

DAILY BIBLE ILLUSTRATIONS

by

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Thirty-Seventh Week -- Monday

THE DEATH OF JOHN THE BAPTIST

"But when Herod's birthday was celebrated, the daughter of Herodias danced before them and pleased Herod. Therefore he promised with an oath to give her whatever she might ask. So she, having been prompted by her mother, said, 'Give me John the Baptist's head here on a platter.' And the king was sorry; nevertheless, because of the oaths and because of those who sat with him, he commanded it to be given to her. So he sent and had John beheaded in prison. And his head was brought on a platter and given to the girl, and she brought it to her mother. Then his disciples came and took away the body and buried it, and went and told Jesus" (Matthew 14:6-12).

Jesus' fame was made familiar to all of wide Galilee, and his proceedings and claims became the general theme of conversation. There was an extraordinary variety of opinions concerning Him. His conduct was so different from that which the nation generally had associated with the idea of the Messiah that there were not many as yet who fully recognized Him in that character.

Some thought He might be John the Baptist raised from the dead, for he had been already put to death by Herod. Others deemed that He might be Elijah or one of the old prophets come as a further harbinger of the Messiah. The general disposition among those well informed as to John's preaching and mission was to place Him above John and next to the Messiah, but not to regard Him as himself the Messiah. This, indeed, is the opinion which we have supposed John himself to have been for a moment inclined to entertain when he sent his disciples to question Jesus. All these opinions were discussed at court, for Jesus was now too conspicuous to be overlooked there. Herod himself said, "John have I beheaded; but who is this of whom I hear such great things?" And he therefore expressed a wish to see Him.

John had met his end in this manner. We have seen that it was not Herod's intention to put him to death, partly because he was afraid to do so. But his more wicked and less scrupulous wife, Herodias, thirsted for the prophet's blood, not only out of revenge but as a measure of prudence and security to herself. The mere fact that John was there as a prisoner must ever keep alive in the minds of the people, and of the king himself, the cause why he was there--for declaring their marriage null and void. And who could say but that at any moment of discontent or remorse, or to gratify the people with whom the marriage was unpopular and scandalous, the king might send her away? She had tried her influence upon Herod often enough to realize that

it was useless to attempt to gain his consent to this murder in any direct way, and she therefore laid a deep plot to extort that consent unwillingly from him.

It was Herod's birthday, which was celebrated with high festivities at court. The Jews generally disliked the celebration of birthdays, and this was one of the heathen customs that the Herodian family had adopted from the Romans. On the present occasion Herod gave a great supper to "his lords, high captains, and chief estates," and before it closed a fair young girl, to whom Herod was greatly attached, was introduced and commenced one of those solo dances for which the East has long been celebrated. That fair child was Salome, the daughter of Herodias by her former husband.

With such marvelous grace and thrilling effect she performed her dance, and Herod, already warm with wine, became excited. In the fervor of his enthusiasm he vowed that she should have whatever she asked, even to the half of his kingdom. Little could he imagine what this child had been tutored by her wicked mother to ask; and Herod was shocked and grieved when, instead of some costly bauble, she asked for the head of John the Baptist.

The sternest man there must have shuddered to hear from those beautiful young lips the blood-thirsty request, and one so atrociously specific: "Give me John the Baptist's head here on a platter." John is not only to lose his head, but the bleeding trophy is to be brought to Salome *there*, that there may be no evasion, and that the high lords who have heard the vow may witness its fulfillment. Then she tells *how* it is to be brought! It is not to be brought in any careless way, not in a napkin, not held by the hair, but on a platter, that she--this young girl--might receive it into her own hands and take it where she pleased without danger of soiling her rich dress with the prophet's blood.

This is frightful. It was done, nevertheless. His oath having been given, false pride prevented him from revoking it, notwithstanding his regret nor the knowledge that the infraction of such an oath was a far less crime than its fulfillment--and certainly notwithstanding that he must have surely seen very well to whose diabolical crafty schemes this was owing.

A man was sent to behead John in his prison and presently brought it to the young princess, who doubtless received it with becoming grace and bore it off daintily to her mother. That the girl could go through all this, however well tutored she needed to be, seems to show that Salome was indeed a true daughter of Herodias.