



Herodias

HER NAME, THE FEMALE FORM OF "HEROD," MEANS
"Heroic"

HER CHARACTER: A proud woman, she used her daughter to manipulate her husband into doing her will. She acted arrogantly, from beginning to end, in complete disregard for the laws of the land.

HER SHAME: To be rebuked by an upstart prophet for leaving her husband Philip in order to marry his half brother Herod Antipas.

HER TRIUMPH: That her scheme to murder her enemy, John the Baptist, worked.

KEY SCRIPTURES: Matthew 14:3–12; Mark 6:14–29; Luke 3:19–20; 9:7–9

Monday

HER STORY

*H*er grandfather, Herod the Great, had ruled Judea for thirty-four years. Herod had brought prosperity to a troubled region of the Roman Empire, building theaters, amphitheaters, and race courses, as well as a palace and a magnificent temple in Jerusalem. In addition to such ambitious endeavors, he had even contrived to lower taxes on two occasions.

But Herod's reign contained shadows that darkened as the years went on. Herodias knew the stories well—how her grandfather had

slaughtered a passel of Jewish brats in Bethlehem, how he had murdered his favorite wife (her own grandmother) and three of his sons for real or imagined intrigues. Advancing age and illness did nothing to improve his character. Herod was determined, in fact, that his own death would produce a time of universal mourning rather than celebration. So, in a final, malevolent act, he commanded all the leading Jews to gather in Jericho. Then he imprisoned them in a stadium and ordered them to be executed at the moment of his death. But the king was cheated of his last wish: His prisoners were set free as soon as he died in the spring of 4 BC.

Not a nice man, her grandfather

Herodias's husband and his half brother Antipas had been lucky survivors of Herod the Great's bloody family, but Antipas had proved the luckier of the two. For while Philip and Herodias languished in Rome with no territory to rule, Antipas was appointed tetrarch of Galilee and Perea. She could sense the man's power the first time he visited them in Rome. And power, she mused, was her favorite aphrodisiac.

Though Herod Antipas was married to the daughter of King Aretas IV, ruler of Nabatea, to the east, he quickly divorced her in favor of Herodias. In one dicey move, Antipas had stolen his brother's wife, compromised his eastern border, and alienated his Jewish subjects, whose law forbade wife-swapping, especially among brothers. But with Herodias beside him, Herod Antipas must have thought himself powerful enough to manage the consequences.

But neither Herod Antipas nor Herodias had expected their transgression to become a matter of public agitation. After all, who was there to agitate, except the usual ragtag band of upstarts? A real prophet had not troubled Israel for more than four hundred years.

But trouble was edging toward them in the form of a new Elijah, whom God had been nurturing with locusts and honey in the wilderness that bordered their realm. This prophet, John the Baptist, cared nothing for diplomacy. He could not be bought or bullied, and was preaching a message of repentance to all who would listen: "A voice of one calling in the desert, 'Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.'"

John the Baptist spared no one, not the ordinary people who flocked to him in the desert, not the self-righteous Pharisees or the privileged Sadducees, and certainly not Herod Antipas or Herodias, whom he chided for their unlawful marriage. Herodias wanted Antipas to kill John, yet even he had to step carefully, lest he ignite an uprising among John's ever-growing number of followers. That would be all the excuse his former father-in-law, Aretas, would need in order to attack Antipas's eastern flank. So, according to the Jewish historian Josephus, Antipas imprisoned John in Machaerus, a fortress just east of the Dead Sea.

On Herod Antipas's birthday a feast was held in his honor and attended by a "who's who" list of dignitaries. During the evening, Herodias's young daughter, Salome, performed a dance for Herod Antipas and his guests, which so pleased him that he promised his stepdaughter anything she desired, up to half his kingdom.

Ever the good daughter, Salome hastened to her mother for advice. Should she request a splendid palace or a portion of the royal treasury? But Herodias had one thing only in mind. When Salome returned to the banquet hall, Salome surprised Antipas with a gruesome demand: "I want you to give me, right now, the head of John the Baptist on a platter."

Though Herod Antipas was distressed by her request, he was even more distressed at the prospect of breaking an oath he had so publicly made. Therefore, in complete disregard for Jewish law, which prohibited both execution without trial and decapitation as a form of execution, he immediately ordered John's death.

That night, Herodias must have savored her triumph over the man whom Jesus referred to as the greatest of those who had yet lived. John had been sent as the last of the prophets, a new Elijah, whose preaching was to prepare the way for Jesus. Had Herodias heeded John's call to repentance, her heart might have welcomed the gospel. Rather than being remembered as just one more member of a bloody dynasty, she could have become a true child of God. Instead of casting her lot with the great women of the Bible, however, she chose to model herself on one of the worst—Jezebel, her spiritual mother. By so doing, she sealed her heart against the truth and all the transforming possibilities of grace.

THE HERODS

Both husbands of Herodias were part of the Herodian family of rulers, as was Herodias herself. Her first husband, Herod Philip, as well as her second husband, Herod Antipas, were her uncles. The family of the Herods ruled in Judea and the surrounding areas for over 125 years. The first Herod, known as Herod the Great, was king of Judea from 37 to 4 BC. His reign was marked by division and domestic troubles, but also by prosperity. While in power, he built amphitheaters, palaces, fortresses, Gentile temples, and the temple of Herod in Jerusalem. This temple was his crowning achievement, noted by the historian Josephus as Herod's most noble work. The literature of the rabbis of that time states: "He who has not seen the Temple of Herod has never seen a beautiful building."

Herod the Great's five wives produced seven sons, most of whom went on to rule parts of the Near East for the Roman Empire. Philip, Herod's son by Mariamne of Simon, was Herodias's first husband. Herodias herself was the daughter of another of Herod's sons. That made her Herod's granddaughter as well as his daughter-in-law by marriage. Herodias wasn't the only one of Herod's children to form such relationships; Herod's great-granddaughter, Bernice, became the consort of her brother, Herod Agrippa II, also a great-grandchild of Herod.

The events at the birthday banquet described in Mark 6 are the culmination of years of corrupt living by a family who had power and knew how to use and misuse it. Herodias's actions, though horrifying, are not really surprising. Each step along the way to requesting John the Baptist's death was perhaps a small one, little noticed, but each step made its relentless way down a path to sin, until what would have been unconscionable years before now seemed acceptable and reasonable. Sin is like that. As your mother told you—and it's true—one small lie leads to another bigger lie that leads to another even bigger lie. The path of sin is strewn with small, seemingly insignificant decisions that lead nowhere but farther along the path away from truth and God.

HER LEGACY IN SCRIPTURE

Read Mark 6:14–29.

1. Note the different responses to John in verses 19–20. What do these responses tell you about Herod and Herodias?
2. How do you typically respond when confronted with a sin or failing? Do you get angry? Sulk? Listen to what the other person says, but without changing your behavior? Cry or feel hurt? Do whatever you can to please the other person? Face whatever is true in the other person's rebuke?
3. What are the signs in this story that power (control, getting her way) was important to Herodias?
4. When has getting your way seemed highly important to you? What did you do to get your way? What were the consequences?
5. What do you imagine it was like to be the daughter of Herodias?

HER PROMISE

*A*s negative as it sounds, the lesson or promise learned from Herodias can only be that sin will devour us. If sin always has its way in our lives, it will eventually consume us. There is only one way out: If we abandon our sin and repent, we will find forgiveness and a new life in Christ. He promises to forgive even the most horrific sins, the most depraved lifestyles, the most abandoned behaviors. We may still face the consequences of our sin, but we will no longer have to fear its judgment. With Christ as our mediator, we become as clean as if we had never sinned.

Promises in Scripture

*I acknowledged my sin to you
and did not cover up my iniquity.
I said, "I will confess
my transgressions to the LORD"—
and you forgave
the guilt of my sin.*

—PSALM 32:5

*He does not treat us as our sins deserve
or repay us according to our iniquities.
For as high as the heavens are above the earth,
so great is his love for those who fear him;
as far as the east is from the west,
so far has he removed our transgressions from us.*

—PSALM 103:10–12

*Though your sins are like scarlet,
they shall be as white as snow;
though they are red as crimson,
they shall be like wool.*

—ISAIAH 1:18

HER LEGACY OF PRAYER

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.

—MARK 6:18–19

- REFLECT ON:** Mark 6:14–29.
- PRAISE GOD:** That he gives us opportunities to repent and turn back to him.
- OFFER THANKS:** For the men and women in your own life who have had the courage to tell you the truth.
- CONFESS:** Any tendency to respond defensively to constructive criticism.
- ASK GOD:** For the grace to respond to correction with humility.

Lift Your Heart

Most of us hate criticism. Part of our defensiveness stems from our inability to see the connection between brokenness and grace. How differently we would respond if we understood that repentance is like a garden hoe breaking up the soil to make it ready for the seed. If we want to cultivate the fruit of the Spirit in our lives—love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control—we must cherish the truth, however it comes to us.

Being receptive to criticism doesn't mean we become women with low self-esteem. It simply means that we will be open about our sins and faults, believing in God's desire to forgive us and help us to change. This week, take some time for a little soul-searching. Is God trying to get your attention about something that is off-kilter in your own life? Is he raising up a prophet in your own family—a child or husband who is trying to tell you the truth? If so, listen, and then pray about what you hear. Resist the temptation to make the person pay for his or her words by sulking, holding a grudge, or criticizing

him or her in turn. Instead, be the first to say you're sorry. A habit of repentance will make your heart fertile soil for God's grace.

Father, I know how deceitful the human heart can be. Please give me the courage to be honest and the faith to believe in your forgiveness. May my heart become a place of brokenness, where grace and truth can flourish.