

The Death and Resurrection of God's Prophets

Psalm 2:1-9; Matthew 14:1-13 (text)

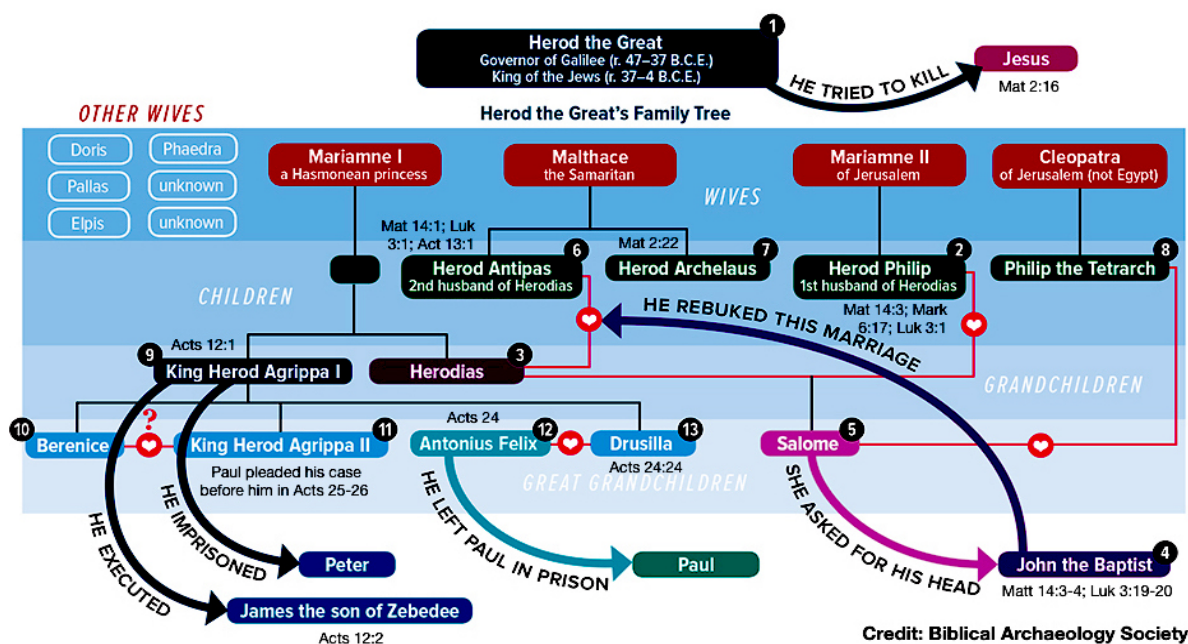
© Rev. Nollie Malabuyo • February 3, 2019 • Big Springs Community Church

Beloved brothers and sisters in the Lord Jesus Christ: Today, we come to the next main part of the Gospel of Matthew. In the first main part, up to Matthew Chapter 13, Jesus taught and performed miracles in the area of Galilee. When we get to Chapter 14, we learn that Jesus went out of this area to avoid King Herod Antipas after Herod killed John the Baptizer. He also focused more of his teaching ministry to his disciples because the Pharisees were hostile to him at every turn. It is only in Chapter 19 when Jesus left Galilee to make his way to his death in Jerusalem.

At the end of Chapter 13, we read that Jesus was rejected in his own hometown of Nazareth, so he did not teach and perform miracles there. And then at the beginning of Chapter 14, we read that King Herod had John the Baptizer beheaded at the instigation of his wife and stepdaughter. So Jesus and John were both rejected by the Pharisees and the ruling Herod family. These are the three main characters we will study this morning.

The Wicked Herodians and Herod Dynasty

The first characters in this narrative are the Herodians. These were a political group of Jews who supported the Herod ruling dynasty. There are at least two places in the New Testament where they are mentioned. The first one is in Matthew 22:16-21 where we read that on Jesus' last week before he was crucified, the Pharisees and the Herodians conspired to entrap Jesus with a question about paying taxes to Caesar. We all know how Jesus confounded the Jews with his answer, "*Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's.*" Then in Mark 3:6, we read how the Pharisees and the Herodians were conspiring to kill Jesus. This is why Jesus warned his disciples about the evil Pharisee-Herodian alliance in Mark 8:15, "*Watch out; beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and the leaven of Herod.*" So these were the Herodians.



What about the Herod ruling dynasty? They were as wicked as their Herodian supporters. “Herod the tetrarch” in verse 1 is the son of Herod the Great, a half-Edomite, half-Jewish man who founded the Herod dynasty. Herod the Great was the King Herod who attempted to kill the newborn Jesus by slaughtering all infants in Bethlehem two years old and under. He ruled with utmost cruelty. Because of his fear of being deposed as “King of the Jews,” he murdered Mariamne, one of his ten wives, along with her two sons, her brother, her grandfather, and her wicked mother.

So that was Herod the “Great.” Herod the tetrarch, his son, also known as Herod Antipas, was not as murderous as his father. Like most of the Herod dynasty, he was adulterous and incestuous. These adulterous and incestuous relationships in the family were bizarre. They intermarried one another. Herodias, Herod Antipas’ wife, had previously married her half-uncle named Herod Philip. But Herodias and Herod Antipas fell in love, so both of them divorced their spouses, and they got married. Herodias was actually Herod’s half-sister. It was this relationship that John the Baptizer denounced, saying, *“It is not lawful for you to have her,”* because this relationship is forbidden in Leviticus 18:16. Herodias and her first husband Herod Philip had a daughter named Salome, the girl who danced in our text. Salome later married her great-uncle, Philip the tetrarch. Two other incestuous relationships in the family are between Herod Agrippa II and her sister Berenice, and between Antonius Felix and her sister Drusilla. All four characters are mentioned in the trial of Paul in Acts 24-26.

But beneath the cruel and murderous deeds of Herod is hidden his weakness as a king. He hesitated to execute John because he was afraid that John came back from the dead as Jesus. And anyone who came back from the dead might be immortal, as pagans believed. Herod was also afraid of the people who might rebel against him if he killed John. But he also wanted to please his wife’s desire to get rid of this pesky prophet. His weakness again showed during the trial of Jesus. Pontius Pilate did not want to make a judgment on Jesus, so he sent Jesus to Herod, since Jesus was from Galilee, which was under Herod’s jurisdiction. But Herod did not want to make a decision, sending Jesus back to Pilate, whom we know also washed his hands from the death of Jesus.

So that was the lifestyle of the wicked Herod family. Herod and Herodias hated John for pointing out to them that God condemned their incestuous and adulterous life. And this is often how people react when their sin is pointed out: they hate the one who tells them. Their reaction is, “How dare you? Who are you to tell me? You’re being judgmental!” And then the accused discounts God’s Word, saying that the Bible is obsolete and does not apply to our modern world. Think of those who approve of abortion and homosexuality. They harden their hearts and shake their fists against God when their sins are called out, and then escalate their wickedness.

We also see this rebellion against God’s Word in the church when a member is disciplined. Against many evidences and witnesses, he denies any wrongdoing and continues in his sin. The church exercises discipline in order to keep the peace and unity, for example, when someone is spreading gossip and backstabbing others. This is why Paul says when the church had a case of an incestuous relationship, *“Let him who has done this be removed from among you... Purge the evil person from*

among you" (1 Cor 5:2, 13). He also lamented the state of the Corinthian church because of those who continue in "*quarreling, jealousy, anger, hostility, slander, gossip, conceit, and disorder*" (2 Cor 12:20).

May we as God's people react with repentance when confronted with our sins. May we confess our sin before God and before our brother or sister, saying with David in Psalm 51:3–4, "*For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me. Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight.*" May we read and meditate on God's law day and night so we may see how we offend our holy God and how sinful we are. Then pray, "*Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me.*" And finally, after we repent and ask God to renew our hearts, we give thanks for his forgiveness, "*O Lord, open my lips, and my mouth will declare your praise*" (Psa 51:15). But the rebellious Herod did not do any of these. Instead, he murdered John, God's prophet.

John the "Resurrected" Forerunner

At his wife's goading, Herod arrested John and wanted to execute John immediately. But he was concerned that the Jews will rebel against him because they considered him as God's prophet. So John languished in jail for months before he was executed. Herod was also superstitious. He heard about the miracles that Jesus was performing, so he was afraid that John was resurrected in the person of Jesus. This is similar to pagan Hinduism's reincarnation.

We all bemoan the senseless death of John because of Salome, the beautiful girl dancing before wild, intoxicated men celebrating Herod's birthday. He was the faithful forerunner of Jesus, preparing the people for the coming of the Lamb of God. He was a prophet crying out in the wilderness for repentance, posing no threat to Herod's kingship. As with all church discipline, John pointed out his sin so he would repent, turn back to God, and obey God's laws. He was a prophet who must have prayed for his king to rule in justice and righteousness.

Did John deserve such an ignominious, horrible death, with his head served by a dancing girl on a platter to a drunken king and his drunken men? We all would say no, he did not, because he was a faithful prophet serving God till the end of his life. Why would God reward him with such a violent death? We ask the same when we hear of the faithful martyrs in the early church who were beheaded, crucified and burned by the Romans? The writer of Hebrews says of these heroes of the faith:

[They] 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—wandering about in deserts and mountains, and in dens and caves of the earth (Heb 11:35-38).

We remember men and women such as John Hus of Bohemia, William Tyndale and Thomas Cranmer of England, Savonarola of Italy, the Huguenots of France, and Guido de Bres of the Netherlands. They were all burned at the stake or beheaded for their faith. They were prophets declaring the truths of God's Word, refusing to recant their faith till they were martyred. We remember them because of the examples of their lives and teachings. This is why we remember John the Baptizer 2,000 years after his death. Herod remembered him after his death, in terror that he came back from the dead in the person of Jesus, the third main person in our text.

Jesus the True Resurrection

Herod heard about the signs and wonders and miracles that Jesus performed. No one else was able to show so much power. So when Jesus was finally arrested and sent to Herod for judgment, Herod was very pleased to see him. He wanted Jesus to perform miracles for him, but Jesus kept his silence (Luke 23:8-9).

Isaiah prophesied that Jesus the Suffering Servant would be silent before his enemies crucified him, *“He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so he opened not his mouth”* (Isa 53:7). Why did he have such peace when he faced the most terrible part of his life’s mission? Because his Father promised him two things. He will rise from the grave, and he will be given a people for an inheritance. Isaiah again prophesied these two things, *“when his soul makes an offering for guilt, he shall see his offspring; he shall prolong his days; the will of the LORD shall prosper in his hand”* (Isa 53:10). His inheritance is his offspring, God’s children whom he will save from their sins. His resurrection will “prolong his days” into eternity, never to die again.

After he rose from the grave, Jesus was *“the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep”* (1 Cor 15:20). If Christ was the first one to rise from the dead and live forever, then it follows that all whom he saved from sin and death will follow him on the Day of Resurrection (1 Cor 15:23). And these believers will include John who did not come to life after Herod murdered him. On that glorious day, John and all who believe in Christ will finally be raised from the grave.

John and Jesus did not depend on their king to save them from death. They knew it was the Creator and Redeemer God who would resurrect them from the grave. Though it is God who appoints rulers and kings, it is ultimately and only God who fulfills his promises. We are commanded to pray for all civil authorities and to obey the laws of our earthly kingdom (Rom 13:1-7). But our ultimate trust must be in God alone, as the psalmist writes, *“Put not your trust in princes, in a son of man, in whom there is no salvation”* (Psa 146:3).

Every presidential inauguration, we put our hope in a new administration to make things right and to bring peace and prosperity. And it is right to hope for better things on this occasion, but how we are always disappointed! Because as the psalmist continues in verse 4, *“When [the king’s] breath departs... on that very day his plans perish.”* A new administration, new policies, new plans, new beginnings, but all rulers are also sinful men, and their plans and decisions are often flawed.

John did not put his trust in the wicked King Herod, because his hope, refuge and strength is God, who alone reigns in perfect justice and righteousness. Jesus, who was born King of the Jews, did not put his trust on King Herod, who was pretending to be King of the Jews. On the Day of Resurrection, the Day of Judgment, Jesus Christ will begin his eternal reign not only as the King of the Jews, but as King of Kings and Lord of Lords in a new heaven and new earth. In his kingdom, there will be no sin and death, no wicked people, as Revelation 22:15 says, *“Outside [heavenly city] are the dogs and sorcerers and the sexually immoral and murderers and idolaters, and everyone who loves and practices falsehood.”* Those outsiders looking in will include King Herod, the Herodians and Pharisees.

Beloved in the Lord Jesus Christ: Three things we must remember in this short passage today. First, when we commit sin, confess to God and to the one we have wronged. Admit wrongdoing, and you will be forgiven by our merciful God and our loving brother or sister.

Second, put your ultimate hope in Christ and his resurrection, and not on your own ruler and political system. For all human systems are flawed and sinful, whether capitalist or socialist, liberal or conservative, Democrat or Republican.

Third, expect suffering, affliction and even persecution, because this is what our Lord Jesus Christ warned us to expect, *“If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you”* (John 15:20). John was faithful to God and his Savior, yet his reward in this life was martyrdom at the hands of a wicked king and his family. So, let me encourage you with these words from 1 Peter 4:12–14:

Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed. If you are insulted for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you.