

- I. **Mark 6:14-29** – the execution of John the Baptist previously read
- II. **Persecution and trials are a part of the Christian life.**
 - a. Who, me? I didn't really sign up for that, thank you very much...
 - b. When we became a believer, whenever the Holy Spirit came to us and gave us the faith we have... along came a burden which we bear... it is the cross of Jesus Christ.
 - c. In our country of America, we have a long Christian history... America is a place where Christians from all over the world came to be free from persecution and trials
 - i. The Puritans left England for the persecution they faced from the Church of England
 - ii. Even our own historical roots of the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod comes from the persecution they faced from the Prussian Union as they came to Perry County, Missouri to begin anew
 - d. However, in America, somewhere along the line we have forgotten that persecution is a part of the Christian walk
 - i. Maybe it's not so much that we have forgotten, but that we have never truly experienced it, so we have nothing to go on.
 - ii. It doesn't help that many churches teach that God will bless us if we are faithful.
 1. And you might be scratching your head here and saying, "Isn't that biblical, Pr Jim? Doesn't the Bible say that when we are faithful God will bless us?"
 - a. Well, I suppose it depends on what you mean by God blessing us
 - b. I use the word "blessing" all the time in reference to God, but I usually mean healing, doing better, feeling better, etc
 - c. My question to all of you is, what is a blessing in the bigger picture? God's picture?
 - iii. In Revelation 2:10 Jesus says, "Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and for ten days you will have tribulation. Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life."
 1. Yes, for ten days, or a symbol for the right amount of time, we will suffer tribulation and be tested... but we will receive a blessing – the crown of life.
 - e. It's not a very popular message to say that blessings might come in the form of trouble – or that God can use persecution to bring about His good purposes.
 - i. But then again, God has never had a popular message – He challenges us over and over again to step out of our understandings, our comfort zones, and our sinful, selfish lives
- III. **Just look at what happened to John the Baptist.**
 - a. John was a prophet sent to lead the way for Jesus

- i. He's the guy who wore camel hair clothes and ate grasshoppers out in the desert.
 - ii. He's also a relative of Jesus, and the one who baptized our Lord in the Jordan River
 - iii. Many of the disciples of Jesus were followers of John the Baptist as well, and Jesus Himself calls John "great" (Matthew 11:11)
 - b. As I preached last week, prophets were often the bearers of bad news to those who were sinning and wandering from God's will
 - i. Just as Isaiah, Ezekiel, Elijah and all the others, John the Baptist also spoke up when someone or something was going against God
 - c. In this case, John spoke up and condemned Herod for marrying his brother's wife, Herodias.
 - i. It seems that Herodias was married to Herod's brother, Philipp, who was a leader in another area... however, she was inclined to move up the ladder by marrying a more powerful leader – who happened to be her husband's brother
 - ii. So Herod, who by the way is Herod the Great's son and the one ruling during the execution of Jesus, divorced his wife and takes Herodias.
 - iii. John spoke out against this behavior, and he became a target for Herodias... who figures out a way to silence him forever.
 - 1. The court narrative just shows the depravity and immorality of Herod and his family – and John is executed
 - 2. I was reading some sermon notes from Pastor Phil Brandt, and he said it seems a little random that John the Baptist was executed because a pretty girl danced... but that's what happened.
 - d. John was being faithful to God... and what did he get?
 - i. He received the crown of life... John was "blessed...in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places..." (Eph 1:3)
 - e. I'm going to rattle off a few more names in the Bible who were faithful to God (as humanly possible) and what happened to them...
 - i. St. Paul, the writer of our Epistle lesson today – he was executed in Rome and spent untold hours suffering, being punished, and sitting in prison for Christ
 - ii. St. Stephen, the man who was stoned for preaching about Jesus and became the first Christian martyr
 - iii. Peter and nearly all the other Apostles of Jesus, who were beaten, punished, imprisoned, and ultimately executed for preaching in His name
 - f. Throughout the ages, men and women from all walks of life have joined the ranks of these faithful followers – speaking the truth about Jesus, even if it meant paying the ultimate price.

- i. The word martyr in Greek means witness, and the ultimate witness for Jesus is to die in the faith... especially while being pressured to reject Him
- ii. In fact, the early Christian martyrs who were executed in Rome were said to have sung hymns and praises, all while being tortured, burned alive, or fed to wild animals... and this made a huge impact on the people watching – they died as witnesses to Jesus.

IV. **So what does this all mean for us?**

- a. God calls on us to take up our cross (Mark 8:34)... that we will lose our lives as we live for God
- b. When we are being chastised for speaking out about wrongs...
 - i. As people retaliate against us and make our lives miserable because we proclaim the name of Jesus unapologetically...
 - ii. If we face trials and sufferings – or even imprisonment for standing with our Savior and His Word...
 - iii. Whenever we go against the grain of social norms and there are consequences...
 - iv. Even when we endure struggles that seem to come out of nowhere and seem to have no meaning as to why...
 - v. All of these things are a part of the life of a Christian – this is what we are given along with our faith in Christ...
- c. Who, me??
 - i. Yes, me... and you... and all our brothers and sisters in Christ all around the world who believe in Jesus as their Savior.
 - ii. And honestly, we should be just as surprised that we are called to suffer as we are that we are called by grace to be saved!
 - iii. When God chose us for from the foundation of the world for adoption (Eph. 1:4-5), when Jesus spilled His blood and gave us the forgiveness of sins (Eph. 1:7) and when we were given the guarantee of the Holy Spirit and an inheritance in heaven (Eph 1:13-14) – now THAT'S when we should look at God and say, "Who, me??"
 - iv. None of us deserve the wonderful grace that has been lavished upon us in (Eph 1:7-8) Christ, but He loves us that much.
 - 1. Who, me? Yes, you...
- d. Please, please, please look beyond the transient, the here and now, to see the true blessings that God has in store for you
- e. Hear God's Word from St. Paul in 2 Corinthians 4 (8-11 NLT) "We are pressed on every side by troubles, but we are not crushed. We are perplexed, but not driven to despair. ⁹ We are hunted down, but never abandoned by God. We get knocked down, but we are not destroyed. ¹⁰ Through suffering, our bodies continue to share in the death of Jesus so that the life of Jesus may also be seen in our bodies. ¹¹ Yes, we live under constant danger of death because we serve Jesus, so that the life of Jesus will be evident in our dying bodies." Amen