

WEEK 9

CHOICES – KING HEROD

BEFORE THE TALK

*Welcome the course participants and suggest they take 20 minutes to work through the Study Guide section called **GROUP DISCUSSION 1** with their group.*

THE TALK

Deliver the talk. The wording below is intended only as a general guide. The aim of the talk is to help participants continue to wrestle with what it means to repent and believe, as we examine Herod's refusal to do so.

I'm sure you've all seen magazines like this.

Hold up a copy of "Men's Health" magazine or similar.

Every edition has articles about losing weight, keeping fit and eating healthily. Now obviously, in order to see any results, you have to choose to do what they say. And that's the difficult part. So often we choose not to do what we know is good for us. But unfortunately, as someone once said, "We are the choices we have made." And some of us only have to look down at our stomachs to see the truth of that statement.

Please turn to Mark chapter 6. We're going to look at verses 17–28. Because it's here that we read the story of Herod, a man who really does pay the price for the choices he makes.

Read aloud Mark 6:17–28.

This grisly passage has fired the imaginations of artists and composers over the centuries. It brilliantly illustrates the fact that "we are the choices that we have made." In this passage Herod made two key choices: he chose to rebel and he chose not to repent.

Display the following headings.

Herod chose to rebel
Herod chose not to repent

HEROD CHOSE TO REBEL

This isn't Herod the Great, the man who murdered all the baby boys living in the Bethlehem region when Jesus was born. This is his son, Herod Antipas, who is the ruler of Galilee. Note that Herodias is not Herod's first wife. Herod's first marriage had lasted over twenty years. But then, while visiting his brother Philip, he met Philip's wife, Herodias. He allowed himself to fall in love with her and he proposed marriage. Herodias accepted, but only on the condition that he got rid of his present wife. Herod agreed.

So she left her husband, Herod's own brother, and came to live with Herod in Galilee. By doing this, Herod is choosing quite deliberately to rebel against God's law. Does he *know* he's rebelling? Yes, because this man John – who Herod knows is “a righteous and holy man” – has been bravely telling King Herod that “it is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife.”

John, you may remember, is the man we met right at the beginning of Mark's Gospel. Also known as John the Baptist, this man told people about Jesus and urged them to turn away from their sin in order to be forgiven by God. Herod puts John in prison, but he continues to listen to him: “When Herod heard John he was greatly puzzled; yet he liked to listen to him.” Note that the word “puzzled” here doesn't mean that John's words were complicated. It means that Herod was disturbed by John's teaching.

Why? Because he had exposed Herod's rebellion. Perhaps as you've come on ***Christianity Explored***, you have had a similar experience. Perhaps you've come to realize that you've been living your life for yourself, and ignoring the God who made you. Perhaps, like Herod listening to John, you listen to the words of Jesus and want to go on listening, despite the disturbance they cause.

So Herod continued to listen. Day after day it went on. The people at the palace must have thought that their king had gone religious, listening to this strange figure preach as he did. “Herod feared John” to the extent that he even “protected him,” but there was nevertheless something that Herod was *not* prepared to do.

HEROD CHOSE NOT TO REPENT

Yes, he was prepared to listen to John. He was prepared to acknowledge John as a righteous and holy man. He was even prepared to protect John. But there was one thing he would not do. He would not cease his adultery. He would not repent. Remember how we've seen that the right response to having our rebellion against God exposed is to repent. It is to do an about-turn, to turn from our sin and ask God for forgiveness. But Herod wouldn't do that.

Then one day, on his birthday, Herod gives a banquet for his high officials and military commanders and the leading men of Galilee. Notice Mark's description of the banquet: “Finally the opportune time came.” Herod's birthday is described as an opportunity. It's an opportunity for Herod to repent decisively and publicly, but it's also an opportunity for Herodias to get rid of John. Notice who seizes the opportunity, and who misses it.

During the birthday banquet, Salome, the daughter of Herodias, comes in and dances in front of all the men. The phrase “she pleased Herod and his dinner guests” has sexual overtones. As a result of her dance the king utters a ridiculous promise to this teenage girl. He says, in verse 23, “Whatever you ask I will give you, up to half my kingdom.”

And I’m sure as he said it, all his friends were laughing and clapping him on the back. Salome runs to her mother Herodias – who extraordinarily has allowed her daughter to do this. “What shall I ask for? Diamonds, gold, rubies, or the lovely meadows to the south so we can establish great lands and farms?” “No, no,” snaps her mother, “you ask for the head of John the Baptist.” Herodias seizes her opportunity to get rid of John. We read, “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.’”

Well, that soon wipes the smile from Herod’s face. We read that he was “greatly distressed.” And, suddenly, we reach the key moment in Herod’s life. He is suddenly in an extremely dangerous place. If “we are the choices we make,” then this choice will have a profound effect on what Herod will become. And it’s a terribly hard choice to make, considering all the oaths he’s made, and all the guests he’s trying to impress.

But there it is. Either he says, “Look, I shouldn’t have made the oaths I made – it was a stupid thing to do. I can’t kill John. He’s a good man. I know the things he’s said have been hard to accept, but he’s always spoken the truth. I will not kill him.” Or, alternatively, he can cave in to the fierce pressure of those around him, gamely pretending to laugh with all his guests, and suppressing his conscience one more time.

What will he choose? Verse 26 says, “The king was greatly distressed, but because of his oaths and his dinner guests, he did not want to refuse her.” Much as he feared John, he feared his guests more. Verse 27 continues, “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.”

It’s horrific, isn’t it? Tradition has it that she pulled the tongue out and pierced it with one of her pins: “That’ll teach John to speak to me like that.” You see, under pressure, this king has capitulated. He has allowed the head that warned him, the tongue that told him to turn from his rebellion and repent, to be literally cut off.

But how many of us would have done something similar in Herod’s position? The fact remains that many, many people will do just that: in the moment of decision, they will deny what they know is right because of what the family will think, what business colleagues may do, or because of what friends will say. Or because they know it will mean changing much-loved habits.

I wonder if you see the parallels Mark wants us to draw between John and Jesus? Both preached the same message: that we need to turn from our rebellion against God and accept the rescue he has lovingly provided. Both were protected by powerful men: Herod and Pontius Pilate, both of whom tried to remain neutral but could not. And both John and Jesus suffered violent deaths as a result. There is, of course, one further point of comparison. Why were both John and Jesus killed? Because in both cases people would not *repent* and would not do what was right.

In Mark chapters 1 to 3, we saw Jesus' awesome power and authority. In chapters 4 and 5, we saw the power of his teaching and of his word. Yet at the beginning of chapter 6, we see him rejected by his "home town." Their familiarity with Jesus bred contempt, they were offended by him, and they rejected him. Jesus' response in subsequent chapters is to take his preaching elsewhere. He instructs his disciples to do likewise, saying that if people will not listen, they should move on. That's the pattern: the message will be rejected by some, who will themselves be rejected because of their response.

Interestingly, Herod is mentioned a final time in the Gospels, in Luke chapter 23. Luke records that Pontius Pilate sends Jesus to Herod when he learns that Jesus is from the area Herod controls. The meeting between Herod and Jesus is ominous, not because of what is said, but rather because of what is *not* said.

Please turn with me to Luke 23, verse 8.

Read aloud Luke 23:8–9.

You see, there comes a time, after repeatedly refusing to repent, when there is no longer an opportunity to do so. It is easy to put it off, to say that we don't have the time, to think that we have too much to lose. *Surely it's better to wait*, you may well be thinking, *there'll be a more convenient time in the future*. Of course, it's *never* easy to repent. There will never be a "convenient" time. And Herod's story reminds us that we may not get an opportunity later.

When Herod gets no answer, he and his soldiers mock Jesus by dressing him in an elegant robe and sending him back to Pilate, who enjoys the joke. And look at verse 12. We read that on that day, "Herod and Pilate became friends – before this they had been enemies." This should be a warning to us: rejecting Jesus' call to repent and believe may earn us the approval of other people, it may even win us friends, but it will eventually earn us the rejection of Jesus.

AT THE END OF THE TALK

Let me leave you with the following questions for your groups:

Display the following questions and read them aloud.

- Why do you think Herod refused to repent?
- John's preaching greatly disturbed Herod. How does Jesus' teaching make you feel?

*Allow 30 minutes for groups to work together through the Study Guide section called **GROUP DISCUSSION 2**.*

AT THE END OF THE DISCUSSION

Before next week, it would be a great help if you'd do the HOME STUDY section in your *Study Guide*.