



BELIEVERS CHAPEL

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The Sermons of S. Lewis Johnson

Gospel of Matthew

“The Beheading of a Baptist,” Matthew 13:51 – 14:12

For scripture reading, will you turn with me to chapter 13 of Matthew, and we will begin with verse 51. And I am reading through chapter 14 and verse 12.

“Jesus saith unto them, ‘Have you understood all these things?’ They say unto him, ‘Yea, Lord.’ Then he said unto them, ‘Therefore, every scribe who is instructed concerning the kingdom of heaven is like a householder who bringeth forth out of his treasure things new and old.’ And it came to pass that Jesus had finished these parables he departed from there, and when he was come into his own country he taught them in their synagogue insomuch that they were astonished and said, ‘From where hath this man this wisdom and these mighty works? Is this not the carpenter’s son? Is not his mother called Mary, and his brethren, James and Joseph and Simon and Judas? And his sisters, are they not all with us? From where, then, hath this man all these things?’ But they were offended in him. But Jesus said unto them, ‘A prophet is not without honor, except in his own country, and in his own house.’ And he did not many mighty works there because of their unbelief. At that time Herod the tetrarch heard of the fame of Jesus, and said unto his servants, ‘This is John

the Baptist; he is risen from the dead; and therefore mighty works do shew forth themselves in him.”

(Incidentally, that word translated “show forth themselves in him” is a Greek word that refers in the New Testament to supernatural workings, generally. So this is an affirmation of a confession on the part of Herod that there are some supernatural things happening through the ministry of The Lord Jesus which he attributes to a risen John the Baptist.) For Herod, now we have a flash back in verse 3, and we read of some things that had happened previous to the ministry of the Lord.

“For Herod had laid hold on John, and bound him, and put him in prison for Herodias' sake, his brother Philip's wife. For John said unto him, ‘It is not lawful for thee to have her.’ And when he would have put him to death, he feared the multitude, because they counted him as a prophet. But when Herod's birthday was kept, the daughter of Herodias danced before them, and pleased Herod. Whereupon he promised with an oath to give her whatsoever she would ask. (The other Gospel accounts say that he added up to half of my kingdom.) And she, being before instructed of her mother, said, ‘Give me here the head of John Baptist.’ And the king was sorry (but it was just for a moment, because when you put the accounts together it said he was momentarily sorry, but not for long) nevertheless for the oath's sake, and them who sat dining with him, he commanded it e given her. And he sent, and beheaded John in the prison. And his head was brought on a platter and given to the girl: and she brought it to her mother. And his disciples came, (that is John’s disciples came) and took up the body, and buried it, and went and told Jesus.”

May God add his blessing to his reading of his inspired word.

The title for the message this morning is a little sensational, I must confess, it even touches perhaps upon the lurid, but it is traced to my youth. It is an old title of mine for this section, and it does remind me of an old story. It seems that back in the early days, the pioneer days of the evangelism of the State of Texas that a young Methodist preacher was out west carrying on evangelistic ministry, and he was asked to perform a funeral. And not being too well instructed in all the details of ministerial duties, he wired his bishop, and said, “I have been asked to bury a Baptist, what shall I do?”

And the bishop was to have reported back, “Wonderful, bury as many as you can.” [Laughter]

Now my title this morning, “The Beheading of a Baptist,” has no reference to the Southern Baptist Convention, I want to assure you. The Lord Jesus, in the 13th chapter in the Gospel of Matthew has been expounding and unfolding, magnificently, the characteristics of an age that we now know has followed his own earthly ministry. Remember he came saying repent for the kingdom of heaven is at hand, and he and John the Baptist announced that kingdom as nigh at hand.

We know, however, from the progress of the divine testimony that instead of being responsive to the ministry of the ambassador and of the king, the nation for whom this ministry was designed, primarily, did not respond. And as a result of their refusal to respond to the ministry of the ambassador and the king, we learn by virtue of these parables of Matthew 13, while the kingdom is surely to come, its manifestation has been postponed.

We have learned that Israel’s rejection of the king has made necessary a disciplinary period in which the Nation Israel will be scattered to the four corners of the earth. The period in which we are living now is the period of which he was speaking when he spoke about the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven. It is a period that might be called an interregnum – that is, there is no king present here in flesh and blood, though the king is at the right hand of the throne of the Father. The kingdom shall come,

but there will intervene this period of time, which in its characteristics, is unfolded in this great ministry which he gives us in Matthew chapter 13.

The foundation of this kingdom is the death of the cross, and it is by virtue in the shedding of the blood that the new covenant is consummated, and all of the citizens of the kingdom are citizens who have received the benefits of that new covenant. And the new covenant was shed for the remission of sin. So, that those who are partakers of the new covenant’s blessings shall ultimately live with our Lord in this kingdom upon the earth, and then ultimately in the eternal state.

The manifestation of that kingdom, however, is now made future by Israel’s response of rejection. This interregnum is a period of time in which secret things transpire, as the Lord says here in chapter 13. He calls them the mysteries, and it will be an age characterized by a number of significant things. We have tried to point out that it will be characterized by seed-sowing—that is, a word will be proclaimed.

And the word that is proclaimed is both the word of God and the word of Satan. There is a simultaneous seed-sowing going on. God, through his faithful ministers, is sowing the seed of the word of God, and sons of the kingdom are being born again through faith in the message concerning the Lord Jesus. But Satan himself is also active, sowing tares in the midst of the wheat.

We have been taught also, by the Parable of the Mustard Seed, that this age will be characterized by an inordinate growth in the profession of Christianity, and that is exactly what we have had in Christendom, if we may use that expression, to refer to professing Christianity. We have a wide-ranging testimony to the Christian faith which has gone out in the four corners of the earth, and a great deal of outward organization that goes by the name of Christian.

Most of us in this auditorium know that a great part of that widespread, inordinate growth of Christian profession is not genuine, not real. It is amazing how the religions of our Western World particularly are parasitical. Coming to church this morning, I listened

to one of these parasites. In this particular preaching which went on for just a few minutes, relatively speaking, man was puffed up as having in him naturally the Christ child. We were encouraged to dissolve ourselves all of our difficulty, and in our own dissolving of our difficulties in our minds, Jesus Christ would be born again in our spirits.

Now that kind of teaching is, of course, utterly contrary to the teaching of the word of God, which demands a new birth as a result of something that has happened outside of us – the saving ministry of Jesus Christ. But in the midst of the presentation of this doctrine, Christian words were used, Christian terms were used, and even expressions of Christ being born within us were used. It is a parasite, that particular form of religion. It could only exist because Christianity exists; it could never exist apart from Christianity. It borrows all of Christian terms and distorts them and gives them different meanings.

And at the conclusion, as while some songs were sung that had a kind of relationship to Christian hymns that we sing, the final song that was sung was from *The Sound of Music*, “Climb Every Mountain.” [Laughter] It’s amazing—that was more than once, incidentally—that must be the theme song of the program, [more laughter] which I don’t hear too often, and I am not looking forward to hearing it again incidentally [laughter] except to listen to the interesting misuse of Christian terms.

But these so-called denominations or religions are parasites on genuine Christianity. They exist only because there is such a thing as genuine Christianity. They are distortions. So we have this inordinate growth in processing Christendom in this present age, and the Lord Jesus has warned us of that, so we should not be surprised to discover this.

He has also told us in this 13th chapter more than once that there will be a final age ending, separating judgment. And those who are taken out of the kingdom who are false, they shall be taken to eternal or everlasting punishment – another doctrine that is very unpopular. Now the Lord Jesus stressed in two of the parables, the Parable of the Hidden Treasure and the Pearl of Great Price, that in order to enter into this kingdom of

heaven there is a demand made upon men which might be called our human responsibility of personal self renunciation; the abandonment of trust in ourselves—in a word, faith in the Lord Jesus.

I think this is beautifully expressed in the words of the Apostle Paul when in Philippians chapter 3 he describes his own conversion. He speaks about the great advantages that he had because he was a Hebrew of the Hebrews. He said he was circumcised the 8th day. He was of the stock of Israel, the chosen people. He was of the tribe of Benjamin, one of the better or more famous tribes in Israel. He was a Hebrew of the Hebrews. And as touching the law he was a Pharisee.

One of the outstanding examples of the Jewish religion concerning zeal he said, “I was zealous, for I persecuted the church,” and as touching the righteousness that was in the law, “I was blameless; I carried out all of the prescriptions that were found in the Mosaic law.” But then he says, “What things are gained to me, these I have counted lost for Jesus Christ.” He sold all that he had. “Yea doubtless, and I count all things but lost for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things and do count them but refuse, that I may win Christ and be found in him, not having my own righteous which is of the law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteous which is of God in faith, or by faith.”

So you see in order for a man to profess the life of the kingdom and to be sure of that future relationship to the Lord, it is necessary that he be born again through faith in the Lord Jesus. And in that act of faith, in which he trusts the objective work of the Son of God who died for us, he ceases to trust in all of the other trusts that men have. For when we trust in Christ we cease to trust in the church. We cease to trust in the ordinances. We cease to trust in our good works. We cease to trust in our culture, if that should be our trust. We cease to trust in our education. We cease to trust in the fact that we enlightened members of society, for in our trust in the Lord we abandon trust in other things for our eternal salvation.

So the Lord Jesus has stressed that too. From this point in the Gospel, in the next two to three chapters, we shall see that this antipathy to the Lord Jesus will be growing. It will begin at Nazareth, at the very place where the Lord Jesus lived, and finally will reach its climax in Jerusalem where there the Lord Jesus shall be crucified.

But, before we turn to the rejection in Nazareth, we need to consider just briefly at least verses 51 and 52, in which Matthew writes about the simile of the householder. Now it is possible that this statement in verse 51 and 52, or these words in these two verses, give us an eighth parable. There have been many who have suggested that these two verses do form a parable just as the preceding seven, and that really what we have in Matthew 13 is eight parables of the kingdom. And one of the commentators has said that this eighth parable is the completion of the octave. Perhaps it is only a simile.

Now you know, and I have said this more than once, I am not characterized by indecision. I remember a professor that I had at the University of Edinburgh, who said with reference to his own teaching, he said, “This bar,” referring to his own desk, his own chair in the theology department of the university, he said, “This bar maybe wrong upon occasion, but it is never in doubt.” [laughter].

Now, in my case, I am in doubt here. I do not know whether this should be considered the eighth parable or simply a simile. We will call it just for the sake of calling it something, a simile, and look at it in that light. The Lord Jesus then having finished in the fifty verses preceding the teaching concerning the mysteries of the kingdom, turns to the disciples and ask them the question, “Have you understood all these things?”

Now, I think that question is interesting because it implies that the Lord Jesus is interested in their understanding of these things. He would have never asked them the question if he were not interested in their understanding. So I think that is a very comforting thing to realize that the Lord Jesus having unfolded this magnificent truth turns to them and asks them with concern, do you understand what I have been saying?

The reply of the disciples is a reply of confidence on the surface, “Yea, Lord,” but I do not think they are claiming a comprehensive understanding, surely. The apostles did not think that they understood comprehensively the things the Lord Jesus had been speaking about. But they do maintain that they have an essential understanding of what he had been saying. Now of course it is folly for me to suggest what they did understand. I do not know probably as well as you what they understood, but it would seem to me that they do affirm that we understand the major things that you have been saying.

You are telling us in effect that teaching concerning the kingdom has facets that we did not anticipate. You are telling us that the Old Testament revelation is being modified to some extent. And I think then that we may say that they claim an essential understanding, but not a comprehensive one. Well, after they make their claim, he then on the basis of their reply states, “Therefore”—or as the Greek text puts it, “on account of this.” In other words, because you have made this profession of understanding every scribe who is instructed concerning the kingdom of heaven is like a man who is a householder, who bringeth forth out of his treasure things new and old.

Now we learn here an important principle, and that principle is truth grasped leads to more truth. They have said, in answer to his question, do you understand all things, yea Lord. Well on account of this – well then, because you affirm an understanding –

I am going to give you further knowledge of truth.

Now that principle I think is important because it explains a lot of our own experience. Many times we wonder why we do not have further understanding of the word of God but seem to have reached a plateau and we are not advancing. The chances are it is because we have not really grasped and appropriated at the truth that has been revealed to us at this point. As we come to an understanding of truth and appropriate that truth, more truth will be given to us. Truth grasped leads to more truth.

He also states the kingdom has its scribes. Now, Judaism had its scribes. The scribes and the lawyers were those who studied the Scriptures in the synagogues and taught that doctrine. So here he says, every scribe instructed concerning the kingdom of heaven. So the kingdom of heaven will have its scribes too: it’s men who study and who appropriate the truth through the ministry of the Holy Spirit and instruct others in it. No doubt the first application of this has to do with the disciples and apostles who are sitting before him as he is teaching now.

And there is another principle that is, I think, illustrated here and it is this: that one must be instructed before he can engage in instruction. He must be instructed before he instructs. And so if we are to instruct in the truth of the word of God, we must be instructed ourselves. We cannot expect to proclaim the truth of God with effectiveness if we ourselves have not learned that truth of God. Every scribe then is like a man who brings forth out of his treasure things both new and old. They must be in his treasure before he can bring them out.

I think that is a word for all kinds of teachers, and not simply men who stand behind the pulpit as I do, but those who teach in Sunday school and those who teach in child evangelism classes and those who teach man to man, woman to woman the things of the word of God. We must have them before we can communicate them. And that means that we must engage in study. And that is not only study for the preacher, but for every individual Christian. We forget, I’m sure, how important it is to excel as a Christian, to practice, to work at acquiring the information and the experience that we need to be an effective Christian worker.

Now, I’ve put in the Believer’s Bible Bulletin an illustration that comes from probably the greatest baseball batsman since the says of Roger Hornsby and Ty Cobb. Unfortunately, he was not a Yankee. I know everybody is allowed at least one or two contradictions. My contradiction, one of them is, that I am a Southerner, but I was always a Yankee fan in baseball for many years. Ever since 1924. I know you didn’t realize I

was living then [laughter]; you thought I was probably born around 1940 [more aughter]. But nevertheless, I began to yell for the Yankees in 1924. Babe Ruth, Lou Gehrig, and all the rest I knew because I followed them just as avidly as it was possible for anyone to follow their averages.

I remember Ted Williams particularly because—you may recall he was not a Yankee—he was a Boston Red Sox outfielder and played in the days of the greatest of them all, Joe DiMaggio. And I was always resentful of the fact that he was playing for Boston instead of New York, because secretly, down deep within, I knew he was the best handler of a bat of anybody in the major leagues then. Lifetime average was 347—lifetime average—and at the peak of his career when he was to have the five greatest years, he was called in the service. And in WWII was a pilot in our services, came back and resumed the same kind of ministry [laughter]. No doubt about it, if he had been able to play those five years he would have been recognized as the greatest baseball player of the 20th Century.

He once said a word or two about the importance of applying oneself to one’s particular job. I can still remember an announcer saying concerning Ted Williams, he has great eyes and great natural ability, and they attributed his success to that. But this is what he said, “A lot of people have as good eyesight as I have, 20/15, and probably better, and still, they are always ready to say eyesight is the reason he does it and natural ability. That is so easy to say and give credit for. They never talk about the practice, practice, practice—you gotta practice,” he said. He then goes on to speak about how when he was just a child, he practiced longer than anybody else, he was always there first to practice and he was always there after everybody left.

He said he went home during his lunch hour, ran home, picked up a few French fried potatoes, ate them, raced back to the school and practiced while the rest of the kids were sitting home eating. He arrived at school in the morning before the janitor, got the

balls and bats and was out practicing before they got there. No wonder he was the greatest batsman of his era.

Now the same kind of thing pertains to any endeavor. That is why Christians should be characterized by excellence, and the same kind of activity pertains in the exposition in the word of God. We will never be expert in the exposition—whether we stand in a pulpit or just man to man—in the gifts of the evangelism which is just as great a gift as standing behind a pulpit. We will never be experts as we might be if we do not work at it. So, when the Lord Jesus says “every scribe who is instructed concerning the kingdom of heaven,” he implies a great deal of that.

Well having described that, Matthew goes on now to describe the visit of our Lord to Nazareth. And this incident may be the key to the larger section which begins here and does not finish until chapter 16:12. One can see that the opposition which made the Lord Jesus speak in parabolic form in chapter 13 is now spreading, and even in his home village of the city of Nazareth where the Lord Jesus was known, there is opposition.

So he left the seed that he had sown in Capernaum to germinate and made his way over the Nazareth. And there Matthew writes that, “When he came into his own country he taught them in their synagogue.” This section, one of the commentators has said, is grouped around the Old Testament passage which he cites in chapter 18 verse 8 and verse 9. There we read, “This people draweth near unto me with their mouths and honor me with their lips, but their heart is far from me; but in vain they do worship me teaching for doctrine the commandments of men.”

Now that is, I believe, a very good picture of the faith of the people to whom our Lord Jesus was ministering. It is true that they did honor him with their lips, but their hearts were far from him. How universal is that? It is possible to attend Believers Chapel and honor our Lord with our lips, but our hearts to be far from him. We can sit in an auditorium like this listening to the ministry of the word of God and even here be

dishonoring him in our hearts, though giving profession of listening of the exposition of God’s word.

When he came to Nazareth he taught them. The response is threefold. First of all, they were astonished. No doubt they were astonished as Luke 4 tells us because of the marvelous words of grace that were flowing out of his mouth. Wouldn’t you like to have been there? Wouldn’t it have been wonderful to be in the synagogue that morning as the Lord Jesus was handed the scroll of the prophecy of Isaiah, and as he stood up and read the scroll and then sat down to teach, as was their custom, wouldn’t it have been wonderful to be there? Wouldn’t you have given a lot to be there?

Do you ever do what I do? I often sit in my chair when I am reading the word of God, and as I am studying along and reading—I sometimes put the Bible in my lap, and lean back and I have a window right behind my desk, and I can look out to the west and see over almost all of Dallas to the west—and I often stop there and daydream, just lean back and daydream. And sometimes I daydream about what it would have been like to be there with our Lord and to hear him preach and teach.

And I must confess that every now and then there comes in my heart this longing to have been there. And here I am sitting with the word of God in my lap, which would give me an insight into and an entrée into the whole teaching ministry of the Lord Jesus, longing to have been there to hear one message that he gave in the village of Nazareth. And the same kind of longing that I think I have fooled myself into thinking that I have, is nullified and denied by the fact that I don’t really want to study this word of God very much. Yes it would have been wonderful to be there, but we may have more than that right before us in this Bible that we have. And how often to we avail ourselves of it?

The next response was puzzlement, as they were astonished first, then they were puzzled. They said, my goodness isn’t this a carpenter’s son? Where does he have this wisdom and where do these works come from? Isn’t his mother the Mary that we know about, that we see every morning down by the little village square getting the water out

of the well and washing clothes? And are not his brethren James and Joseph and Simon and Judas that we see everywhere, everyday; and are not all his sisters here with us? From where then does he have all of these things? And then it is stated, they were offended in him.

So there was astonishment, there was puzzlement, and then there was unbelief. Now the proper response should have been of course reflection on his wisdom and works, conviction of the deity of the son of God, because nothing else could account for the mighty works, and then trust in him. But they broke the sequence by their offense, and thus they demonstrated the truth of the Lord’s citation from the word, a prophet is not without honor safe in his own country and his own house.

And mind you it was not simply because he was from Nazareth; it was the expression of the natural antipathy of the human heart. Even in the midst of the mighty works and the mighty teaching of the Son of God, instead of bowing down before him to worship him, they were offended by him. Now if you need any testimony to the innate sinfulness of the human heart, this is it.

And if you think that was just an isolated incident, then see the response that happens today when the word of God is preached, and how many, hearing of the mighty works of our Lord and the mighty teaching that he gave, bow immediately before him and acknowledge him as the Lord and Savior of their lives.

Well, the conclusion is that he did not many mighty works there because of their unbelief. Mark tells us that he healed just a few sick folks. Nazareth, you see, using our Lord’s own terminology and this chapter, was “soil by the wayside,” and so when the seed fell there the birds of the heavens came and plucked it up so that there was no fruitfulness at all. The truth of the matter is then that Nazareth was bad ground, and because of the unbelief of that bad soil, the Lord Jesus was unable to do many mighty works there.

Well the 14th chapter is story of the murder of John the Baptist. So, first Nazareth rejects him and now the king of the Galilean sections will reject him, too. The report concerning the Lord Jesus came to Herod, he was the tetrarch, and immediately when the report of the Lord Jesus came to him he blurted out, “This is John the Baptist.”

Now he had already put John the Baptist to death. So you can see what is happening here. When the report of Jesus came and of the works that he was performing, he said this is John the Baptist, he has risen from the dead, and these mighty works do show forth themselves supernaturally in him. If you put all of the Gospel sections together you learn that Herod was first perplexed. His first response was perplexity—someone said, Jesus is doing these mighty works—he puzzled over it. But soon, his terror-stricken conscience conquered him, and this man affirms his belief in the resurrection.

Now what is amazing about this is that Herod was reported to have been and thought to have been a Saduccee, and of course the characteristic of a Saducee is, according to the New Testament, they didn’t believe in spirits and they didn’t believe in the resurrection. So here is a man who is nominally a disbeliever in the supernatural, and when the law Jesus’ ministry is mentioned to him, he blurts out something that is really a confession of the supernatural—a confession of the very thing that he is not supposed to believe.

Origen, who was one of the early church fathers of the third and fourth centuries, said that there is a tradition to the effect that John the Baptist and Jesus looked very much alike. Now if that is true and it is of course likely or at least believable because they were related, then that would have made this identity a great deal more plausible. Someone would say there is a person out there who looks a great deal like John the Baptist, but he is called Jesus, and he is doing these mighty works and this great teaching, and he might then have blurted out it is John the Baptist from the dead.

One writer whose works I have in years past read with some profit, J.T. Morrison, has a story that is an account of a conversation that he had with a very intellectual man. They were discussing the Christian faith, and as Mr. Morrison sought to bring him to a confession of the gospel of the Lord Jesus, he kept saying “I’ll never believe in hell.”

And Mr. Morrison stopped when he first said it, and said, “Wait a minute, I am not trying to convince you to believe in hell at the moment. What I am really trying to get you to do is to transfer your trust from over things to trust in the Lord Jesus. I want you to believe in a death, burial and resurrection as a foundation for our salvation.”

“But he kept saying “I’ll never believe in hell. I will never believe in hell,” and finally Mr. Morrison said the last words that he spoke to me as he left, after our conversation, were “I’ll never believe in hell.”

That night, he went to a room to sleep and his conscience, he said afterwards, was wrestling with these things that he had discussed with Mr. Morrison. And in the midst of a rather, almost a sleepless night he finally fell asleep, a fitful kind of sleep, and suddenly he was awakened, and as he looked before him, fire was everywhere and his first thoughts were, “I am in hell!” And then just moments later, as he finally awakened and saw what had happened, he was greatly relieved to discover it was a factory across the way that had caught on fire during his sleep, and it was the factory that was burning. But then he began to reflect, “Why is it that I said I am in hell, when I didn’t believe in hell?”

And he realized that his conscience had spoken before his mind had a chance to marshal its arguments. And as a result of that, upon further reflection, he became a believer in the Lord Jesus, and as he left and was traveling across to the United States of America, he wrote a letter to Mr. Morrison and said “I want you to know that I have come to a trust in the Lord Jesus, he is the wisdom.”

Now I think it is very interesting that Herod here should blurt out a faith in the resurrection. It is almost as if his own conscious spoke before his mind had a chance to marshal its argument. Well, this causes Matthew to give up the flashback, because he

hasn’t told us how John came to an end, although John was dead at this time. So he tells us how Herod put John to death.

It is the story of Salome. It is the story of Herodias, and most of all, it is the story of Herod. Herodias was the implacable, vindictive woman whom Herod had married. He had been already married, but on a visit to Jerusalem his eyes had fallen upon his brother Philip’s wife, Herodias. Infatuated by her, he took her from Philip, divorced his first wife and made this woman his second wife illegally and immorally.

Now John the Baptist was the kind of preacher who didn’t mind saying what the Scriptures taught him regardless of the consequences, and so since he was baptizing in the vicinity and the subject came up of Herod’s immoral behavior with Herodias, he simply blurted out that it was not lawful for you to have Herodias as your wife, Herod, and he preached that out on the street corners evidently. And Herodias was not too pleased with that, being an implacable, vindictive kind of woman.

And Herod was not pleased with it either. He wanted to put John to death right at the beginning, but since the people thought he was a prophet, he was afraid to do anything about it. Now Herod was an evil man, but he was also a very unusual man. He was artistic, he was handsome; the women loved Herod. He was also a real first century swinger [laughter]. I am sure that he would have had a Mercedes of the most expensive character if he lived today, and all of the other trappings that go with a swinger. But he was a very evil, immoral man as well.

So, they had to brood over the fact that John was there. They could at least put him in the prison, and since it was not unusual for prophets and apostles to lecture the rich and to land in the slammer, that is exactly what happened here. John the Baptist found himself in the slammer at Maquiras, and there he was kept.

Now he was smiling, but the apostles new a whole lot about the prisons of those days. We read in 2 Corinthians that when the Apostle Paul was describing his experiences, he said “in prisons more frequent,” so probably no one would have been

better prepared to tell us the conditions in our penal institutions than the apostles in the first century. And Peter we are told was in a prison also in Acts chapter 12. So they were the kinds of men who were often in the prisons. So in case you find me in one, don’t be surprised [laughter].

Now when Herod’s birthday came, they had a feast. And Herod, as the custom was, imbibed just a little too much; he not only got high, but he was really drunk. And in the midst of it, Herodias sent Salome in. And it is evident that they had planned this, because we read in verse 8, “she being instructed of her mother.” So she came in and did a beautiful belly dance. Now that is not in the Scripture; I am adding that kind of dance, and I am not exactly sure it was that. But I do know this, it was a very sensuous and attractive dance for this sensuous, evil man Herod.

As she did this dance, incidentally she was a descendent of a once noble Macabees, so we find corruption and disintegration, degeneration in her own life as well. And as a result of this dance and the pleasure that it gave the drunken Herod, he spoke out in the midst of the carousing crowd and said, “I will give you whatever you wish up to half of my kingdom.”

She went immediately to her mother Herodias ,who was either in the room at another place or in another room, and asked what she should ask for, and she was told, “Remember I told you to ask for the head of John the Baptist, and ask for it on a platter because it is the time for dessert,” and so that is exactly what happened.

And when the request came to Herod, we read that he was grieved. But incidentally, that expression is a kind of expression that indicates that it was only for just a moment, because Mark says he immediately sent a servant to obtain the head of John the Baptist. And so that is what happened. One of the servants rushed off to the prison and beheaded the Baptist and brought the Baptist’s head back on a platter as the last course in that meal.

Now Herod had a little bit of trouble with this. He did grieve over it, but the text of scripture says that nevertheless for the oath’s sake – that is because he had given his word – and secondly and them who sat dinning with him. What was preeminent with him? Well in the first place he had given his word. He wasn’t an Englishman, but he liked for people to think “my word is my bond. And second, the people about him, because if he had reneged on his promise, they would have said, “Ah, Herod doesn’t keep his word.” So in order to keep the people about him and in order to communicate the kind of attitude toward himself that he wanted people to have, he went through with his nefarious scheme.

Now I think that brings me to what I want to conclude with. And the first thing I want to say is this, that a false philosophy always collapses in a crisis. Herod, in the midst of this critical word that came from the Lord Jesus affirms his believe in the resurrection which he was supposed to deny.

You know, we cannot stifle the truth of God, even if the voice that utters it is silenced. In a local church for example, if a preacher—this has no reference to Believer's Chapel, but it has reference to many other places down through the years—if a preacher preaches the truth of the word of God, and the congregation gets rid of him because they don’t like the preaching, it is a futile work. They did that with Jonathan Edwards. They ran, railroaded Jonathan Edwards out of the church. But everybody remembers the teaching of Jonathan Edwards today, but most people don’t even remember the place where he pastored the church.

You see, you cannot stifle the truth even though you shut the mouth of the person who preaches it, because God has ways of communicating his truth that go deep down into the human heart itself.

Herod’s later history is tragic – the tragedy of a person who doesn’t respond. Well, in the first place in the case of Herod, there was the murder of John the Baptist that was the beginning of the end for him. Then there was a war with Eritus that just followed

shortly after that, and he lost that war. And finally, Herodias asked him to go to Rome in order to be named king, and he went there and he was not only turned down, but he was banished to Lyon in Gaul, and he ended his life there in disgrace.

The second thing that I want to mention is that the fear of man is a fatal sin, for the maudlin honor of an evil oath he betrayed the appeals of his conscience. My dear Christian and non-Christian friends, it is not sin to break an evil oath. It is repentance to break an evil oath. Herod thought that by keeping his word he would be righteous. But by breaking his word, he would have repented and would have accorded the word of God firstly in his life. But in order to maintain his impression of righteousness with his friends and with this false idea of righteousness in his heart, he was willing to break the law of God, thou shall not murder.

Now we know the rest of the story of Herod in the New Testament. It is a tragic story. And finally, when he comes in the presence of the Lord Jesus and appears to be glad because he is there – it is purely curiosity, we shall see, of course – but he asks the Lord Jesus, there is questions, but Jesus answered him nothing. Herod you see was bad ground. Herod committed unpardonable sin.

It is a serious thing to have truth and reject truth. If you are here this morning and you have never believed in our Lord Jesus Christ, we remind you that the saving work was accomplished on the cross at Calvary in the cross in which our Lord Jesus suffered. He gave himself a sacrifice for sinners, and you may have everlasting life, as you are turning from trust in other things – your own good works, your church, the observance of the ordinances, religion – and turning to him, you shall have life.

So I call upon you as an ambassador of the Lord Jesus, if God the Holy Spirit has brought enlightenment to you that you are a sinner and lost and under condemnation, Christ has died for sinners and that you may have life. May God give you grace to come to him. Let’s stand for the benediction.

“The Beheading of a Baptist” by S. Lewis Johnson
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[Prayer] Father, we are so grateful to Thee for the truth of the word of God, and we do ask, O God, that if there are some here who have not responded to the message of the Lord Jesus, that right now Thou would bring conviction and conversion to the glory of thy name.

May grace, mercy and peace go with us as we part.

For Jesus sake. Amen.