

Mark 6:23

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

And he sware unto her, Whatsoever thou shalt ask of me, I will give it thee, unto the half of my kingdom.

Analysis

And he sware unto her, Whatsoever thou shalt ask of me, I will give it thee, unto the half of my kingdom. Herod compounds his foolish promise with a solemn oath, creating self-imposed trap. 'He sware unto her' (ὤμοσεν αὐτῇ, *ōmosen autē*) indicates formal vow, likely invoking divine witness—making it religiously binding in his mind. The phrase 'Whatsoever thou shalt ask... unto the half of my kingdom' (ὅτι ὃ ἐὰν με αἰτήσης δώσω σοι ἕως ἡμίσεως τῆς βασιλείας μου, *hoti ho ean me aitēsēs dōsō soi heōs hēmisous tēs basileias mou*) echoes Ahasuerus's promise to Esther (Esther 5:3; 7:2), showing Herod's grandiose self-presentation.

The extravagance was partly empty—Herod couldn't actually give half his kingdom (Rome controlled it), but the hyperbole displayed generosity before his nobles. This public oath before witnesses created the trap: refusing whatever she asked would humiliate him before his political allies. Pride prevented him from doing right. The irony is profound: he swore to give anything except what God commanded—putting away Herodias. He valued public reputation above righteousness, human approval above divine. This exemplifies James 5:12's warning against oath-taking—rash vows create obligations that may conflict with God's will. Reformed theology emphasizes that no human vow should supersede obedience to God's commands.

Historical Context

Oath-taking in ancient world carried enormous weight—breaking vows brought shame and, people believed, divine curse. Various oath formulas existed: swearing by God's name, by the temple, by heaven, or by one's own life. Jesus later prohibited oath-taking precisely because it created such dilemmas (Matthew 5:33-37). The phrase 'half my kingdom' was hyperbolic royal generosity formula, not meant literally. Similar promises appear in Persian court narratives (Esther). Herod couldn't give territory to anyone—Rome granted his authority and could revoke it. Nevertheless, the public nature of the vow before military commanders and aristocrats made it politically binding. Ancient honor-shame culture made breaking public promises devastating to reputation and authority. Herod prioritized preserving political standing above justice or divine law. The Mishnah later discussed vows and circumstances permitting their annulment—recognizing that rash promises sometimes conflicted with higher obligations. However, Herod either didn't know or chose to ignore such principles. Early church teaching emphasized that unjust vows should not be kept—better to repent of foolish vow than compound sin by fulfilling it (Augustine addressed this).

Related Passages

Ephesians 2:8 — Salvation by grace through faith

John 3:16 — God's love and salvation

John 15:13 — Greatest form of love

1 John 4:8 — God is love

Study Questions

1. How does Herod's prioritizing human reputation above divine righteousness illustrate the fear of man that proves to be a snare (Proverbs 29:25)?
2. What does this passage teach about the danger of making public commitments without first considering whether they align with God's will?

Interlinear Text

καὶ	ὥμοσεν	αὐτῇ	ὅτι,	Ὅ	ἐάν	με	αἰτήσης
And	he swore	unto her	Whatsoever	G3739	G1437	of me	thou shalt ask
G2532	G3660	G846	G3754			G3165	G154
δώσω	σοι	ἕως	ἡμίους	τῆς	βασιλείας	μου	
I will give	it thee	unto	the half	G3588	kingdom	of my	
G1325	G4671	G2193	G2255		G932	G3450	

Additional Cross-References

Esther 5:3 (Kingdom): Then said the king unto her, What wilt thou, queen Esther? and what is thy request? it shall be even given thee to the half of the kingdom.

Esther 7:2 (Kingdom): And the king said again unto Esther on the second day at the banquet of wine, What is thy petition, queen Esther? and it shall be granted thee: and what is thy request? and it shall be performed, even to the half of the kingdom.

Esther 5:6 (Kingdom): And the king said unto Esther at the banquet of wine, What is thy petition? and it shall be granted thee: and what is thy request? even to the half of the kingdom it shall be performed.

Matthew 14:7 (Parallel theme): Whereupon he promised with an oath to give her whatsoever she would ask.

Proverbs 6:2 (Parallel theme): Thou art snared with the words of thy mouth, thou art taken with the words of thy mouth.

Matthew 4:9 (Parallel theme): And saith unto him, All these things will I give thee, if thou wilt fall down and worship me.

2 Kings 6:31 (Parallel theme): Then he said, God do so and more also to me, if the head of Elisha the son of Shaphat shall stand on him this day.

1 Samuel 28:10 (Parallel theme): And Saul swore to her by the LORD, saying, As the LORD liveth, there shall no punishment happen to thee for this thing.

