

Birthday parties can be a big deal; depending on your family and your age.

When we were in El Salvador helping to build homes in the Village of Hope several years ago, the hotel where we were staying hosted a ***La Quinceañera*** Party. It is a lavish affair thrown when a girl turns 15. Think princess and prom queen all rolled up into one day!

Do you have a favorite birthday that you remember? I remember when I turned 40 (a couple of years ago) and was surprised to come home from church and discover that my pastor buddies (Ed Morrow, Tom Lange, Dan May, and Steve Koenig) were all invited over to play cards, talk about golf and share a beer!

Kids usually love birthdays. Friends come bearing gifts, there's cake and ice cream, and these days maybe even an outing to a local amusement park or someplace else where kids can run wild. Blowing out the birthday candles is an annual rite of passage in America, though the older we get and the more candles there are the less excited we seem to become.

But sometimes the birthday parties go wrong:

- A family decided to throw their 8-year-old daughter a surprise party, only to see her burst into tears when everyone yelled "Surprise." She cried out that surprise parties ***"made her heart hurt."***
- One party hired a clown to entertain a bunch of 5-year-olds, only to discover that half the kids screamed in terror when they saw him. The parents had to ask the clown to leave.
- At another party, one of the kids showed up with a stomach bug and threw up in the middle of the ball pit, on the cake and even on the gifts.

- Another family went all out and spared no expense to create the birthday party of the century. The birthday girl bragged about her party so much that only one person showed up.

But all of these birthday party disasters pale in comparison to what has to be the worst birthday party in the history of birthdays.

Once upon a time, a king named Herod Antipas, became aware of an itinerant preacher from Nazareth who was performing all sorts of miracles.

Rumors about this Jesus had been circulating and people speculated about who he was. Some thought he was John the Baptist raised from the dead, others Elijah and still others thought he was one of the prophets.

Herod Antipas was convinced that only one of those rumors could be true — that John the Baptist, the prophet whom he had both feared and revered, had come back from the dead.

This is where Mark gives us a flashback to ***Herod's birthday party***.

A few years before, Antipas had gone to visit his half-brother Philip. While visiting he was taken by Philip's wife, Herodias. He convinced her that he was a bigger deal than his brother and that she should divorce Philip, marry him and move to Galilee.

Since this was in direct violation of many Old Testament Laws, John the Baptist let them know that God was not pleased!

Herodias did not appreciate John the Baptist making her an object of ridicule and scorn and secretly plotted to have him done away with.

Herod had arrested John but feared to have him executed since he was convinced that he was a prophet of God.

When the king's birthday rolled around, he decided to throw a party for himself and invite the rich and powerful; just imagine the gifts he would receive!

The parties of the Herodian court were legendary for their excesses, and we can be sure that King Herod Antipas indulged in more than a few glasses from the punch bowl. Herodias, seeing her chance to influence her new husband and bump off that annoying prophet, had her daughter, Salome, dance for her new husband.

Loosened up from partying, Antipas went gaga over his stepdaughter (another no-no) and made a rash oath that he would give her anything she wanted, even half his kingdom, (which wasn't his to give in the first place, since he was actually ruled by Rome). The nasty queen prompted her daughter to say, "I want you to give me the head of John the Baptist on a platter".

The king was now trapped by his own words. Not wanting to lose face in front of the members of his court, he reluctantly ordered the prophet's head served up on a plate.

Mark's Gospel is very concise. He gives the impression of always being in a hurry. The word "***immediately***" occurs 43 times in Mark, more than the rest of the New Testament!

Why then does Mark go into such detail about Herod's birthday party?

Perhaps it's because Mark wants us to recognize that:

- Following Jesus (the King of Kings) is a costly business.

- Giving our allegiance to him will put us sideways with the political and social forces that seem to govern our world.
- Speaking the truth often results in being ignored and pushed aside at best and, at worst, may cost us our head.

When the rich and powerful get together for a party, to honor themselves, there is little doubt that they would gladly order up the head of someone they disagree with.

In recent years the various award shows for celebrities have fallen on hard times; more people tune out than ever before. Congratulating themselves on how great they are, they use these shows as a platform to stir up hatred against those they disagree with politically. One celebrity actually posted a picture of herself holding the head of President Trump. It wasn't even her birthday!

She initially expressed regret when it had a negative impact on her career, but she has now stated that she is ***"no longer sorry"***! I wonder if she realized that she had cast herself in the part of Herodias and the president as John?

Disagree with the rich and powerful at your peril!

But I think Mark is also telling us that we are invited to a different sort of party. Immediately after this horrific story about a party gone wrong, Mark offers another party story where things go better than anyone could have imagined. Jesus feeds more than 5,000 people with just five loaves and two fish!

Herod Antipas threw a party in honor of himself, with an exclusive guest list restricted to the rich and powerful, and in his drunken lust condemned a holy man to death.

Jesus threw a party and invited everyone, giving to them the sustenance they needed for that day!

Which king do you want to follow, and which party do you want to be part of?

In A.D. 36, King Aretas (the father of Herod's first wife) attacked and defeated Herod's army. The Jews were elated, considering this to be divine punishment for beheading John the Baptist.

In the year 39, Herodias goaded her husband to claim the title of a real king for himself, urging him to go to Rome to appeal to the new Emperor Caligula. Instead of becoming king, Herod and Herodias were banished to the region of Gaul and his territory in Galilee was given to Herod Agrippa. We're guessing Herod Antipas had no more parties after that.

Consider these words:

Luke 1:51–53

He has shown strength with his arm;

he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts;

he has brought down the mighty from their thrones

and exalted those of humble estate;

he has filled the hungry with good things,

and the rich he has sent away empty.

The Herods didn't fare too well in history.

Herod the Great is best known as the madman who ordered the slaughter of the Innocents. Herod killed so many of his own children that the emperor Augustus quipped, *"It is better to be Herod's pig than son"*—the joke being that, since Herod was a Jew, he didn't eat pork and his pig would be safe.

In Acts 12 we encounter Herod Agrippa I, grandson of Herod the Great and nephew of Herod Antipas.

Acts 12:1–3

About that time Herod the king laid violent hands on some who belonged to the church.

He killed James the brother of John with the sword, and when he saw that it pleased the Jews, he proceeded to arrest Peter also.

Acts 12:21–23

On an appointed day Herod put on his royal robes, took his seat upon the throne, and delivered an oration to them. And the people were shouting,

"The voice of a god, and not of a man!"

Immediately an angel of the Lord struck him down, because he did not give God the glory, and he was eaten by worms and breathed his last.

Notice the sequence!

He was eaten by worms and then he breathed his last!

Jesus said,

Luke 14:11

For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.”

This is why Mark tells us about the worst birthday party ever.

- Here is what happens to the rich and powerful who exalt themselves and make themselves enemies of God.
- The king that we follow is humble and came to seek and save those who were lost!
- The king that we follow came not to exalt himself but to empty himself; taking upon himself the form of a servant he became obedient to death on a cross in order that all who follow him would be exalted forever in **Heaven!**

Planning a birthday party?

- Use it to celebrate the life of that loved one but keep it humble!
- Use it as an opportunity to show that person how much he or she is loved.
- Use the occasion to build your relationship with one another.
- Use the party to remind the loved one just how much God loves them in Jesus!