



## NG Study Guide: Mark 6:14-29 “Dealing with Doubt” [4.18.21]

### Love God + know the Bible better:

1. Read the passage cited above, and try to answer the questions below before your group meets.
2. *Leader note: Please review the brief instructions for leaders at the bottom.*

### The Study

**Thesis:** We all face realities in life that cause us to struggle, wrestle, and potentially doubt. When we ignore, suppress, or try to manage our doubts ourselves it inevitably causes us to stray further from the Truth. We see this play out in the life of Herod. However, if we look at John the Baptizer, imprisoned and facing death, we see that when we honestly and earnestly lay our doubts before Jesus, He reassures us of the Truth and strengthens our faith.

#### 1. The Roots of our Doubts [14-20]

**4** Now King Herod heard of Him, for His name had become well known. And he said, “John the Baptist is risen from the dead, and therefore these powers are at work in him.” **15** Others said, “It is Elijah.” And others said, “It is the Prophet, or like one of the prophets.” **16** But when Herod heard, he said, “This is John, whom I beheaded; he has been raised from the dead!” **17** For Herod himself had sent and laid hold of John, and bound him in prison for the sake of Herodias, his brother Philip’s wife; for he had married her. **18** Because John had said to Herod, “It is not lawful for you to have your brother’s wife.” **19** Therefore Herodias held it against him and wanted to kill him, but she could not; **20** for Herod feared John, knowing that he was a just and holy man, and he protected him. And when he heard him, he did many things, and heard him gladly.

In Mark 6:14-15, Jesus came onto the scene, and the things He was doing were previously unmatched in history. Here we see how the multitudes (and Herod) react to Jesus. What do they do? They try to explain this power. They say “*it is Elijah*”, because Elijah was prophesied to come to Israel again before the Messiah (Malachi 4:5). They say “*it is the Prophet*” or “*it is one of the prophets*” because Jesus demonstrated miraculous signs similar to the prophets of the Old Testament, and perhaps he could even be The Prophet (Deut. 18:15), who Moses foretold would bring the very message of God. Deuteronomy 18:15, Acts 3:19-26 tells us, was speaking prophetically about Jesus. So the multitudes had a varied response to Jesus, some closer to understanding who he is and some further. Some misunderstood the identity of Jesus. So we see that *a root of doubt can come from a misunderstanding of Who Jesus is*. Why do they do this? It is because our minds tend to fight against “gaps in understanding”. When we are faced with something unexplainable, the first thing we do, intellectually, is to seek ways to explain it. The cultural paradigm the multitudes grew up in, allowed for a shortsighted explanation of Who Jesus was (Elijah, The Prophet, prophets). However, they had not encountered anyone quite like Jesus. Yes, the Scriptures had shown healing, power, and even resurrection, but no one had done it with the authority of Jesus. Yes, their tradition spoke of Messiah, but would Messiah really come from the place Jesus came from, spend time with the type of people Jesus spent time with, come with both authority and humility like Jesus did, and not throw off their Roman oppressors like Jesus

wasn't? They misunderstood, because the Reality of Who Jesus was came into conflict with their assumptions of Who Messiah would be.

Then we see Herod's response. These verses depict this struggle in Herod Antipas, who proclaims here "John the Baptist is risen from the dead!" [16] He had heard of Jesus, and couldn't comprehend Who Jesus was, so he filled in the space with the assumption "This must be John the Baptist!" Luke 23 tells us that Herod was perplexed, a Greek word literally meaning "doubt". Herod is thrown into a place of doubt. What does it mean to doubt? Doubt occurs when what we believe to be true comes into conflict with our experience of reality. In similar words, whenever reality collides with our paradigm of Truth, we experience doubt. We are forced into a space where we have to ask "is what I believe to be true, actually true?" Herod came from a line of terrible rulers who lived for power and status (Herod the Great, his father, had all the male children in Bethlehem, under 2 years old killed, because he thought the young King Jesus was a threat to his power). So how does Herod respond when he encounters John? Verse 17-18 tells us that Herod had John imprisoned because John "it is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife". This came right into conflict with Herod's driving principles of life (the idea that life is about power and status, and that having those allows you to act in the manner you wish). However, Herod encounters John, who lived for a completely different purpose (heralding the Truth that Jesus is the prophesied Messiah). How Does Herod respond? In verse 20, we see that Herod hears John "gladly" (even though John's message was full of rebuke), but (if we look at other translations/the original language), we also see that he is "perplexed" once again. Why does this happen? It is because the reality of John the Baptist's way of life, is coming into direct conflict with the principles that drove Herod's way of living. The philosophy Herod once held to be true was being deconstructed.

After the deconstructing of the philosophy a person is holding to be true, they are faced with another task: will they accept a different philosophy than the one they are currently operating under because it more aligns with reality (objective truth- i.e. God's Truth)? The willingness to answer "yes" or "no" and to what degree is contingent on the willingness to accept this new paradigm (theory of how our life ought to operate). So now, this begs the question: what hinders us from accepting a new paradigm, even if it aligns with objective truth more than the paradigm we currently hold? Again, looking at Herod's response to John the Baptizer gives us some clues.

Our experience of doubt often begins when we encounter an idea that is more favorable because it is more true (that is, it better aligns with objective reality), so we take it in "gladly", meaning this idea of truth draws us in. However, we experience feeling "perplexed" when this truth statement conflicts with a previously held paradigm. For example, a person might believe (have the paradigm) that materially good things ought to come to a person who is generous, but when they see that it is not the case many times, they must wrestle with the reality that what they previously thought could be wrong. This person comes across verses in Scripture that communicate that even seemingly good people experience poverty and loss, yet those who believe in Christ are promised a rich inheritance in heaven (Eph. 1:18) and are supplied with everything they need (Phil. 4:19). This person has to wrestle with accepting this truth (since it aligns more with reality and is therefore more favorable), even though they have been operating under a different assumption up until this point. So we question, we wrestle, we struggle- we experience doubt. From here, at first blush, the response seems simple: accept the true paradigm, reject the false paradigm. But we are human, finite, limited in our understanding. We process a significant amount of our experience subjectively. So, if it's difficult, at times, to accept the Truth, we must ask the question: what hinders us from wrestling with our doubts and accepting the Truth?

## **2. Where Our Doubts Take Us [21-29]**

**21** Then an opportune day came when Herod on his birthday gave a feast for his nobles, the high officers, and the chief men of Galilee. **22** And when Herodias' daughter herself came in and danced, and pleased Herod and those who sat with him, the king said to the girl, "Ask me whatever you want, and I will give it to you." **23** He also swore to her, "Whatever you ask me, I will give you, up to half my kingdom." **24** So she

went out and said to her mother, "What shall I ask?" And she said, "The head of John the Baptist!" **25** Immediately she came in 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; yet, because of the oaths and because of those who sat with him, he did not want to refuse her. **27** Immediately the king sent an executioner and commanded his head to be brought. And he went and beheaded him in prison, **28** 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 away his corpse and laid it in a tomb.

In verse 21, we are brought to a scene where Herod is hosting a dinner party for the men of influence (nobles, high officers, chief men) of Galilee. Herod wants to please his dinner guests, so in verse 22, he has his daughter dance for them. What we see playing out is a scene reife with sin, and what we will discover in the following verses is that *sin hinders us from seeing clearly, while we wrestle with our doubts*. We see three examples, in Herodias, her daughter, and Herod. In verse 22-23, Herod makes his step-daughter this offer: "Whatever you ask me, I will give you, up to half my kingdom." She leaps at this offer and rushes to her mother, who asks for John's head (25). She immediately returns to Herod and makes her request [26]. She is driven by her greed, and either oblivious or ignoring the fact that her greed will cost John his life. Instead of taking time to understand the implications of what she is asking, her greed drives her to sin. We see a similar situation play out in Herodias, who "held (John's rebuke) against him and wanted to kill him" [19]. She is fueled by her bitterness and it blinds her to the terrible sin she is committing against John. She only sees him as an obstacle to what she wanted (marriage to Herod), and continues in her bitterness to have John murdered.

With Herod, we see a suppression of doubt. Instead of dealing with his "perplexed-ness", he dives further into sexual sin and pleasure with the dancing of his step daughter [21-23]. He operates by his base desires for lust, money, and power. He lingers in this "in-between" state where he is not dealing with his doubt. Instead of facing the hard task of wrestling with doubt, he buries his struggle with lust and power. In verse 26, we see the driving motivation behind his actions: "because of the oaths and because of those who sat with him, he did not want to refuse" Herodias and her daughter's request. Herod desires power and reputation, and cannot conceive of life without it. Ultimately, this leads to his decision to kill John the Baptizer, even when it causes him mental anguish (Herod is "exceedingly sorry") [26]. What Herod decided was more valuable than Truth was his subjective idea of what is valuable in life. Delving into sin and flesh, rather than facing doubts, causes a person to stray further from the Truth. Because Herod lacked decisiveness in facing his doubts, this left him susceptible to Herodias, who had decisively chosen against truth and objective right. Led by her bitterness, she pushed for the beheading of John the Baptist [24-25]. Herod conceded [27-29], and this is the last time we see him wrestling. He ended up succumbing to his sin and doubt, and by the time he came face to face with Jesus (*Luke 23*), Herod met the Truth Himself with mocking and cynicism. It is critical that we face our doubts and wrestle with them, because even some ideas we think are true, actually stem from our cultural/social/family background. And some things we feel we ought to attain, are rooted in desire that may be fleshly and sinful. In Herod, we see this in his adulterous relationship with Herodias, even after John confronts the sin as being "not lawful" (objectively wrong) (verse 18). He wants to keep this relationship, even when knows it is objectively wrong. This situation is further aggravated by Herodias' bitterness and her daughter's greed. Instead of listening to the truth (that their adultery is wrong), they are driven by their fleshly desire, and they plummet further and further from the Truth. The main driving force was sinful, and sin drives the self more and more inward, rather than looking upward to God (Truth Himself), for direction. At the root of our doubts is a paradigm we are drawn to because it is True, colliding with a previously held idea, as well as our subjective desires. We wrestle because we are weighing the cost of accepting truth over our current desire. Herod and his family chose to remain with their previous way of living, rather than wrestling with doubt to find Truth. So how do we wrestle well?

Where can we bring our doubts, so we don't end up falling to our sins and our own subjective desires? In *Luke 7:18-35*, we see John the Baptizer wrestling with doubt. He finds himself, after living a

life faithful to God, in jail precisely for his faithfulness, even when it came to confronting a king of his sins. He questions, "Are you the Messiah, or should we find another?". But where does he bring his doubts? He brings them to the Source of Truth. John brings his doubts to Jesus, Who meets him with compassion, and reassures him that He truly is the One John has been searching for. He reassures John with evidence. If we look at the evidence, there is an abundant amount of evidence in the consistency of the manuscripts used to write the Scriptures of the Bible across history, there is evidence in the eyewitness accounts of Jesus's resurrection, evidence in the fact that all of his followers were martyred for believing and following him (if Jesus' claims that he is God was a lie then someone would have given up on it before facing death), there is evidence in the consistency of the word, there is evidence in the transformed lives of believers around us. Evidence and reassurance from the Lord strengthens John's resolve, to the point that he can face certain death because he knows he is standing on truth. When we wrestle with our doubts, we are wrestling with what the Truth will cost us, and many times our wrestling is so anguishing because we, at some level, are not sure how we will come out on the other end. Will our faith be strengthened like John, or will our doubt lead to our ruin like Herod? We can find reassurance beyond doubt, because in a Garden in Gethsemane on Passover Evening, Our Savior wrestled. Though Jesus never doubted, He wrestled to the point of anguish, asking His Father "*if there is another way, please let this cup pass from Me*". Jesus struggled with knowing that the act that would produce the greatest good, would also result in the greatest pain for Him. He held this paradox as He walked forward to the cross. And because He faced the cross, took each nail, took a mocking crown made of thorns, and took on our sin, shame and doubt, we have life. Jesus held onto Truth to the end. And lost everything still holding on, but rose from the grave having gained everything (glory, honor, and you and I as His people). The very worst happened to the epitome of Goodness Himself, and yet that act was part of God's Good Plan to save us. So how should we wrestle with our doubts? We bring them to Jesus. 1. We study God's Word to learn Truth (*John 17:17*), 2. we talk with the Lord about our doubts, in honest and earnest prayer (*Psalms 73*), 3. we seek the wisdom and encouragement of mature brothers and sisters. (*Hebrews 3:13-14*), and 4. we continue to obey the Lord (*James 2:14-26*). These actions serve to strengthen our faith, combat our doubts, and ultimately point us to Jesus Christ, the Truth of God Himself (*John 14:6*).

### **Study Guide Qs**

**Q1. What are some things believers doubt about God's character or plan? Why?**

**Q2. How do believers and nonbelievers handle doubt similarly? Differently? Why?**

**Q3. What are some ways sin can hinder a person from seeing the Truth clearly?**

**Q4. How do the Word, prayer, and other believers help us process our doubts? Do you have examples from your own experience of how the Lord has helped you in times you've struggled with doubt?**

### **"Digging Deeper" (optional or alternative study)**

**1. Read Matthew 26:36-44 and Luke 7:18-28. What do these passages tell you about how God responds when we honestly wrestle before Him? What comfort can we draw from these passages?**

**2. Here are some practical tips for considering the areas in which we doubt:**

<https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/justin-taylor/dealing-with-doubt/>

**3. An encouraging article on how the Lord responds to our doubts:**

<https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/i-never-expected-doubt/>

**Love your neighbor *outside* the group better:**

1. Who would like to share how they sought to befriend or build relationship with their neighbors where they live, work, study, or play this past week?
2. Are there some needs that can provide us an opportunity to love our neighbor outside the group?
3. Here is a neighboring idea(s) for us to consider for the week(s) ahead:

**Pray and seek opportunities to share with a struggling neighbor how you are discovering God's peace by trusting Him.**

**Love your neighbor *inside* the group better:**

1. Are there some needs in our group that can provide us an opportunity to love our neighbor within the group?
2. What might we do about that need to help?

**Prayer [Loving God and Neighbors better]:**

Close the NG meeting with a time of group prayer. Encourage each participant to pray, but don't force anyone to pray. Encourage the group to keep their prayers brief so that each person can pray.

**Leader Notes:**

- 1. Seek to involve as many group participants as possible.** A good group discussion time allows people to get to know the passage and one another better.
- 2. Feel free to pre-select the discussion questions that you want to focus on** in case there isn't enough time to answer them all.
- 3. The "Digging Deeper" section provides some optional or alternative study and discussion activities.** As a group leader, you can choose to focus on the "Digging Deeper" section, include part of that section in your group meeting, or not use it at all. Try to give the group sufficient notice so they can be prepared for the meeting.
- 4. Every time you meet consider asking:**
  - a. What about this passage is particularly exciting, challenging, or confusing?** If a leader is uncertain about a question of doctrine or theology don't hesitate to follow-up with your coach during the week. Then revisit the issue(s) when the group gathers next time.