

## **The Death of John the Baptist** **Mark 6:14-29**

Jesus sends his disciples out all on their own, blessed and empowered with his authority (6:7-13). Before they get back, Mark tells us this sensational story, which includes power, sex, death and religion. Why stick a cropped episode right in the middle of a driving narrative about Jesus? This is the only story in the gospel not about Jesus explicitly, but like the book of Esther omitting “God”, it’s all about him. Mark’s sandwich structure—apostles sent, John murdered, apostles return—tells us what it means to follow Jesus. John goes before Jesus, Jesus before the apostles, and the apostles before us. This is death by discipleship.

### **A Grisly Banquet**

The disciples faithfully and effectively preach about Jesus so that King Herod hears (v14). People hazard guesses as to who this is—Elijah, John the Baptist resurrected—but Herod is sure: “John, whom I beheaded, has been raised” (v16). This horrible murder still plagued Herod, and Mark tells us why. Herod imprisoned John because John rebuked him for his incest and adultery with Herodias, his brother’s wife (v18). Herodias wanted to kill John, but Herod feared, respected, was intrigued, perplexed and blessed by John (vv19-20), so he protected him. Until his birthday party. This is a party of high official men—nobles, commanders, leaders (v21). Herod was a political climber who though denied the title “King” by Augustus when his father Herod the Great died, tried to live up to his father’s legacy. Herodias sends her daughter (Salome) to dance erotically for the men, and Herod offers her up to half his kingdom (vv22-23). Herodias hastily seizes the opportunity to get what she wants: the head of John the Baptist. Herod is *really* sorry about this, but not enough to forsake his pride before the men and cross his bloodthirsty wife (vv24-27). In a gruesome scene, John’s head is brought on a platter to Salome who then gives it to Herodias (v28). When John’s disciples hear about it, they take the body and put it in the tomb (v29).

### **A Tale of Two Powers**

Idolatry is taking a good thing and making it into a god, ascribing praise, honor, and priority to it that belongs only to the Creator. One telltale sign of idolatry is fear, because idols are always mortal and in danger of dying. Herod can’t break his oath because he fears losing power. His desire for power controls and compels him to do what he doesn’t want to do, even to murder a man he respects. But if power corrupts, it doesn’t always. John is a great and influential man. He is the messenger prophesied about by Isaiah and Malachi, the greater Elijah, the greatest prophet (Is. 40:3; Mal. 3:15; Matt. 11:11-14). He had a great reputation and influence, but he used it to serve the Lord even when it cost him everything. John follows in a long line of powerful and faithful people who were not corrupted by their power: Abraham, Joseph, Moses, Deborah, David, Esther and Nehemiah to name a few. John wielded his power faithfully despite the consequences.

### **Discipleship by Death**

The last time we heard about John he was preaching the gospel of the kingdom (1:14). He preaches and is arrested (1:4-8; 1:14; 6:17-29). Jesus preaches and is arrested (1:14-15; 9:31; 10:33; 14-15). The disciples preach and will be arrested (6:7-13; 13:9-13). John is executed by a reluctant political ruler and plotted against in secret. Jesus will also be killed by a reluctant ruler who would rather spare him. Herodias sought an “opportune time” just as Judas will seek “opportunity” to betray Jesus (14:11). Herod is caught off-guard by Salomes’ response to his offer; Pilate will be surprised by the response to his offer of release (15:6-15). Both have disciples put their bodies in tombs. There are two radically different ways to read the gospel: 1) Jesus suffered in my place for my sins so I don’t ever have to suffer. Or, 2) Jesus suffered in my place so that, redeemed, I get to love, live for, and *live like* him. If it’s the first, this is a history lesson we can leave and forget. If it’s the second, it means we can take up our cross, die to ourselves, and know this “light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory” (2 Cor. 4:17). This is how the kingdom comes.

## NOTES FOR LITTLE SAINTS

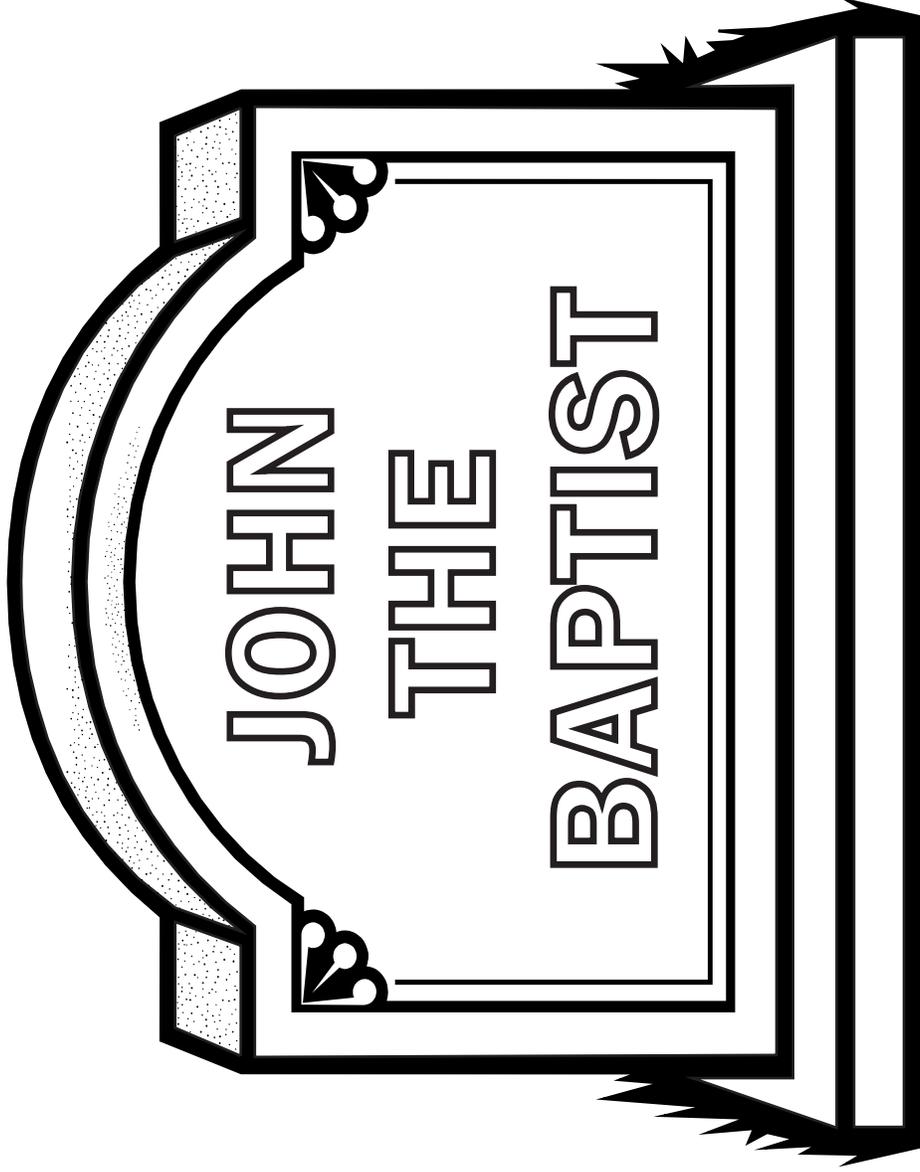
### **Today's Passage: Mark 6:18-20, 22-29**

*18 For John had been saying to Herod, "It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife." 19 And Herodias had a grudge against him and wanted to put him to death. But she could not, 20 for Herod feared John, knowing that he was a righteous and holy man, and he kept him safe. 22 For when Herodias's daughter came in and danced, she pleased Herod and his guests. And the king said to the girl, "Ask me for whatever you wish, and I will give it to you." 23 And he vowed to her, "Whatever you ask me, I will give you, up to half of my kingdom." 24 And she went out and said to her mother, "For what should I ask?" And she said, "The head of John the Baptist." 25 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." 26 And the king was exceedingly sorry, but because of his oaths and his guests he did not want to break his word to her. 27 And immediately the king sent an executioner with orders to bring John's head. He went and beheaded him in the prison 28 and brought his head on a platter and gave it to the girl, and the girl gave it to her mother. 29 When his disciples heard of it, they came and took his body and laid it in a tomb.*

1. What did John tell Herod it was not alright to do (verse 18)? Why might John might be scared to say this to Herod?
2. Have you ever made a promise you shouldn't have? Herod offered Salome, the girl who danced for him, up to half his kingdom. A promise like this is called an oath, a serious commitment. What did she ask for (verse 25)?
3. Herod made a foolish promise, and then he committed a huge sin by keeping his promise and murdering John the Baptist. If you say or promise something you shouldn't, what should you do? Write your answer and ask your parents later about this one.
4. Draw a picture of John the Baptist, clothed in camel skin with a container of honey tied to his waste, courageously telling King Herod (whom you might draw with a big hat, robe, and scepter): "It's not lawful to have your brother's wife."

### **Memory Verse to Recite Next Week:**

*For John had been saying to Herod,  
"It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife." --Mark 6:18*



Which of the following could be used to describe John the Baptist on his tombstone? Circle them.

COURAGEOUS

FEARED GOD

FEARED DEATH

POWERFUL

WEAK

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

Mark 6:18