

March 6, 2011

# *Jesus Has a Wonderful Plan for Your ~~Life~~ Head*

Mark 6:14-29

## INTRODUCTION

One of the most infamous lines in modern evangelism is the line that indiscriminately announces to unbelievers: “Jesus loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life.” Now if I’m an unbeliever who has deliberately chosen not to follow Jesus thus far, I’m only going to hear one message in that call—*Cool, Jesus loves me just as I am and He wants me to keep having a good time!* What on earth about the gospel does that message actually communicate? And while you’re thinking about that, think about this also: How do we reconcile that message with the fact that everyone who has ever loudly proclaimed the name of Jesus has been opposed, silenced and either killed or had to escape being killed for it?

- THE EARTHLY HEAD IN RELATION TO THE PROPHET’S HEAD
- THE PROPHET’S HEAD IN RELATION TO THE EARTHLY HEAD

**The Big Idea** is that there are two heads that tell the gospel—one that kills and the other that dies.

You have been called to be both characters in this account. Of course I don’t mean that any of us here will be called to be the king. But we have been called to several different spheres in this world—the family, the church, the workplace, sometimes other cultural arenas—and the message that you have about Jesus is not to be compromised in any of them. God has bound us in covenant relationship to people in this world—believers and unbelievers, consistent believers and not so consistent believers—and at every point the claims of one of those covenant relationships will be tugging on the ropes of the others, and the main pressure, at the end of the day, is a demand for you to compromise the gospel.

There are parallels between the death of John the Baptist and the death of Jesus. Both are prophets who inform the earthly monarch what the limitations and proper use of their power are. They are both moved from imprisonment to execution in an atmosphere that is a mockery of justice. They are both put to death against the bitter internal struggle of a ruler

who knows that they are innocent. And that knowledge of their innocence (in Herod and Pilate) is compromised by promised relationships that it would have been right to break off. But none of that is the main way that John's death foreshadows Jesus' death.

## DOCTRINE

### I. THE EARTHLY HEAD IN RELATION TO THE PROPHET'S HEAD

#### A) Herod's Compromise Was Natural and Provisional

1. *King Herod heard of it, for Jesus' name had become known (14a).* The first thing that was perfectly natural about Herod's predicament here is how the ministry of Jesus had become known to him. Those of his court reported back to him the word on the street: *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" (14b-15).* The language is very similar to when Jesus asks his own disciples later on who the people in the country say that He is. Now Herod has only one thought in mind and it is completely filled with dread: *But when Herod heard of it, he said, "John, whom I beheaded, has been raised" (16).* Herod was experiencing a double-dose of paranoia. First of all, he was an earthly authority doing what earthly authorities do. He was jealous to defend his turf and leaders over Palestine couldn't afford to make any distinction between religious uprisings and political uprisings. For the people of Israel, the religious determined the political. They had to consider any new popular following a potential threat. But secondly, Herod knew that what he had done with John the Baptist was wrong for much higher reasons. And so now Mark has to digress from the flow of his writing and give us the background of how Herod came to put John to death.

2. Next we are introduced to Herod the politician as husband and husband as politician: *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" (17-18).* First let's notice the charge. Herod had taken his brother's wife—a marriage of political convenience—and that was against the Law of God: *"You shall not uncover the nakedness of your brother's wife; it is your brother's nakedness" [Lev. 18:16]; If a man takes his brother's wife, it is impurity. He has uncovered his brother's nakedness; they shall be childless" [Lev. 20:21].* The only acceptable taking of a brother's wife was if he had died and you followed the laws of the levirate marriage. The threat was clear. Israel was a nation under God's Law. If people heard this charge and put two and two

together, there would have been a mob uprising at the very least. John had to be at least silenced. Now let's focus on what is sandwiching that charge inside it. First, Herod does something "for the sake of" his wife—namely, imprisons John—then, in the very next verse it tells us that he does something against his wife's desires: *And Herodias had a grudge against him and wanted to put him to death. But she could not (19)*. So, for Herodius' sake, he removes John from his public ministry and therefore removes the threat; but because Herodius was so offended by John's charge and filled with hatred, she wanted him dead on the spot. Herod wouldn't do that. First of all, that wouldn't be politically expedient. John was much more dangerous as a martyr than as a prisoner awaiting a fair legal hearing.

### B) Herod's Compromise Was Inexcusably Wicked

1. We have already seen that the most hardened unbeliever knows, deep down inside, something of what he owes to God. He knows enough to convict him so that when any voice speaks the words from heaven, he shudders. Luther said that the pagan quakes at the sound of a falling leaf; how much more the thundering of a prophet! After hearing John Knox's preaching to her, Mary the Queen of the Scots said that "I fear the prayers of Knox more than all the assembled armies of Europe." Herod would have agreed. It says that even though his wife wanted John's head, Herod restrained her lust for blood: *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 (20)*. Now Mark was not telling us this so that we can feel sorry for Herod's predicament—just the opposite!

2. God sets up the spheres of this world with an authority: a head. This man Herod is wearing both hats here in his relation to the prophet and he confuses the two. John is bringing the truth to him and this truth immediately gives him all the truth he needs to wear both hats the right way. It is Herod's duty to submit to Christ as ultimate Head over all by obeying his voice through his messenger. That will immediately set right his headship in the state and the home. But he disobeys because he thinks he can play politics with his wife and his court and the people. He thinks he can keep them all just happy enough to stop nipping at his heels. Herod's fundamental mistake (aside from disobedience) is that he thinks that the one sphere has nothing to do with the other. He lets his guard down because he thinks are areas of life in which his guard doesn't have to be up, like at a party. *But an opportunity came when Herod on his birthday gave a banquet for his nobles and military commanders and the leading men of Galilee (21)*. This opportunity is what Herodius was looking for, but really this thing called an "opportunity" is something that the devil is always looking for, and no area of life is

safe: “And when the devil had ended every temptation, he departed from him until an opportune time” [Lk. 4:13]. So we are commanded: “Be sober-minded; be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour” [1 Pet. 5:8]. So the forces of evil are always making their moves through those who do not and will not understand what is at stake in all things. And you do not want to join yourself and sign on the dotted line with those who do not and will not understand what is at stake in all things. Didn’t the human race fall when a man said to the voice of God “My wife made me disobey?”

3. Look at this sordid scenery! That is intentional. Notice the cover of darkness under which both John the Baptist and Jesus are supposedly tried in a court of justice. This isn’t a court room: this is a strip club! *For when Herodias's daughter came in and danced, she pleased Herod and his guests (22a)*. “Well,” you may say, “I don’t spend my time at get-togethers like this!” Alright, then, what mindless, harmless pleasures distract *you* from placing your home and your call under the clearest loudest voice of God’s message? The point is that Herod makes what you may be tempted to dismiss a drunken unthinkable gesture, and of course it is ‘drunken.’ How unthinkable it is we will have to examine in our own lives: *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” (22b-23)*. What parts of your life, under the other hats that you wear, make you drop your guard and make deals with the devil to silence the triumph of his word in this place? Do you not understand that this lack of self-control leads immediately to the silence of the voice of God? God has called you, as head, to kill things in your own life so that his voice won’t be killed. One or the other will die. The only question is which one, moment by moment. Notice how ready Herodius was to know where to strike: *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” (24-25)*.

4. Then finally, *And the king was exceedingly sorry (26a)*. The fact that the king was “exceedingly sorry,” was not the same thing as repentance. It was not godly sorrow. The basic reason we can say that is that it wasn’t a strong enough sorrow to make him change everything for the highest cause: *but because of his oaths and his guests he did not want to break his word to her (26b)*. Because of his oaths and his face in front of his guests he would not save the life of God’s messenger. “Well, he made a promise—and he made it to his wife! And that’s important.” Perhaps we need more classes on Christian Ethics in our day. Because of other

commitments, other covenants, other spheres that God has called me to—what? Do you not understand that the basic thing he has called you to is the kingdom of his Son, Jesus! Do you not understand that all of the other relationships you have will be better served and cared for if you make that choice! Do you think the devil is stupid and will not use Scripture itself to tug on you and bind you to silence God’s voice!

## II. THE PROPHET’S HEAD IN RELATION TO THE EARTHLY HEAD

### A) The Gospel Informing John’s Message Informed the King of the Law

1. Notice that John is basically aware that the Messiah had come. Remember he had declared without hesitation: “The next day he saw Jesus coming toward him, and said, “Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world! This is he of whom I said, ‘After me comes a man who ranks before me, because he was before me’” [Jn. 1:29-30]. It is true that once imprisoned, John falls under natural discouragement and doubt, so Matthew tells us: “Now when John heard in prison about the deeds of the Christ, he sent word by his disciples and said to him, ‘Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?’ And Jesus answered them, ‘Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them. And blessed is the one who is not offended by me” [Mat. 11:2-6]. So at the end of the day, John did not see his life or his message as a waste. And what was that message?

2. Ultimately it was always about Jesus. But specifically, to Herod, it was a call to repentance and reformation, starting with his own household: *John had been saying to Herod, “It is not lawful for you to have your brother’s wife” (18)*. So let’s do the math here. John is operating in the knowledge that the good news has come. Yet in order to be faithful to that gospel he has to communicate the Law of God in exactly the way that it applies to each person. To a husband, the unrepentant man needs to know that he has failed to glorify God as Servant-Head in the home. To a king, the man needs to know that he has failed to glorify God as Servant-Head of the state. Both the home and the state were created to talk about the glory of Christ as the Servant-King. To fail in exactly the way God says to do that is sin. The prophet, in order to be faithful to God and the gospel, must speak God’s truth to every area of life where it is applicable: “For he whom God has sent utters the words of God” [Jn. 3:34]. The person who has God’s truth does not serve people well if his message does not stand over every person in every walk of life. Jesus gets down **low** and dirty and serves

every kind of person, but He does this with a word and a truth that stands **over** everyone and every head and every relationship. And we lie about who Jesus is when we don't strike that balance.

## B) The Gospel is Told the Loudest When We Lose Our Lives for It

1. John got to tell the gospel one last time: not like Sampson lashing out for one last vengeance against the Philistines, but one last, greatest statement about what is valuable. Notice first that our best death now is appointed and rushes quickly to us when the time comes: *And immediately the king sent an executioner with orders to bring John's head (27a)*. There's that word again—**immediately** (*euthys*). The ministry of John, like the ministry of Jesus, was a short, short blip by worldly standards, and once the decree of God prepares the natural fires of the unbeliever's intentional, seemingly clever devices, they move like rushing minions, as if they were neurons firing from the mind of the devil himself, but when we look deeper we see that they are pawns of God's chessboard. What the persecutors mean for evil, God means to show more of his glory. When Jesus told the disciples that it was time for him to be glorified, this is the way He described it (and it's what tells us that John's life was not a wasted life—especially not now!): “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. Whoever loves his life loses it, and whoever hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life” [Jn. 12:24-25]. *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 (27b-28)*. The enemies of Christ have the losses of Christians as their trophies.

Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted, while evil people and impostors will go on from bad to worse, deceiving and being deceived” [2 Tim. 3:12-13]

2. Well who heard this gospel if everyone at the party is intoxicated with themselves and the executioner is just doing his business? *When his disciples heard of it, they came and took his body and laid it in a tomb (29)*. Why in a tomb, again? Because the Jews had always anticipated the resurrection. How many times do we have to be told by Jesus that He promises us something so much better than ‘your best life now’ and a “wonderful plan for your present life’? He promises us himself—his own glory forever! For *this* lifetime, He promises us suffering to prepare us for true glory. It is a promise! “do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you” [1 Pet. 4:12]; “and you will be hated by all for my

name's sake" [Mat. 10:22], "Whoever does not bear his own cross and come after me cannot be my disciple" [Lk. 14:27].

He had a cross that cleanses us forever. We have a cross that cleanses us day by day. His glory came through suffering; our glory will come through suffering: "and if children, then heirs—heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him" [Rom. 8:17]. We do not glorify God in the gospel so much by playing politics with every single person we know so that people can look at us and say, 'Wow, they have really got their 'head together,' as much as we glorify Christ by losing our head for him. It is no coincidence that the instrument of suffering that Jesus obtained us by is the imagery that He calls us to when He calls us at all. Bonhoeffer said,

The cross is not the terrible end to an otherwise God-fearing and happy life, but it meets us at the beginning of our communion with Christ. When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die.<sup>1</sup>

## APPLICATION

**To the Skeptic** – It may be argued that the account of Josephus' *Antiquities* and Mark's go not together. Josephus says that the reason that Herod had John executed was for fear of political uprising; Mark specifically lists the charge of Herod's unlawful marriage. This is a simple case of being able to think logically, from the general to the specific. Civil rulers did not care about religious matters—*unless* it threatened the political stability of their region. And in Israel, religion always defined politics. If Herod was in an unlawful marriage, the people would rebel because they would be convinced that the curse of God would be upon their nation. So in other words, Mark and Josephus are not in disagreement at all. The secular historian is focusing on the general fear of an uprising; Mark is focusing on the thing that would cause the occasion for uprising. Often times, answering objections are no more complex than this. We have to train ourselves to distinguish between the general and the specific and be able to think about them both at the same time.

**To the Saint** – There are two extremes in the conservative church today when it comes to being faithful to the gospel in relationship to our other hats, particularly with respect to our interaction with the state. You don't need to be confused. The Bible is filled with stories just like this and they speak with one voice. The example of John the Baptist before Herod is just one more example. He was willing to die for Christ to speak the gospel to everyone

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<sup>1</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (MacMillan, New York 1967, fp. 1937); p. 99

(including Herod). Don't miss that! John was not primarily tuning his message to how likely Herod would respond and reform things. He was communicating Law because Law comes before grace. It just so happened that Herod's sin effected society as a whole. If Herod lived on the way he was and John was allowed to live, John would not have considered his life a failure because "society was getting away from him." Too many Christians today live at one of two extremes. They are either afraid of compromising the gospel because there is any speech flowing from our heads to the heads of the institutions of the old age; or, they are afraid of compromising truth if we go on preaching the gospel to the point of death if enough heads don't roll with us. Most people I know live on one of these extremes.

But compromise is always a question of what you are willing to kill and what you are willing to be killed. Can you speak into the social sphere with eternal authority without needing it to turn out a certain way for your eternity? Some people cannot do that because they have unrealistic expectations about what we can accomplish in this age. That person has an optimistic idol. Other people cannot do this because they have confused the possibilities for social change with our degree of responsibility. Since "nothing we can do" does such and such, therefore we should do such and such. That person has a pessimistic idol. Both have a pathetic ungodly need to tailor their speech to man's response. John the Baptist went to death first and foremost for the gospel of Jesus Christ and the reason the gospel was told in his death was precisely because man's response and his very next breath were non-existent to him, in comparison with the clearest, greatest reward of being with Christ.

**To the Sinner** – So if you are here today as an unbeliever or undecided or uncommitted to Jesus, how would I tell you the good news differently than that 'Jesus loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life'? Well if God is both perfectly holy and perfectly loving, what first plan must he have for a life that is sinful but a life that He loves? He has to do something radically different with that life first. If He is too pure to look upon sin and if He loves the sinner, then His message to you and me cannot be 'I love you just the way you are and I have a wonderful plan for your life,' as if that means that He has alterations or additions or energy to continue to be the same person you are now. All that you are now has to be renounced. All that you are now—as a sinner—is all that He had to pay for in losing his life.