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When the Forerunner Decreased

A Reflection on the Death of John the Baptist

Reflections Family, Discipleship and the Christian Life 18 September 2026

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The death of John the Baptist is one of the most disturbing episodes in the Gospels. Here was a righteous man, a prophet of God, a man whom even Herod himself recognised as holy, imprisoned and eventually beheaded because of the resentment of Herodias and the foolishness of Herod. I have long read this story simply as an account of human wickedness. But the more closely I look at it, the more another question presses itself upon me. Was John's death merely the consequence of human sin, or was God, even through this terrible event, bringing the ministry of His forerunner towards its appointed conclusion? I do not think the answer need be one or the other. The Gospels show us both the terrible consequences of human sin and the mysterious sovereignty of God working through circumstances which sinful people themselves neither understood nor intended for His purposes. It is in holding these two realities together that I find the death of John the Baptist becomes particularly significant.

John had confronted Herod plainly: "For John had said unto Herod, It is not lawful for thee to have thy brother's wife" (Mark 6:18). He did not soften God's truth in order to preserve his standing with the ruler. Yet Herod was not entirely hardened against him. Mark gives us a remarkably revealing description of Herod's attitude: "For Herod feared John, knowing that he was a just man and an holy, and observed him; and when he heard him, he did many things, and heard him gladly" (Mark 6:20). There is something profoundly tragic in that verse. Herod knew that something about John was true. He respected him, listened to him, and heard him gladly. And yet knowing that John was righteous did

nothing to change Herod's own conduct. It is possible, I have come to see, to admire a servant of God while still refusing to obey the God whom that servant proclaims.

Herod had already made his compromise. Matthew tells us that he would have killed John, but was restrained by his fear of the people: "And when he would have put him to death, he feared the multitude, because they counted him as a prophet" (Matthew 14:5). Instead, John was imprisoned. I find myself wondering whether Herod imagined that imprisonment would be enough to satisfy Herodias. John would be removed from public life, his uncomfortable denunciations no longer heard openly, and Herod would not have to bear the guilt of killing a man he knew to be righteous. Did he think that by doing this, his lady love would be contented? How wrong he was. Sin is rarely satisfied with half-measures. Mark tells us plainly, "Therefore Herodias had a quarrel against him, and would have killed him; but she could not" (Mark 6:19). That little phrase, "but she could not," says everything. Herodias wanted John dead, but John was not yet within her power. He was in prison, but not yet at her disposal. Then an opportunity presented itself.

At Herod's birthday banquet, his daughter danced before the guests and so pleased Herod that he made a reckless public promise: "Whatsoever thou shalt ask of me, I will give it thee, unto the half of my kingdom" (Mark 6:23). The girl went to her mother and asked, "What shall I ask?" and Herodias answered her, "The head of John the Baptist" (Mark 6:24). I am wondering whether she would have told her daughter to ask this, had it not been a fact that John was within reach. Scripture gives me no basis for saying that she would, or would not, have done so had he still been at large. But the narrative makes it clear that the existence of an opportunity mattered a great deal. Herodias already hated John and had already wanted him killed; the opportunity merely provided the means by which that desire, long harboured, could finally be acted upon. An opportunity does not necessarily create an evil intention; it may simply reveal one that has already been allowed to take root in the heart. Herod's imprisonment of John, then, had not solved anything. It had merely placed him within reach, waiting for the moment when the opportunity would come.

When Herodias's request was made, Herod was greatly distressed: "And the king was exceeding sorry; yet for his oath's sake, and for their sakes which sat with him, he would not reject her" (Mark 6:26). This, to my mind, is the most tragic moment in the whole story. Herod knew the request was wrong. He had heard John gladly; he respected him; he knew him to be righteous. Yet he ordered his execution all the same. His conscience had spoken, but his pride, and his concern for what his

guests would think of him, proved stronger. The irony is striking: Herod had been afraid of the people when he first considered killing John, and he was again ruled by his fear of people when the final opportunity came. His fear of human opinion repeatedly overruled his knowledge of what was right. I take from this that a good conscience, precious as it is, does not by itself give a person the courage to obey what he knows to be right. Herod possessed knowledge, respect, even an uneasy conscience — but when obedience became costly and embarrassing, he chose the easier path. His trouble, in the end, was not that he did not know what was right. It was that he was unwilling to act upon what he knew.

If I stop the story at Herod, Herodias, and the birthday banquet, I see only tragedy. But John's ministry had been pointing beyond himself from the very beginning, and I think the Gospel writer John wants us to notice this. His Gospel opens with one of the most profound declarations in all Scripture: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God" (John 1:1). And then, almost immediately, he introduces John the Baptist: "There was a man sent from God, whose name was John" (John 1:6). I suspect this placement is deliberate. The eternal Word is introduced first; John is introduced immediately after, as a man sent by God, so that we are never permitted to confuse the messenger with the One to whom the messenger points: "He was not that Light, but was sent to bear witness of that Light" (John 1:8). John was not the Light. He was the witness to the Light, and he seems to have understood this distinction perfectly himself. When people wondered who he was, he claimed no honour for himself: "He confessed, and denied not; but confessed, I am not the Christ" (John 1:20). When he saw Jesus, he declared, "Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world" (John 1:29); and later, when his own disciples were standing with him and Jesus appeared again, he pointed them towards Him once more: "Behold the Lamb of God!" (John 1:36). Two of John's own disciples heard him say it, and followed Jesus (John 1:37). There is something beautiful in this. John did not regard his disciples as belonging to him. His ministry was never about gathering a following for himself; it was about bringing people into contact with Christ, and then pointing them onward to Him. A ministry has fulfilled something of its purpose, I think, when those who have listened to us can move beyond us and say, in effect, "Behold the Lamb of God."

There is another remarkable feature of John's ministry that I find myself dwelling on: he baptised Jesus, even while understanding perfectly well that Jesus was greater than himself. Matthew records his hesitation: "I

have need to be baptized of thee, and comest thou to me?" (Matthew 3:14). Yet Jesus instructed him to proceed, and when Jesus was baptised, the heavens opened, and the divine proclamation was heard: "This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased" (Matthew 3:17). John stood, then, at a remarkable point in salvation history. He was the prophet who prepared the way; the baptiser who identified Jesus; the witness who declared Him the Lamb of God; and, at the same time, the man who understood that his own prominence must diminish as Christ's increased. He expressed this most clearly in his own words: "He must increase, but I must decrease" (John 3:30). These words are often read simply as an expression of personal humility, and they certainly are that. But I think they can also be read within the larger movement of the Gospel narrative itself. John's ministry rises first. He began his ministry of bringing people to repentance before Jesus began His public ministry. He had gathered disciples who had joined him — and I would rather think that some of them simply stuck with him, unlike the disciples of Jesus, whom Jesus Himself called to follow Him. Then Jesus appears, and the centre of attention moves, progressively, from John to Jesus. John did not regard this as a tragedy. He described himself as the friend of the bridegroom, and said, "This my joy therefore is fulfilled" (John 3:29). His joy was not in remaining prominent. His joy was in seeing Christ take His rightful place.

John's ministry was never intended to become a permanent centre of spiritual allegiance. He was the forerunner; his purpose was to prepare the way for Another. This is why his decreasing matters so much. The servant gives way to the Saviour. The voice gives way to the Word. The forerunner gives way to the One whose way he prepared. And I find myself asking: had John's work of preparing the way, calling people to repentance, identifying the Messiah, and bearing witness to Him already been accomplished, what further role remained for him in the larger economy of the Kingdom of God? What if God called him into glory simply because his purpose was accomplished? I want to tread carefully here, because the Bible never explicitly says, "God caused John to die because his work was finished," and I do not think we should claim that Scripture directly teaches this. But it seems to me entirely legitimate to reflect upon the providential pattern the Gospel narratives present. John had been given a particular assignment: to prepare the way, call people to repentance, identify the Messiah, and bear witness to Him. He had done all of this. He had announced the coming One; baptised Jesus; identified Him as the Lamb of God; directed his own disciples towards Him; and openly acknowledged that Jesus must increase while he himself must decrease. And then his earthly ministry came to an end.

His death, of course, occurred through the sinful actions of Herod and Herodias, and nothing in the story excuses their actions or suggests their motives were good. God does not need human wickedness to become righteousness. Yet Scripture repeatedly shows me that human beings can act according to their own sinful purposes while God remains sovereign over the larger course of history. John's death may therefore be viewed as part of the providential movement by which his particular ministry gave way to the expanding ministry of Christ. That is an inference on my part, rather than an explicit statement of Scripture — but it fits remarkably well with the role John himself understood he had been given. There is a small detail after John's death that is easily overlooked. His disciples came, took his body, buried him, and "went and told Jesus" (Matthew 14:12). Even in death, John's story moves towards Jesus. That is entirely consistent with everything he had done in life: his words, his baptism, his disciples, his witness, all pointed beyond himself. His life did not become meaningless because it ended prematurely from a human point of view, nor did his ministry fail because he did not live to see the Cross and the Resurrection. His calling was different. He was the herald who announced the King, and the destination was always Jesus. Jesus Himself gave him extraordinary honour: "Among them that are born of women there hath not risen a greater than John the Baptist" (Matthew 11:11). John was great because he was faithful to the calling God had given him — yet even he knew he was not the destination. He was the one sent to point towards it.

It may be too narrow, then, to read John's own words, "He must increase, but I must decrease," merely as an instruction concerning personal humility. I think they also describe the movement of God's redemptive history as revealed in the Gospel. John's ministry begins before Jesus' public ministry. He calls Israel to repentance; he gathers disciples; he baptises; he prepares the people. Then Jesus appears; John identifies Him; John's own disciples begin following Jesus; John's public prominence diminishes; and finally he is removed from the scene, while Jesus' ministry expands. This is almost precisely the movement John himself had foretold. I should be careful about saying that God needed John's death for Jesus' ministry to proceed — God is not dependent upon such circumstances — nor should I say with certainty that God called John into glory because his purpose was accomplished, since Scripture does not make that connection explicit. But I can see, in John's death, the solemn completion of a movement that had already been visible throughout his ministry. The forerunner had done what he was sent to do. The Saviour had appeared. The witness had borne his witness. The disciples had been directed towards Christ. The messenger could now disappear from the centre of the story.

John did not live for the continuation of his own prominence. He lived for the revelation of Christ. He could say, "I am not the Christ," and he could also say, "He must increase, but I must decrease." The fact that he died before the Crucifixion does not mean his life was incomplete; the fact that he did not witness the Resurrection does not diminish his ministry. His task was different: he was the prophet who prepared the way, the voice crying in the wilderness, the witness who pointed to the Light. His greatness lay precisely in the fact that he understood his place. There is a lesson here that I take very much to heart, since I am myself engaged, in a small way, in Christian ministry. It is easy to begin by serving Christ, and gradually to become concerned instead with preserving one's own position, influence, reputation, or following. John offers me a very different model. He was willing to become less visible, if that meant Christ became more visible. The Christian minister, of whatever kind, should never confuse the ministry with the Minister, the messenger with the Message, or the servant with the Saviour.

Perhaps, then, I should read the death of John the Baptist on two levels at once. On the human level, it is a story of sin, resentment, compromise, pride, fear of public opinion, and the terrible consequences of failing to act upon one's own conscience. Herodias wanted John dead; Herod tried to contain the problem by imprisonment; an opportunity eventually presented itself, and Herodias seized it; Herod, though distressed, and though he knew John to be righteous, allowed his pride and his fear of those around him to prevail. John was killed because sinful human beings exercised their freedom in sinful ways. But on the providential level, the same event occurs within a much larger story. John had come as the forerunner; he had prepared the way for Christ, called people to repentance, baptised Jesus, heard the divine proclamation concerning the Son, identified Jesus as the Lamb of God, and directed his own disciples towards Him. He had finally articulated the principle that explains his entire ministry: "He must increase, but I must decrease" (John 3:30). I cannot say dogmatically that God brought about John's death because his purpose was complete, since Scripture does not explicitly make that connection. Yet I can see how John's death fits within the providential movement of the Gospel, in which the forerunner recedes and Christ takes the centre. John had faithfully fulfilled the calling entrusted to him, and his life, his ministry, and even his death continued to point beyond himself, to Jesus.

This leaves me with some uncomfortable questions of my own. Herod heard John gladly, yet hearing the truth never became obedience for him — and I recognise that pattern in myself. It is possible to admire

Scripture, agree with a sermon, and still quietly avoid whatever in it would cost me something. Herod also let the presence of his guests outweigh his own conscience; I am rarely tested so dramatically, but the same instinct shows itself in smaller ways — staying silent when I should speak, going along with what I know to be wrong because everyone else is, or softening a conviction to avoid awkwardness. And Herodias reminds me that the heart matters before the deed: her resentment had taken root long before the opportunity to act on it ever arrived, which makes me ask not only what I do, but what I am allowing to grow, unchecked, within me.

John's own life turns me to a different question again: what is my Christian service actually for? He did not cling to his disciples once they were ready to follow Jesus, nor try to hold on to his own prominence once Christ appeared. Anyone who teaches, leads, or serves in the Church has to ask, as I must, whether people are being drawn towards Christ or merely towards us, and whether our ministry depends on our own personality and position rather than on Him. "He must increase, but I must decrease" is, then, not only John's testimony; it is a daily discipline — surrendering recognition, control, even the wish to be understood, so that I become less occupied with myself, and more occupied with Christ.

There is a providence lesson here too. From inside his prison, John could not have known how his death would be read by generations to come; it must have looked, to him, like nothing but the triumph of Herod and Herodias. I will meet circumstances that seem to make no sense in much the same way — a door closed, a work that appears to fail, a season of usefulness ending before I am ready for it to end. John's story tells me that such an ending is not necessarily the ending of God's purpose, and that my task is not to understand every circumstance before I remain faithful, but to trust the God whose purposes are larger than my own.

John's life teaches me to obey the truth I hear, not merely admire it. Herod warns me against letting the fear of people outweigh the fear of God. Herodias warns me against the resentment I allow to take root. And his ministry, all the way to its end, points me to the same place: "Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world" (John 1:29). When I am praised, let me ask whether it is Christ being noticed, or myself. When I am criticised, whether I am defending my own pride, or the truth. When I am given influence or opportunity, let me ask what it will reveal me to be. John's earthly life ended in a prison cell, but his testimony did not: "He must increase, but I must decrease." That is my own prayer too — that Christ would increase in my thoughts, my

choices, and my character, and that my need for recognition, my fear of people, and my pride would decrease, so that my willingness to obey, to serve, and to trust God might grow in their place. The story was never ultimately about John. It was always about Jesus — and the question left for me is whether my own life is making that same truth visible.

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