

# Jesus Messiah: Seeing Christ In The Gospel Of Mark

*“The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel.”  
(Mark 1:15 ESV)*

*And the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. And when the centurion, who stood facing him, saw that in this way he breathed his last, he said,  
“Truly this man was the Son of God!”  
(Mark 15:38–39 ESV)*

## **The Death Of John The Baptist**

**July 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2017**

**Mark 6:14-30**

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### **Introduction:**

Good morning. I want to invite you to open your Bibles to Mark 6:14; that’s on page 841 in your pew Bibles. This is a very interesting story partly because this story isn’t about the content of this story. If you look closely you will immediately see that this story is told inside of another story. Just look at your Bibles for a second. Look at the 2 verses before this story. What do they say?

So they went out and proclaimed that people should repent. 13 And they cast out many demons and anointed with oil many who were sick and healed them. (Mark 6:12–13 ESV)

Who went out? The disciples – the 12 Apostles! Jesus sent them out as Kingdom messengers to preach and to call on people to repent. Alright, now look at the verse immediately AFTER this story. If your Bible chops up the verses into story units, like mine does than the story labelled “The Death Of John The Baptist” probably ends in verse 29. So let’s read the very next verse. Verse 30 says:

The apostles returned to Jesus and told him all that they had done and taught. (Mark 6:30 ESV)

Are you seeing that? This story about the death of John the Baptist is told INSIDE the story of the Jesus’ sending out the Apostles to preach. What do you think that means? It means that this story is not about this story. It is about the sort of reception Kingdom Messengers should expect

in a fallen and hostile world. Hear now the Word of the Lord, beginning at verse 14. This is what the Bible says:

King Herod heard of it, for Jesus' name had become known. Some said, "John the Baptist has been raised from the dead. That is why these miraculous powers are at work in him." 15 But others said, "He is Elijah." And others said, "He is a prophet, like one of the prophets of old." 16 But when Herod heard of it, he said, "John, whom I beheaded, has been raised." 17 For it was Herod who had sent and seized John and bound him in prison for the sake of Herodias, his brother Philip's wife, because he had married her. 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. When he heard him, he was greatly perplexed, and yet he heard him gladly.

21 But an opportunity came when Herod on his birthday gave a banquet for his nobles and military commanders and the leading men of Galilee. 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.

30 The apostles returned to Jesus and told him all that they had done and taught. (Mark 6:14–30 ESV)

This is the Word of the Lord, thanks be to God!

Now, as I said, almost every scholar you could consult on this text agrees that this story is not about the content of this story. William Lane for example says:

"John himself is always in the background. The single emphasis of the account is what *they* do to him."<sup>1</sup>

Dennis Nineham says the same. He says that this story is really about how:

"The fate of the forerunner is a presage of the fate of the successor."<sup>2</sup>

This story is about how a fallen and rebellious world responds to Kingdom Messengers. If they rejected John, if they imprisoned John, if they executed John, then what will they do to those who follow? What will they do to Jesus? What will they do to us? There is no question that this is the question that Mark intends for us to be asking. Let me give you one more quote – we might as well get them all out right at the beginning – James Edwards says about this passage:

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<sup>1</sup> William Lane, *The Gospel of Mark*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament. (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1974), 223.

<sup>2</sup> Dennis Nineham, *Saint Mark*, The Penguin New Testament Commentaries. (London: Penguin Group, 1992), 173.

Whoever would follow Jesus must first reckon with the fate of John. John's martyrdom not only prefigures Jesus' death, but it also prefigures the death of anyone who would follow him.<sup>3</sup>

That's what this story is about! It is about the cost of proclaiming the kingdom of God. John told the king that he was subject to a higher power. John told the king that his word was not law – God's Word was law. John told Herod that he was a sinner and that he better get right with the King of Kings and because of that, he was arrested, he was imprisoned and he was killed. Everything else is detail.

Now when you line this story up with the other story that surrounds it – the story of the sending out of the 12 – I think the message is very hard to miss. You are supposed to read these stories together – there is no doubt about that – and so you are supposed to discern a single message. There is a unified meaning here in these two stories and it is this:

When you preach the Gospel of the Kingdom to a fallen and rebellious culture you can expect a variety of responses.

- Some are going to respond positively
- Some are going to respond negatively
- Sooner or later they're going to kill you

That is the message when you look at these stories as they are presented in Mark's Gospel. Some people are going to respond positively – we've seen that again and again but here there is a warning, in story form, that it won't always be that way. Some people are going to reject the message and some people are going to oppose the message. In Matthew's version you don't get the story you just get a straight up warning. Before he sends out the Apostles Jesus says:

“Behold, I am sending you out as sheep in the midst of wolves (Matthew 10:16 ESV)

Sheep in the midst of wolves don't fare very well. By and large, you don't want to be a sheep in the midst of wolves. Sheep in the midst of wolves tend to get torn apart and eaten up. And that is

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<sup>3</sup>James R. Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, Pillar New Testament Commentary. Accordance electronic ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 189.

what Jesus says you should expect as a Kingdom Messenger in a fallen world.

But you must not be afraid.

In that same sending speech in Matthew, Jesus goes on to say:

do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell. (Matthew 10:28 ESV)

Don't you worry about men. Don't you worry about the devil. You just worry about God. You just worry about whether or not you are doing what he told you to do. Whether people cheer for you, or stone you to death, you just follow the Lord.

That is what this story is all about – in Matthew's version, as here in Mark. This passage is a warning and a prophecy for all who would follow Christ.

So, what should we do with it?

I don't think our task this morning should be to break down all the irrelevant details. I could show you pictures of the fortress of Machaerus where John was imprisoned. I could show you a chart showing all the twists and turns in the Herodian family tree. We could look up the background passages in the Old Testament that explained why what Herod did was sin – but none of that is the point. No one thinks that is the point. The point is the prophecy. What happened to John – the first kingdom messenger – will happen to Jesus – the Ultimate Kingdom messenger – and Jesus said that it would happen to all those who follow him. That's what he meant when he said "take up your cross and follow me".

So, the real question, is what do we do now? How should we function with this prophecy hanging over our heads? Let me suggest a couple of things.

First of all, I suggest that we....

- 1. Don't waste time trying to remove the offense of the Gospel**

You can't! Its hard wired in! It's a fool's errand – despite that many contemporary Christians are engaged in it. It can't be done.

Do you know what offended Herod and Herodias in this story? The fact that John said they were sinners. John – a desert prophet – a brother who lived in the wilderness and who ate locusts and honey and who dressed like a crazy person – this brother stood in Scripture and called the king to account. He said, “What you have done is not lawful”. He told this man that he was subject to a higher power – he told THE KING that he was subject to the Word of God. That is UNIVERSALLY OFFENSIVE. And here is the thing, you can't get to the Gospel without going through this truth.

The Gospel is not rocket science. The Apostle Paul said:

Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners (1 Timothy 1:15 ESV)

Boom! There's your Gospel! There are basically two ideas there: you are a sinner and Jesus is the Savior that you need. And the second part doesn't make sense without the first part.

Nowadays people try to shave the Gospel down to the second bit. Jesus is the Savior that we need. And they say that we can get there without the prickly bit – without the “you're a sinner” bit. But how does that make sense? What does Jesus save us from if not our sin? What are we in bondage to if not our sin? Why are we apart from God if not for sin?

Did God make us this way?

Is he a bad creator?

Is he just irrationally particular and hostile?

Did he make us outside and away?

Did he leave us?

What then is the problem if not human sin?

Do you see brothers and sisters that this cure is worse than the original disease? It leave us with a bad God instead of a fallen people – that's not an upgrade, that's blasphemy. And its unfaithful. And its unbiblical.

Answer me this. Where would you go in the Bible for a verse that justifies never telling people that they are sinners? Where would you go for that?

Where would you go for ONE VERSE that might even open the door a crack for this idea that we can sweet talk people into the Kingdom of God? That we can play their music, speak their language and trick them into becoming followers of Jesus Christ?

Where would you go for that? Would you go to Jesus? I don't think so. He said

No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish. (Luke 13:3 ESV)

So we can't go to Jesus to justify our new approach. We can't go to the disciples, we already read last week about their approach:

they went out and proclaimed that people should repent. (Mark 6:12 ESV)

So that's not helpful and it doesn't appear that they mellowed out over time. Late in his life, one of those disciples from Mark 6:12 was still giving it straight up to his churches in Asia Minor. He said:

If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. (1 John 1:9 ESV)

So where do we go for even an ounce of justification for this new approach?

I have no idea, but I know this, you won't find it in the Bible.

So, let's not waste time trying to find a way to take away the offence of the Gospel. There are no shortcuts to Jesus. There is no way to get to Jesus that bypasses the essential logic of the Gospel. The essential logic of the Gospel is that God exists. He is good. He created us good. We owe him our obedience, our love and our gratitude – BUT WE REBELLED. We sinned. We wanted to be like God deciding right and wrong for ourselves. And so reaching up we fell down, away from God and away from our design and purpose. BUT GOD IN CHRIST HAD PITY ON US. He came and did for us what we could no longer do for ourselves. And he paid for what we had done in his body on the cross. Thanks be to God for our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ!

That is the logic of the Gospel – and it cannot be skipped, bypassed or watered down. It is what it is and it is BEAUTIFUL.

The second logical imperative that comes out of our reflection on this text then I think is this: We need to:

## **2. Stand with those believers who are currently on the front lines of Gospel persecution**

Do you know that more people were martyred for their faith in the 20<sup>th</sup> century than in all previous centuries of the Christian church combined? Its true.<sup>4</sup> We live in a tiny little shrinking pocket of freedom here in North America. But in most places in the world it has never been harder to serve as an Ambassador of Jesus Christ.

Consider just a couple of examples. In May of 2017 lawmakers in Washington D.C. heard a report from the religious freedom advocacy group International Christian Concern which detailed the historic persecution being endured by believers in North Korea. The presenter said:

"One can confidently say that it is the Kim family regime that has taken religious persecution, in particular the persecution of Christians, to a level, perhaps, on par with Nero's Rome as well as the Assyrian, Greek and Armenian genocide of World War I or the Yazidi genocide today"<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> <http://www.christianity.com/church/church-history/timeline/1901-2000/modern-persecution-11630665.html>

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.christianpost.com/news/north-koreas-persecution-christians-on-par-neros-rome-expert-says-184931/#oRkg28XiTG1XtuVd.99>

Did you hear that? The persecution of Christians in North Korea – today – is unsurpassed in human history.

Or how about Egypt? Did you hear about the bus attack on Christians in May of 2017? 28 people were killed, including women and children. Did you hear how it happened? This is a direct quote from the New York Times.

“Claiming to be security officers, the gunmen ordered the passengers to get out. They separated the men from the women and children, and instructed them to surrender their mobile phones. They told the men to recite the shahada, the Islamic declaration of faith.

When the men refused, the gunmen opened fire.

At least 28 people were killed, several with a single shot to the head, according to the Egyptian authorities and relatives of the victims, several of whom were children. The attack on Friday in Minya Province, 120 miles south of Cairo, was a coldblooded escalation of sectarian violence [targeting minority Christians](#) that has left more than 100 people dead [since December](#) and shaken the country’s government.”<sup>6</sup>

This is going on all over the world and part of what it means to be a Christian today is to stand with those who are presently on the front lines of persecution. That isn’t my fancy preaching point – JESUS SAID THAT. In the parable of the Sheep and the Goats he said to the sheep – those who had proven to be his disciples – those whose fruit showed them to be real believers:

‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. 35 For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, 36 I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me.’ 37 Then the righteous will answer him, saying, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink? 38 And when did we see you a stranger and welcome you, or naked and clothe you? 39 And when did we see you sick or in prison and visit you?’ 40 And the King will answer them, ‘Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of **the least of these my brothers**, you did it to me.’ (Matthew 25:34–40 ESV)

Let me state the obvious church – Jesus isn’t saying that if you give money to Prison Fellowship Ministry here in Canada you will be credited as a Christian. Now, I’m all for Prison Fellowship Ministry – we support Prison Fellowship Ministry – we support it because people in prison know that they are sinners and so they are half way to Jesus already! So we are PRO Prison Fellowship Ministry – but that is not what this passage is talking about. These people are in prison BECAUSE THEY ARE BROTHERS AND SISTERS OF JESUS. Jesus is saying in Matthew 25 that standing with those brothers and sisters is what real Christians do. Praying for those brothers and sisters is what real Christians do. Supporting those brothers and sisters financially is what

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<sup>6</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/05/26/world/middleeast/egypt-coptic-christian-attack.html?mcubz=1>

real Christians do. And risking their own necks to visit those brothers and sisters is what real Christians do.

And by the way, you saw that in our story today. Do you remember how it ends? After John has been executed in prison the Bible says:

When his disciples heard of it, they came and took his body and laid it in a tomb. (Mark 6:29 ESV)

At great risk to themselves they came and ministered to the body of their brother because that's what real believers do.

The third thing I think you've got to do is:

### **3. Prepare your children for the possibility of persecution**

For whatever reason, I've been asked to chair a panel discussion for a group of Canadian pastors in September on the topic of Religious Liberty In Canada. To be perfectly clear, I am not a lawyer, the only reason I was selected for this job is that I am reasonably good at reading and researching and I have done some homework and I have made contact with some actual experts and what they're telling me and what they will likely tell this group in September is that because of Canada's reasonably robust protections in the Charter of Rights And Freedoms, Christians in this generation in Canada are unlikely to face actual, legal, persecution, technically speaking. Rather what we are likely to face and are starting to face is regional, localized, harassment and discrimination.

Christians in this generation are likely to be forced out of certain professions – you are starting to hear about that already. Christians are likely to be targeted by the media for economic marginalization and social and cultural harassment. Christian Camps and Schools and charities are likely to face challenges with respect to their hiring and staffing policies – but no one in this generation, in this country, at this time is likely to go to jail for worshipping Jesus or sharing the Gospel with friends and neighbours.

But – and this is an important but – the road to persecution generally leads through economic and cultural harassment which means that unless there is revival in this country we need to prepare our children for the possibility of persecution. Cardinal Francis George said back in 2010:

“I expect to die in bed, my successor will die in prison and his successor will die a martyr in the public square.”<sup>7</sup>

There is a progression, generally, in the hostility of a culture towards the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Therefore I think the need of the hour – even while we pray for and work for and look for revival - is to prepare our young people for the possibility of persecution. Make sure that when you share the Gospel with little Johnny you tell him that following Jesus may well cost him his life. That’s not scaremongering, that’s just being faithful. Jesus said:

For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel’s will save it.  
(Mark 8:35 ESV)

You should tell your kids that – because its in the Bible.

Fourthly and lastly, I think we ought to:

#### **4. Keep calm and carry on**

Now you might say, “Pastor, you just frightened the daylight of me! You just read a story about a man having his head cut off in prison! You just told us to tell our kids that they might lose their lives for the sake of the Gospel, and now you’re telling us to keep calm and carry on?”

And to that question, I would say: Yes. That is exactly what I’m telling you. Because that is what we see in the Bible. In the Bible we see honest warnings followed by calm encouragement.

That is the Jesus way.

In John 16 Jesus says:

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<sup>7</sup> <http://www.chicagocatholic.com/cnwonline/2012/1021/cardinal.aspx>

In the world you will have tribulation. (John 16:33 ESV)

Woah! Woah! That's not qualified or ambiguous at all. Jesus says, in this world you WILL have tribulation. That's not good news. That makes me nervous and yet look at what Jesus says next:

But take heart; I have overcome the world. (John 16:33 ESV)

Honest warning. Calm encouragement.

That's what we see in the Bible – that's what we see in this story! I told you that in Matthew's version which is far longer than Mark's version there is a whole speech about this issue that Jesus gives to the disciples before sending them out. In the speech he says:

I am sending you out as sheep in the midst of wolves (Matthew 10:16 ESV)

Ok, again, that does not encourage me. That sounds ominous. That sounds foreboding. And yet, Jesus goes on to say:

“have no fear of them, for nothing is covered that will not be revealed, or hidden that will not be known. 27 What I tell you in the dark, say in the light, and what you hear whispered, proclaim on the housetops. 28 And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell. 29 Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? And not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father. 30 But even the hairs of your head are all numbered. 31 Fear not, therefore; you are of more value than many sparrows. 32 So everyone who acknowledges me before men, I also will acknowledge before my Father who is in heaven, 33 but whoever denies me before men, I also will deny before my Father who is in heaven. (Matthew 10:26–33 ESV)

Short version: Keep calm and carry on.

Don't go underground with the Gospel – proclaim it on the housetops! Don't be afraid, remember the final judgment. Give your testimony before men and I will speak for you before my Father. Deny me before men and I will deny you before my Father.

That is the warning. That is the encouragement and this is the Word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God, let's pray together.