

Herod's Ball-Room

by Horatius Bonar

The sermon warns against the dangers of worldly pleasures and the consequences of indulging in lust and sin.

Scripture: Matthew 14:6

Topics: "Worldly Pleasures", "Conscience and Guilt"

Description

Horatius Bonar reflects on Herod's birthday ball, illustrating the stark contrast between worldly pleasure and spiritual turmoil. Despite the lavish festivities, Herod is haunted by guilt over his sins, particularly the imprisonment and eventual murder of John the Baptist. The sermon emphasizes how people often seek worldly distractions to escape their conscience, yet these pursuits lead to spiritual death and moral decay. Bonar warns against the seductive nature of such revelries, which can drown out the voice of God and lead to devastating consequences. Ultimately, he calls for a recognition of the emptiness of worldly gaiety and the need for true repentance and connection with Christ.

Transcript

"But when Herod's birthday was kept, the daughter of Herodias danced before them, and pleased Herod."--Matthew 19:6.

This birthday ball of Herod was held, in all likelihood, at Machaerus, a fortress beyond Jordan, not far from the Dead Sea. It was a high and royal festival. Pomp, splendor, luxury, and lust were all gathered there. In the midst of the song, and the glitter, and the mirth, there was one troubled conscience, that of Herod,--one trembling man, Herod. His soul was ill at ease, though surrounded with all that the world could give to banish care. He, Herodias, and John the Baptist, may be said to be the chief personages brought before us in this scene. But let us take up the narrative in another form; (1.) before the ball; (2.) during the ball; (3.) after the ball.

I. Before the ball. The news of Christ's miracles had overspread the land, and reached Herod. He was startled and troubled. Who is this Jesus! Can he be John? Can John be risen? But why these fears on the part of Herod? The answer carries us back to the time before the ball. John had reproved Herod for his wickedness more than a year and a half before; for Herod had taken his brother's wife, and John had proclaimed the unlawfulness of the deed. This had roused the king's anger. He would fain have slain him, and was only kept from doing so by fear of the multitude, who revered John. But he imprisoned him, and kept him in the castle of Machaerus for eighteen months. The guilt of an unlawful marriage was on his conscience, as well as the guilt of imprisoning a holy man. His course of sin had been begun and

persevered in. He was braving out his crimes; and like worldly men in such circumstances, he rushes into gaiety to drown his troubles and terrors. The pleasures of the feast and the ball-room, the song and the dance,--these are welcomed to induce forgetfulness, and "minister to a mind diseased." In how many cases do men fly to the ball, the theatre, the card-table, the tavern, the riotous party, not simply for pleasure's sake, and to "taste life's glad moments," but to drown care, to smother conscience, to efface convictions, to laugh away the impressions of the last sermon, to soothe an uneasy mind, to relieve the burden or pluck out the sting of conscious guilt! O slaughter-houses of souls! O shambles, reeking with blood! O "lasciviousness, lusts, excess of wine, revellings, banquetings, and abominable idolatries"; how long shall men "run on in this excess of riot"? O lust of the flesh, lust of the eye, and pride of life, when will ye cease to intoxicate, and lead men captive at your will? O God-forgetting gaiety! O dazzling worldliness! O glittering halls of midnight, where

"Youth and pleasure meet

To chase the glowing hours with flying feet,"

when, when will ye cease to be resorted to by the sons of men to "heal the hurt" of the human soul, to still its throb and heartache, and to medicate the immedicable wound?[1]

II. During the ball. It is a gay scene. The lust of the flesh, the lust of the eye, and the pride of life are there. All that can minister to these are there. Herod is there, feeding on lust, drinking in pleasure, stupifying conscience. The fair daughter is there, in all the splendor of gay wantonness. And the vile mother is there, lascivious and revengeful. And the courtiers are there, in pomp and glitter. Music and mirth are there. The dance and the song are there. No note of gloom, no indication of trouble. What a scene of mirth and revelry! But some are absent,--conspicuously absent, we may say. John is not there. A prison holds him. His disciples are not there. They can but weep and lament. And Jesus is not there, nor his disciples. They were at the marriage festival in Cana; but this ball-room is not for them. It is not the place for a follower, either of Jesus or of John. The beauty of "this world" is one thing, and the beauty of "the world to come" is quite another. These scenes of royal vanity are instructive; for they present the world in its most fascinating aspects. All that regal state, and princely beauty, and wealth, and gold, and silver, and gems, and tapestry, and blazing lamps can do, to make this world fair, is in such scenes and haunts. These balls are the most seductive specimens of pure worldliness that can be found. Surely the god of this world knows how to enchant both ear and eye. In an assembly like this, the natural man is at home. Here the unregenerate heart gets scope to the full. It is a place where God is not where the cross is not; where such things as sin and holiness must not be named. It is a hall where the knee is not bent, except in the voluptuous waltz; where the music whose burden is the praise of Jesus is unheard; where the book of God, and the name of God would be out of place; where you may speak of Jupiter, or Venus, or Apollo, but not of Jesus; where you may sing of human love, but not of the love that passeth knowledge; where you may celebrate creature-beauty, but not the beauty of Him who is fairer than the children of men. It was during that ball that the murder of John was plotted and consummated ("Lust hard by hat."--Milton); that a drunken, lustful king, urged on by two women, perpetrated that foul deed. Such are the haunts of pleasure! Such are the masquerades of time. Lust is let loose; revenge rises up; murder rages; conscience is smothered; the floor of the ball-room is spotted with blood; the dancers may slip their feet in it, but the dance goes on. Such was the coarse worldliness of old days; but is the refined worldliness of modern times less fatal to the soul? The ball is finished, and John lies dead in prison. What a picture of gaiety! What a specimen of ball-room revelry! And this is pleasure! This is the world's joy! "Ye adulterers and adulteresses, know ye not that the friendship of the world is enmity with God?"

III. After the ball. Of the chief actors in this ball-room murder, nothing more is said. They pass to the judgment-seat, there to receive sentence for lust, rage, revenge, and murder. They have sent John before them to the presence of his Judge to receive his reward. They have got their revenge, and they leave his body to be dealt with in any way. His lips are silenced; that is all they care for. But his disciples find their way into the prison; they gather round their Master's body; they bury it in silence. They can do no more. That ball has robbed them of their master. It has been a costly festival to them! Then they go and tell Jesus, knowing his sympathies, and feeling that they have no one else to whom they can unbosom themselves so confidingly. Jesus hears of the murder, and is silent! Not a word escapes him. He had come to suffer both in himself and in his members; so he is dumb. This is the day of silent endurance and patient suffering. The day of recompense is coming.

O gaities of earth! Feasts, and revellings, and banquetings, how often have ye slain both body and soul! Men call you innocent amusements, harmless pleasures; but can ye be harmless, can ye be innocent, when ye steal away the soul from God, when ye nurse the worst lusts of humanity, when ye smother conscience, when ye shut out Jesus, when the floors on which your votaries dance off their immortal longings, are red with the blood of souls!

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