

# THE RADICAL RABBI: A RADICAL MARTYR

(Mark 6:14-29)

8.1.21

## INTRODUCTION

Martyr. One of those words that can bring a number of images to mind — a lot of them pretty ugly. The dictionary defines a “martyr” as: *Someone who chooses to sacrifice their life or face pain and suffering instead of giving up something they hold sacred.* This faith we call Christianity is filled with the stories and examples of many men, women and children who have died rather than renounce that faith. Some examples:

- 1) Jim Elliot. He once said: *He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose.* While doing mission work in Ecuador, he felt compelled to try and reach out to an indigenous tribe — the Auca — a name given them by another tribe which means “savage”; they had a reputation for being very violent, and dangerous to outsiders. Initial contacts with the tribe seemed to be promising, so they proceeded with their plans for more interaction. But on January 6, 1956, along with fellow missionaries Pete Fleming, Ed McCulley, Nate Saint and Roger Youderian, Jim Elliot was speared to death by warriors from that tribe. What came out later was that, at the time of the attack, Jim Elliot was armed; he had a gun in his pocket. But he and the others had made a vow that they would not kill any Auca who did not know Jesus, simply to save themselves. Jim Elliot left behind his wife of three years, Elisabeth, and their 10-month-old daughter, Valerie. He was 28 years old at the time of his death.
- 2) John and Betty Stam. John and Betty were missionaries in China in the early 1930s under the direction of the China Inland Mission, working in a village in east central China. They had actually met while both attended Moody Bible Institute in Chicago, and were married in China in October 1933. Being in China at that time put them in the middle of the Chinese civil war between the government’s Nationalist forces and the Communist forces under Mao Zedong. In December 1934 the village in which they were ministering was overrun by bandits loyal to Mao. After spending a night under arrest, they were stripped down to their underclothes and forced to march 12 miles to another village. Shortly after arriving, they were led up a hill and then beheaded. John was 27 years old at the time of his death; Betty was 28. They left behind a three-month-old daughter, Helen. Their graves are in China under a common tombstone. Under Betty’s name are the words of Paul from Philippians 1:21: ***For me to live is Christ and to die is gain — Paul, Philippians 1:21.*** Under John’s name is the last half of the preceding verse, ***that Christ may be magnified whether by life or by death — Paul, Philippians 1:20b.*** That verse was included in a letter John had written the night before to his mission board.
- 3) Ernest and Miriam Erickson. These two are close to my heart because I knew them; they came from the same church in which I grew up. Ernest and Miriam were Lutheran Brethren missionaries who started serving the Lord in northern Cameroon and neighboring Chad, Africa in 1943, working with people who spoke the Masana language. Over the course of their time in Africa, they erected three health buildings (a leprosarium, a clinic and a hospital), developed Christian literature for new believers, created Sunday School materials and songbooks, helped translate the Bible into the Masana language, and helped train future pastors. In May 1978, while clearing some land around their compound, a tree viewed as sacred to those who held to traditional African religions was cut down. In retaliation, Ernest and Miriam were murdered near their home in Yagoua; they were in their 60s, and just

beginning to look at retirement. Of the nine men initially arrested for the crime, the Ericksons likely knew seven of them.

Today we're going to be looking at arguably one of our first martyrs — John the Baptist. What exactly can we learn from his life and death? Let's begin that search **with a moment in prayer.**

### **TEXT (Mark 6:14-29)**

***King Herod heard about this, for Jesus' name had become well known — Mark 6:14a.***

Just to be clear as we begin, the “King Herod” Mark is writing about here is Herod Antipas, one of the sons of Herod the Great, who was the “Herod” who was ruling at the time of the birth of Christ. The “this” that Herod Antipas was hearing about was the disciples of Jesus, going about the ministry to which He had commissioned them (what we talked about last week). Specifically, as Mark tells it in verses just prior to the section we are looking at today: ***[The disciples] went out and preached that people should repent. They drove out many demons and anointed many sick people with oil and healed them — Mark 6:12-13.*** All this was causing quite the fuss.

***Some were saying, “John the Baptist has been raised from the dead, and that is why miraculous powers are at work in him.” Others said, “He is Elijah.” And still others claimed, “He is a prophet, like one of the prophets of long ago.” — Mark 6:14b-15.***

So, while the disciples of Jesus were preaching the words of Jesus and performing the works of Jesus, everybody seemed to understand that one way or another, behind all this amazing activity was this mystery man from Nazareth; it all came down to Him. Who was He? The speculation was very wide-ranging — from John the Baptist returned from the grave, to Elijah (who had never died), to speculation that Jesus was like so many other prophets who had impacted the nation of Israel. But interestingly, nobody ventured to wonder if Jesus of Nazareth was actually the Son of God, God's chosen One, the “Messiah.” That possibility was never discussed.

***But when Herod heard this, he said, “John, whom I beheaded, has been raised from the dead!” — Mark 6:16.***

Herod Antipas casts his “vote” that the man doing these amazing things is indeed John the Baptist. Obviously, his beheading of the holy man had never been far from his thoughts; in fact, there is quite a backstory to be told. So, at this point, Mark pivots to a flashback of the reason behind Herod's guilty feelings.

***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. For John had been saying to Herod, “It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife.” So Herodias nursed a grudge against John and wanted to kill him. But 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 — Mark 6:17-20.***

Herod had had John arrested, bound and put in prison. Why? He did it literally “for the cause” of his wife, Herodias — who had previously been married to Herod's brother Philip. It was this adulterous marriage that John had kept denouncing to Herod. He was not going to allow them any peace, to feel content in their marital arrangement. As a prophet of God, he was compelled to speak God's truth. And the uncomfortable truth was that their marriage was “not lawful” by virtue of God's words to Moses in the book of Leviticus: ***“Do not have sexual relations with your brother's wife.” . . . If a man marries his brother's wife, it is an act of impurity; he has dishonored his brother*** — ***God speaking, Leviticus 18:16a, 20:21.*** Herod's brother Philip was still alive, which made this marriage dead wrong.

But, as is often the case, Herodias did not want to hear that she was wrong. And how dare anybody even say such a thing. So, she “nursed a grudge” against John because of the stand he was taking against her and Herod. Of course, she wanted to do much more than simply have a quarrel with John; she wanted him dead — and, if up to her, she’d have killed him in an instant.

But ironically it was her husband Herod who stood in the way. The Bible doesn’t say that Herod was angry with John but rather that he “feared” John; the Greek word gives us our word “phobia.” But it was a fear mixed with reverence; he knew that John was in fact a completely innocent and holy, morally blameless man. Herod’s viewpoint offered John protection from Herodias and, in fact, it gave Herod pleasure to listen to John. This was not a believer’s pleasure in the joy of the Lord, but John’s preaching gave him some sense of enjoyment and, according to the Greek, this desire of Herod’s to observe John preserved John. But in the meantime, Herodias was scheming.

***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 — Mark 6:21.***

For such an important event as the king’s birthday, only the best, most elite guests would have been granted an invitation — the greatest members of his administrators, the most prestigious members of his military, and only the *creme de la creme* of the society over which he ruled — the most influential citizens of Galilee. And of course, in the customs of the time, this would have been a “men only” affair. And the place where all this took place was a fortress palace called “Machaerus,” just east of the Dead Sea (in modern-day Jordan).

Now royal feasts of the time were portraits of excess, both in terms of their shameless displays of wealth and grandeur, and in their equally shameless opportunities for unrestricted and unrestrained pleasure. And one of the participants inserted into this rambunctious male environment was the daughter of Herodias and her first husband Philip (and thus stepdaughter of Herod); according to first-century Jewish historian Josephus, her name was Salome.

***When the daughter of Herodias came in and danced, she pleased Herod and his dinner guests — Mark 6:22a.***

Now Hollywood has enjoyed making this young girl into a very seductive, erotic, mature enchantress who had Herod falling all over himself. The fact is, the Greek in describing her uses the word for “damsel,” referring to a young or little girl. But even in that context, Herod obviously was pretty much running “zero” in the moral behavior department. As a guest in his own half-brother Philip’s residence in Rome, he had essentially stolen Philip’s wife Herodias for himself — also requiring the two of them to formally divorce their spouses. And what’s more, Herodias was technically his half-niece. So, marriage — and even incest — laws were pretty much totally ignored by this guy. So, while it is just speculation, it is entirely feasible from his track record that Herod’s young stepdaughter was gaining some inappropriate attention from him in this moment as well.

***The king said to the girl, “Ask me for anything you want, and I’ll give it to you.” And he promised her with an oath, “Whatever you ask I will give you, up to half my kingdom” — Mark 6:22b-23.***

So, the stepdad watched with questionable pleasure his stepdaughter perform, and he and all his guests enjoyed it — likely fueled by a goodly consumption of “adult beverages.” So, he proudly announced that, in view of her entertaining him and his guests so well, anything she wanted she could ask, and he would give it. And then, as if to underscore how impressed he was with her, he kept repeating his offer.

Now the idea of a king granting “half his kingdom” to anybody was just meant as an extravagant way of promising an amazing gift; it was understood that the wording was never to be taken

seriously. And Herod was actually making an offer that was never his to grant: he was not a king but rather a tetrarch — basically a ruling governor, but subordinate to the rulers back in Rome. And he had no kingdom to give away to anybody; again, whatever he ruled over was done by allowance from Rome. In truth, he meant nothing to Rome; they had no loyalty to him. They could replace him whenever they wanted.

But in this moment, Herod was acting very much like a royal — he thinks he can say and do whatever he wants. But unfortunately, the Greek tells us that Herod couldn't keep his proud mouth shut; he kept repeating his “kingdom giveaway” offer. Not surprising given that such an oath had as one of its desired effects deeply impressing his guests. But in making his oath so public, he set himself up with a huge problem.

***She went out and said to her mother, “What shall I ask for?” “The head of John the Baptist,” she answered. At once the girl hurried in to the king with the request: “I want you to give me right now the head of John the Baptist on a platter.” The king was greatly distressed, but because of his oaths and his dinner guests, he did not want to refuse her. So he immediately sent an executioner with orders to bring John’s head. The man went, beheaded John in the prison, and brought back his head on a platter. He presented it to the girl, and she gave it to her mother. On hearing of this, John’s disciples came and took his body and laid it in a tomb — Mark 6:24-29.***

Two things to notice right away: First, the girl has absolutely no problem making the request; it appears she is as heartless and cruel as her mother, and second, none of Herod's guests raise any protests either. And of course, what drove all this was the social etiquette that declared that oaths made must be honored. And he had gone to such absurd — and loud — lengths to make sure his generous offer was appropriately impressed upon his audience. But now, caught up by his wife's evil conniving, Herod was “greatly distressed,” exceedingly sorrowful according to the Greek, but his distress was greater when thinking about the reactions of his guests. So even though very proudly attaching to himself the power of “king,” he folded like a lawn chair when faced with another power: social pressure. No matter his feelings for John, he wasn't going to go back on his word — even if it meant an innocent man's death.

Now the place where John was imprisoned was one floor below the place where Herod and his guests were partying. So, in no time at all, an executioner received his command and went down below the party room and beheaded John. The head was dutifully placed on a platter and given to the girl, who passed it on to her mother. Eventually John's disciples, upon hearing of this, were given permission to take John's body and place it in a tomb. And Matthew's gospel adds a final coda to this story: ***When Jesus heard what had happened, he withdrew by boat privately to a solitary place — Matthew 14:13a.*** It is merely speculation, but John's death may have been a reminder of the martyr's death that was awaiting Jesus as well.

## **APPLICATION**

Now on first blush, it can seem difficult to understand why God would have allowed John's death. I mean, even though John had famously said: ***“[Jesus] must increase, but I must decrease” — John the Baptist, John 3:30 (NKJV)***, you had to assume that he still knew how to preach, he still knew how to challenge, he still knew how to call people to repentance. Instead, a godless man under the influence of an equally godless woman has him mercilessly killed.

And obviously the deaths of the saints has continued. According to the Center for the Study of Global Christianity of Gordon-Conwell Seminary, an evangelical school located in Hamilton, Massachusetts, it is estimated that some 100,000 Christians die annually for their faith. That means

that, during the course of our one-hour service, somewhere around 11-12 people have died in our world for the sole reason of refusing to give up their belief and trust in Jesus Christ.

So why does God allow “martyrdom” to happen? The Bible suggests four very good reasons:

- 1) First, martyrdom is one of the ways in which God both plants the church and empowers believers. Believers are inspired to like-minded behavior when they see how other believers have suffered without yielding. A late third-century author wrote this: *Horror spread everywhere through the congregations; and the number of lapsi (those who renounced their faith to save their lives) . . . was enormous. There was no lack, however, of such as remained firm, and suffered martyrdom rather than yielding; and, as the persecution grew wider and more intense, the enthusiasm of the Christians and their power of resistance became stronger and stronger.*
- 2) Second, martyrdom is one of the ways that God employs to shut the accusing mouth of Satan. Remember when he came before God as told in Job 1? **[T]he Lord said to Satan, “Have you considered my servant Job? There is no one on earth like him; he is blameless and upright, a man who fears God and shuns evil.”** Do you remember Satan’s reply? **“Does Job fear God for nothing?” Satan replied. “Have you not put a hedge around him and his household and everything he has? You have blessed the work of his hands, so that his flocks and herds are spread throughout the land. But now stretch out your hand and strike everything he has, and he will surely curse you to your face” — Job 1:8-11.** What Satan was saying that people only serve God because their lives go better: “Of course Job fears you and shuns evil. Look at the life you’ve given him. But I dare you to take it all away, everything he has. Then let’s see how blameless and upright he is!” Martyrdom bears the precisely opposite testimony — that life simply lived for God is enough, regardless of consequences — and that testimony shuts Satan up!
- 3) Third, martyrdom and suffering is used by God to make our sometimes shakeable faith more unshakeable. James suggests this right at the beginning of his letter: **Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything — James 1:2-4.** James wants his readers to think of faith as spiritual muscle. Whenever you stress muscle, it gets stronger, not weaker. James wants us to respond spiritually in the same way. The more stress you experience, the more strength you have to endure — what James is calling “perseverance.”
- 4) And fourth, martyrdom and suffering remove us out of the way to reveal the singular, ongoing completeness of life in Christ; as Paul famously wrote: **Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. But he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for My power is made perfect in weakness.” Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ’s power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ’s sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong — II Corinthians 12:8-10.**

We need to remember that God is never caught off-guard by the death of His saints; those deaths are not a defeat for Him, but rather a part of His divine, perfect plan. In fact, God is so committed to the power inherent in believers dying for their faith in Him that He actually has determined the number of martyrs that will occur over the course of time; as the book of Revelation tells it, this occurs during the seven seal judgments: **When [the Lamb] opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain because of the word of God and the testimony they had**

*maintained. They called out in a loud voice, “How long, Sovereign Lord, holy and true, until You judge the inhabitants of the earth and avenge our blood?” Then each of them was given a white robe, and they were told to wait a little longer, until the full number of their fellow servants, their brothers and sisters, were killed just as they had been — Revelation 6:9-11.* Martyrdom is completely a part of God’s perfect plan — which means that there is divine purpose in all that God’s children ever have to endure. The goal? That we as believers would come to the place that the psalmist Asaph arrived at: *Whom have I in heaven but you? And earth has nothing I desire besides you. My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever — Psalm 73:25-26.*

You see, one of the things that ties all martyrs together is their hope, expressed this way by the author of Hebrews: *[T]hey were longing for a better country — a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for He has prepared a city for them — Hebrews 11:16.* That is their way of saying that there is nothing in this world that will ever bring more joy, more satisfaction, more thrill, more life, than holding out for the things that God has prepared for all those who love Him. How do we make the things of this world fade away? Keep our eyes on heaven!

Praise God that Jesus felt this way. Remember how the author of Hebrews spoke of Him: *For the joy set before Him He endured the cross, scorning its shame — Hebrews 12:2b.* The point? Jesus kept His eyes on heaven, focusing on what was eternal versus what was happening in the moment. Paul called everything he ever acquired in this world “garbage” (Philippians 3:8) compared to, as he called it, *the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord — Paul, Philippians 3:8a.*

That’s how Jim Elliot, and the Stam’s, and the Ericksons, could hold onto their faith in the midst of their suffering. There was something greater, something everlasting, something promised, that made every moment in this world insignificant. That’s where Jesus wants us to be, too — a place where, as individuals, and as a church, there is nothing greater to claim and proclaim than Christ Jesus our Lord. May that be all that ever matters to us — because that’s all that really does.

## CONCLUSION

As we close, there is one final piece to why martyrs have chosen their path: the completely trustworthy truth of the gospel. Jesus said it in His high priestly prayer in John 17 (and I love the King James here): *“Thy word is truth” — Jesus Christ, John 17:17b.* It’s the truth that all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. It’s the truth that there is only one way to the salvation that makes us clean before our Lord — Jesus Christ. And it is truth that Christ will never throw out anybody who comes to Him. And it is truth that God is preparing an everlasting home for all His children to be home with their Father. That is truth.

One of the blessings of living in this country is that we have not yet had to lay our lives on the line for truth, as have Christians around the world. But the day may come. Will we claim God’s truth, Biblical truth, as being all that matters? Would we die for the truth of the gospel as did Jim Elliot, the Stam’s, the Ericksons?

He has given us His all. Let us pray for the same grace and strength that so many have realized in giving their fullest measure of devotion to the cause of Christ. We won’t die. We’ll live — in the presence of our Father and His Son. What could be better than that? Let’s pray!