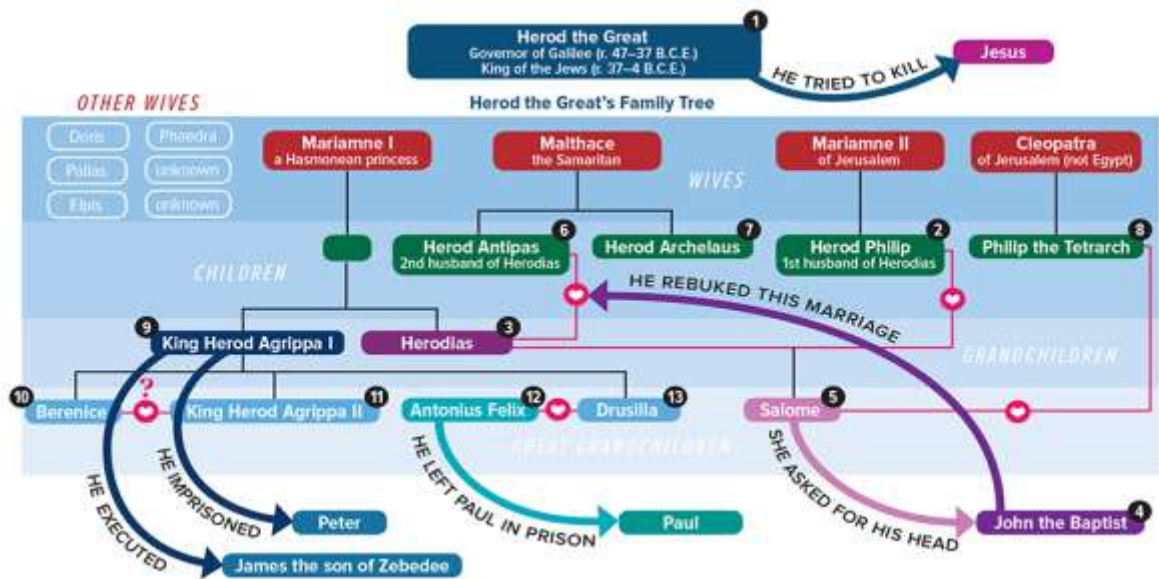


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 Sunday 15, 2018
 Mark 6 the execution of John the Baptist

A few weeks ago, I preached about John the Baptist. I did not explain much his relationship with Herod Antipas and Herodias. I do not want you to be confused between Herod Antipas and Herod the Great, who tried to kill the infant Jesus by slaughtering of the children at Bethlehem. For this reason, let us look at the sermon insert and try to understand why Herodias wanted to get rid of John. You will notice that several men were called Herod. Herod is a title of the kings of Judea appointed by Rome. The title means "son of hero." They were actually Edomites descendants of Esau, whose ancestors had converted to Judaism.



John the Baptist criticized Herod and Herodias' marriage, "It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife." The law in Leviticus 20:21 states that "If a man marries his brother's wife,

it is an act of impurity; he has dishonored his brother. They will be childless.” There is only one case that the law allows a man to marry his brother’s wife. If a man dies having no children, his brother must marry the widow and raise up offspring to his deceased brother (Deuteronomy 25:5-6). Herodias first husband Herod Philip was still alive, and Salome was their daughter. Herodias, who wanted to live in Jerusalem as a queen, did not want to lose her status. She saw John the Baptist as a threat to her political ambition. Herodias knows that Herod regarded John as a prophet. She could not harm him. However, she was looking for an opportunity to kill him. “But an opportunity came when Herod on his birthday gave a banquet for his influential guests and Salome the daughter of Herodias danced and pleased Herod and his guests. Herod told her, “Ask me for whatever you wish, and I will give it, even half of my kingdom” (vv. 21-23).

The promise to give Salome his half kingdom sounds ridiculous because Herod's kingdom belonged to Rome. He didn't have a right to give it to anybody. Herodias advised Salome to ask for the head of John the Baptist, which was more valuable than Herod's half kingdom. Herod reluctantly agreed to execute John.

When Herod heard of Jesus, he thought that John had risen from the dead. In Jesus time superstitious belief was common. People believed in ghost-hunting. They believe if a person was murdered, his/her ghost comes back to haunt the murderer. Herod thought that John's ghost had come back to haunt him.”ⁱ

John the baptizer spoke boldly against the government and religious establishment. Herod and Herodias executed him because he was committed to his faith and God's law. He faced persecution and became a martyr for the sake of the kingdom of God. The evangelist Mark wrote his gospel at a time when Emperor Nero persecuted Christians and accused them of burning the city of Rome 64 CE. Mark wrote down the execution of John to encourage early Christians to endure persecution. Since the early church, Christians have been persecuted. Thousands became martyrs for the sake of Christ.

You heard of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who was a German Lutheran pastor and theologian. He challenged both the government and religious establishment of his time. The evangelical church adopted Nazi principles and called itself "German Christians." In response, Bonhoeffer started the Confessing Church that commits itself to Jesus' teaching, not Nazi ideology. Hitler executed Bonhoeffer as Herod executed John the Baptizer.

In 2015, ISIS video appeared to show beheadings of 20 Egyptian Coptic Christians and one Ghanaian man in Libya. This massacre shocked the whole world. These 21 martyrs refused to deny Christ and kept their faith to the end. ISIS beheaded them just like Herod beheaded John the Baptist. Pope Francis says "Let's not forget that today there are more Christian martyrs than in ancient times, than in the early day times of the church."ⁱⁱ

Christians in the United States are not facing persecution in the same way their sisters and brothers are facing in the Middle East and Africa. But their martyrdom inspires our faith.

The execution of John the Baptist motivates us to face persecution for the sake of Jesus Christ. His martyrdom teaches us that Christian life is not easy. You are going to pay a high price for your faith. We are going to suffer for the sake of Jesus. Your family and friends might persecute you on account of Jesus. Sometimes laws are used against your faith.

In whatever form suffering comes, you should embrace it and remember that Christ is with you. We need to be always prepared to experience hardship for the sake of Christ. Jesus has promised to go with us through the trouble. The stronger your relationship with Christ, the stronger you stand up for Christ.

The good news for you today comes from the gospel of John. Jesus tells his disciples: "I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world." (John 16:33). Jesus has overcome the world and he will help you to overcome it, too.

ⁱ Strauss, Mark L.; Strauss, Mark L.. Mark (Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament) (Kindle Location 6757). Zondervan. Kindle Edition.

ⁱⁱ <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/world/2017/05/27/pope-more-christian-martyrs-today-than-ancient-times/102232868/>