples had no power at all. They had no power even to endure their frequent hungry feelings. They were always behind Jesus, being afraid of the Pharisees. But they were very free at the house of Mary and Martha. However, when they obeyed Jesus' instructions and carried out the evangelistic campaign with only a staff, not compromising with the people, a great work of God was done. It was nothing but the disciples' fieldwork training. In other words, it was nothing but an evangelistic campaign. It was a mere evangelistic campaign for the future disciples. But King Herod heard about this and he was puzzled and his conscience became shaky. Actually, King Herod's conscience had been branded by fire. But the conscience given by God is always alive, even though it is branded by fire. Herod suffered from a prick of conscience. He was terrified by the news of the mere disciples' evangelistic campaign. Romans 2:8-9 say, "But for those who are self-seeking and who reject the truth and follow evil, there will be wrath and anger. There will be trouble and distress for every human being who does evil: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile." King Herod was troubled until his bones were crushed. King Herod was distressed until he

lost all his hair. It was because of one specific evil thing. The world is defined as the place of cheating and being cheated. In order to survive, all human beings try to cheat others and they are being cheated. Based on percentage, those who want to cheat are cheated more.

King Herod was a man, but he was an evil man. Verse 14a says, "King Herod heard about this...." Evil man King Herod did not know that it was the disciples' evangelistic campaign. He thought it was the mighty work of God through Jesus. He began to tremble until his leg bones were cracking and his knees were knocking continuously. Finally he called palace scholars and asked who might be the ones who were shaking the world so violently. They knew Jesus' name very well. Some were saying, "John the Baptist has been raised from the dead, and that is why miraculous powers are at work in him." Evil man King Herod trembled so much that his face looked blue and sometimes too pale; he looked like he was being carried by some officials in a coffin prepared by himself. His tragedy began with lustful desire.

Verse 15 says, "Others said, 'He is Elijah.' And still others claimed, 'He is a prophet, like one of the prophets of long ago.'" Some palace scholars said directly, "He is Elijah." But some smart scholars said, "a prophet of long ago." Their stories are exactly the same. Look at verse 16. "But when Herod heard this, he said, 'John, the man I beheaded, has been raised from the dead!'"

Here we see that evil men suffer so much by the evil spirit. Evil man King Herod was a king of Israel under the Roman rule. But his inner man was a prisoner in a dungeon. Everything looked dark to him. He didn't know how to get out of the dungeon. His fear made his heart pound and his blood level was reducing moment by moment. Especially his haunted situation was unbearable. He felt that the righteous man John the Baptist, without a head, was chasing him speedily and that he was running away speedily. His panting was so great that he felt like dying. Moreover, the headless man's chasing was horrible to him.

There are many evil men in history. We have no space to mention all the worldly evil men. Let's think about evil men in the Bible. Still, there seem to be too many. The first king of Israel was Saul. He was so handsome, and a head taller than all other people. The people of Israel refused to have Samuel as their Judge and wanted a king. So God chose a man they would like as their king. He was King Saul. He was very shy and humble before he became king. After he became king, the people of Israel were in deep trouble because of the Philistine champion, Goliath. Every day the champion Goliath of the Philistines came out and taunted the soldiers of Israel to have a duel, shouting, "If I lose the duel, you win the war. If you lose the duel, your people will be subject to us" (1Sa 17:9). He continued taunting the ranks of Israel. He roared, saying, "Give me a man and let us fight each other." Saul and all the Israelites were dismayed and terrified. At that time, Israel was in deep trouble because of their spiritual condition.

By chance, David, the youngest son out of eight, came to the battle field on an errand for his father to supply his brothers' rations (1Sa 17:12-19). David, the errand boy, saw that the Philistine champion was blaspheming against God. Righteous anger arose in his heart (1Sa 17:26). He volunteered to challenge the Philistine champion Goliath. At

last, the duel started. The Philistine Goliath was drawing near to the boy David. He was nine feet tall and he had a bronze helmet on his head and he wore a coat of scale armor of bronze weighing five thousand shekels. On his legs he wore bronze greaves, and a bronze javelin was slung on his back. His spear shaft was like a weaver's rod and its iron point weighed six hundred shekels. His shield bearer went ahead of him (1Sa 17:4-7). The boy David said to the Philistine champion, "You come against me with sword and spear and javelin, but I come against you in the name of the Lord Almighty, the God of the armies of Israel, whom you have defied. This day the Lord will hand you over to me, and I'll strike you down and cut off your head. Today I will give the carcasses of the Philistine army to the birds of the air and the beasts of the earth, and the whole world will know that there is a God in Israel" (1Sa 17:45-46). As they confronted each other, the Philistine champion Goliath laughed at David and said, "Oh, this boy is approaching me with a staff." He thought the boy David was his prey. At the moment, David ran quickly toward the battle line to meet him. Reaching into his bag and taking out a stone, he slung it and struck the Philistine on the forehead. The stone sank into his forehead, and he fell facedown on the ground (1Sa 17:48-49). Even in a boxing match, those who fall facedown on the ground are considered fatally wounded. The Philistine champion not only fell facedown on the ground, but the stone sank into his forehead. He was completely dead by brain damage. Even modern medical technology would be of no use. In this way, David led Israel to victory over the Philistines. After David had finished talking with Saul, Jonathan became one in spirit with David, and he loved him as himself (1Sa 18:1). Jonathan was different from his father. His father was tall and empty and a very emotional person. But Jonathan was a very godly young man. When they were marching back to their fortress, the women came out from the towns of Israel to meet King Saul with singing and dancing, with joyful songs and with tambourines and lutes. As they danced, they sang: "Saul has slain his thousands, and David his tens of thousands" (1Sa 18:6-7). As soon as King Saul heard the women's singing to the music tune, he was very angry; the women's singing galled him. From that time on, an evil spirit came into Saul and he became useless (1Sa 18:10). All the rest of his life, for thirty years, he was chasing David to kill him. David had several occasions to trap and kill King Saul. But David did not do so because he saw King Saul as one ordained by God. King Saul was driven by the evil spirit. His demon possession made him frantic all the time and angry all the time. King Saul resembles King Herod.

There are too many evil people. So we cannot tell all the evil people's stories. But it is important to know that man is both good and evil. In Fyodor Dostoevsky's works there is a book, "Crime and Punishment." Briefly speaking, one student majoring in law was very poor. So he frequently went to a pawn shop run by an old lady. Later he found that this old lady, the owner of the pawn shop, squeezed so many students penniless. All their possessions were taken away by this old lady, the pawn shop owner. Then Raskolnikov, the young student, in his righteous anger, thought, "If I kill this wicked woman, students will not suffer and bleed." So one night he went into the pawn shop. He pressed his jackknife and mangled the old lady. The young student thought it was the end of everything. But after three days he began to drink and to go to the red light district frequently. Nevertheless, he could not soothe his thorn of conscience. Suddenly, several hundred demons came into him and punished him day and night. Suppose one demon punched

his nose ten times. Then several hundred demons really tortured him by punching him. So he became like Cain. Such people do not realize there is a physical world and there is a spiritual world. Finally they die without God. Their suffering and torment do not stop there. They must stand before the righteous Judge. After that, they go to the place of the fiery lake of burning sulfur. There they gnash their teeth and their gums. They will be forever in the darkness and in the burning sulfur.

We cannot omit the story of Cain. God accepted Abel's sacrifice. God did not accept Cain's sacrifice. One day in the field, the elder brother Cain killed his younger brother Abel and buried him in the dirt. There was a problem. Cain knew God. But he deliberately committed sin by killing his younger brother Abel. God asked him, "Where is your brother Abel?" "I don't know," he replied. "Am I my brother's keeper?" God said to him, "Your brother's blood cries out to me from the ground" (Gen 4:9,10). In this way, God wanted to counsel him and lead him to repentance. But he rejected God's counseling and went his own way. Soon he became a man of heavy crime and endless punishment. He wandered around the world with a sense of punishment, more than he could bear (Gen 4:13-14).

Herod the King was the same as Cain. Herod was chained with a sense of punishment and fear, even though he was sitting on the throne. He was haunted by headless John the Baptist chasing him, while he was panting heavily, running away from John the Baptist. His officials did not know what to do when he was foaming at the mouth with a sense of punishment and haunting. These days many people don't care about the spiritual world and despise spiritual men, not knowing that the spiritual world is so beautiful and the spiritual man enjoys God's peace all day long. If a spiritual man sees his wife, he smiles from ear to ear. But one evil man said, "I don't love my wife." He has much money and he cooks meals for his wife. But he said he doesn't love his wife. Those who do not love their wives are not happy. They do not love themselves. They are people of demon possession.

Herod's evil-doing was escalating to the extreme degree. Look at verse 17. "For Herod himself had given orders to have John arrested, and he had him bound and put in prison. He did this because of Herodias, his brother Philip's wife, whom he had married." Herod repeated evil-doing in order to please his wife, who was formerly his brother's wife. Here we learn that when men rise to high-ranking positions, they do their best to please beautiful women. In this way, they make terrible mistakes. Herod the King heard about the disciples' evangelistic campaign and trembled so much. In the midst of fear and torment, he was still mindful of Herodias. So he arrested John the Baptist and put him in prison. If we are going to be men of integrity, we must be careful about women. Those who have records of enjoying bad women cannot be great men. Good women help their husbands or others become great. But bad women ruin many men. Bad women cripple men mentally. Any man who wants to be great must overcome the temptation of women.

II. A woman of vanity, Herodias (19-29)

There is a saying, "Woman's vanity is so great. If, from a woman, vanity is taken out, she collapses." A good example is Queen Herodias. She became King Herod's wife in order to be called "Queen Herodias." Her vanity ruined her husband Philip and she rose to be a

Queen in Israel. Later she manipulated Herod to kill the prophet John the Baptist. Queen Herodias made a plastic smile and asked King Herod to arrest John the Baptist and put him in prison. King Herod arrested John the Baptist and put him in prison in order to please his wife, who was formerly his brother's wife. Queen Herodias nursed a grudge against John and wanted to kill him. But the funny story is that 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 (19-20). It is obvious that King Herod was a man of evil-doing. But he was very thirsty after demons' constant torture and the outcry of his conscience, which was branded by fire. This is the reason he feared John and protected him, recognizing John the Baptist as a righteous and holy man. Whenever Herod the King heard John speaking, he was greatly puzzled. Yet he liked to listen to him. What a funny comedian. Evil men are like wicked comedians in terror movies. Evil men cannot escape from their consciences given by God. Herod's suffering because of his conscience was great. Still, he continued to do evil things. Look at verse 21. "Finally the opportune time came. On his birthday Herod gave a banquet for his high officials and military commanders and the leading men of Galilee." Herodias wanted to make use of this opportunity. So she made her daughter come and dance before the king and his high officials and army commanders. Her dancing pleased King Herod and his dinner guests. Then the king spoke to the girl in his schizophrenia. He talked with a great gyration by saying, "Ask me for anything you want and I will give it to you" (22). He promised to give her up to half his kingdom (23). Then the little girl asked her mother what to ask. Her mother said, "The head of John the Baptist on a platter" (24-25). The king was greatly distressed, but because of his oaths and his dinner guests, he did not want to refuse her (26). As a result, John the Baptist became a martyr.

III. The courage of John the Baptist (18)

The Bible says that John the Baptist had the spirit of Elijah (Lk 1:17). Let's think about Elijah. Elijah was the eminent prophet among all prophets. It was because he challenged the Baal prophets. They were to dig a trench and inside the trench build a sacrifice altar. They immersed the sacrifice in water. The prophet Elijah challenged them to see who could burn the water in the trench and the sacrifice. He said, "If you dry the water in the trench and burn the sacrifice first, you win. If I dry the water in the trench and burn the sacrifice, I win" (1Ki 18:24).

A tragic event happened. The Baal prophets did not know God. They were good in performing rituals or telling lies to the king, but they had no power of God. Still, they had to accept the prophet Elijah's challenge. At first, they shouted and prayed that the god Baal might come down and swallow the water in the trench and burn the sacrifice on the altar. But there was no answer at all. From early morning to dusk they shouted and prayed to the Baal god. Nothing happened. Then they began to torture their bodies with knives, slicing their trunks and their faces. Still, nothing happened. They were afraid of Queen Jezebel. So the Baal prophets did their best to defeat the challenger. But they had no power to dry out the water in the trench and burn the sacrifice on the altar. They all looked like slaughtered animals. And they were paralyzed by fear of Queen Jezebel.

Elijah the prophet took over the challenge. He prayed to God, and God gave him power to dry the water in the trench and burn the sacrifice on the altar in a few minutes (1Ki 18:38). In the ancient times, those who were defeated should be killed. Elijah began to kill the Baal prophets one by one in the Kidron Valley until 400 Baal prophets were all killed. Likewise, John the Baptist had spiritual power and authority to proclaim the message of repentance. Palace scholars and magic artists told evil man King Herod that Jesus might be John the Baptist or the prophet Elijah. Evil man King Herod concluded that he was John the Baptist risen from the dead.

People of the time were waiting for Elijah to come back. But actually, Elijah did come back in the name of John the Baptist. Why do we think that Elijah came back to the world in the name of John the Baptist? It was because the spirit and power of Elijah and John the Baptist were equal and they were indeed outstanding prophets among prophets. The world was dark. Doing evil was condoned and doing good was stopped by law. In King Herod's time, being put in prison was common and murder was common. His time was lawless and inhumane. Herod the King wanted to enjoy his brother's wife. So he ruined his brother Philip and took his brother's wife as his wife. In this way Herod satisfied the vanity of Herodias, making her a Queen of Israel. His power wielding was reckless. Finally, Herod the King killed John the Baptist in order to please a little girl. When the times are dark, people know how to complain about little things. But they cannot rebuke an evil man. In this country, any man who talks against capitalists is soon condemned. We have many examples. Nobody wants to fight against evil men who victimize idealistic leaders. But King Herod's time was really evil. The Roman Empire demanded heavy taxes. In addition, Herod the King also demanded heavy taxes. People were like POWs in Cambodia or many people in Siberia, condemned and punished. No one could say anything against King Herod. Let's read verse 18. "For John had been saying to Herod, 'It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife.'" This was King Herod's secret crime—using his king's power to overrule the law. But John the Baptist, the forerunner of Jesus, rebuked the king: "You should not destroy your brother and take his wife." John's preaching to him gave King Herod a dawn of conscience. But Herodias, who became a new Queen to Herod, held a grudge against John and manipulated Herod to kill him. Finally, she made the situation to have John the Baptist's head cut off and put on a platter and brought to her. Here we learn that women are very powerful, even though they look weak. The time of Elijah and the time of Herod were different. But in essence, they were the same. The present time is also the same. I heard from Missionary John Bird that in Wales they cannot proclaim gospel messages by radio. Anybody who broadcasts a gospel message by radio is arrested and put in prison.

Here we think about John the Baptist's rebuking the king and queen for their immoral behavior. This is the reason why when John the Baptist came, people said, "Elijah came to this world." John lived with the truth of God. John the Baptist loved King Herod and Queen Herodias very much. John the Baptist wanted to save them from their sins. Out of his great compassion, he rebuked the king and queen. As a result, John became a martyr. John the Baptist fulfilled his mission to make the path straight. In other words, he made the environment. Even King Herod and Queen Herodias had a chance to repent, not to mention the

crowds of people. Without his martyrdom, Jesus' ministry might have been detained. John preached the gospel of repentance to everybody. Tax collectors and soldiers and all kinds of people came to him and repented, beating their chests and being baptized in the water of the Jordan River. They came back to God and were ready to accept Jesus Christ as the Messiah. We feel sorry that John did not marry and died young in order to fulfill God's mission. But he is living forever in our hearts, together with the prophet Elijah. King Herod and Queen Herodias seemed to defeat John the Baptist. But they became wicked and lost in the sight of God. John the Baptist seemed to have lost. But he won the victory. In the spiritual world, losing is winning. It is endless to talk about John the Baptist. He came as the forerunner of Jesus. And he lived in the desert eating locusts and honey and wearing clothing made of camel's hair. In short, he grew in power by being pure. When Jesus came, John gave his disciples, beginning from Andrew and Philip, to Jesus and he gradually disappeared. His final exam was martyrdom caused by Herodias. But the martyr John the Baptist lives in our hearts forever. John the Baptist lives in our descendants forever. John the Baptist lives in our consciences forever. John the Baptist lives in the consciences of our descendants forever. John the Baptist fulfilled his mission as forerunner of Jesus to the end the way God wanted him to.

A man must be a man of integrity by shaking off immoral desire. A woman must be a suitable helper to her husband by shaking off woman's vanity and dying to herself. We must imitate John the Baptist's martyrdom spirit.