

Matthew 14:1-12 – “Losing Your Head”

We are cruising through the book of Matthew and the outline we’re following along is this:

1. The Revelation of the King – Ch. 1-10
2. The Rebellion against the King – Ch. 11-13
3. The Retreatment of the King – Ch. 14-20
4. The Rejection of the King – Ch. 21-27
5. The Resurrection of the King – Ch. 28

We come to an account today that is an interesting one. It’s the story of one who lost their head, and one who lost their mind. And in this account the one who lost their mind lost a whole lot more.

It’s not directly related to Jesus but it’s revealing the reason why Jesus is taking this approach of retreatment. From now on He’s going to be speaking more specifically to His disciples and not to the crowds. He’s not going to be doing great signs and miracles to a broader audience but to those whose faith is linked to Him.

14:1-2 - *At that time Herod the tetrarch heard the report about Jesus² and said to his servants, “This is John the Baptist; he is risen from the dead, and therefore these powers are at work in him.”*

We’re introduced to Herod the tetrarch. We read about Herod in Matthew 2 who ordered to have all the male children murdered in fears of a new King being born. That was Herod the Great. This Herod we read of in Matthew 14 was Herod Antipas, the son of Herod the Great. There are different Herods mentioned in the Scriptures, and it can be confusing because they’re often just referred to as Herod. But we have different ones that are being referred to.

Herod Antipas, the one mentioned here, ruled over a fourth part of Israel, which is why he was called a tetrarch. This title literally means ‘ruler over a fourth part’. Though the name tetrarch began to be used rather loosely because though Herod the Great divided his territory into four parts before he died, he divided it among only 3 of his sons. Archelaus was given half of the region (ruling over Idumaea, Judea, and Samaria), Antipas was given a quarter of the region (ruling over Galilee and Perea), and Philip was given a quarter (ruling over Gaulanitis, Trachonitis, Batanea, and Paneas).

It's Herod Antipas that is most mentioned in Scripture because he was on the scene during John the Baptist and Jesus' earthly ministries. And because he was ruling in the region where John and Jesus were doing most of their ministry, he is the Herod we see most often. At Jesus' trial when Pilate realized Jesus was from Galilee and in Herod's jurisdiction, he sent Him to Herod Antipas (Luke 23:6-12). And we read in that passage that Pilate and Herod became friends that day. Previously they were not, but they bonded over a common enemy.

Because Antipas ruled over the Galilee and Perea region, it gave him many opportunities to hear the reports about Jesus and the great miracles He was doing. Perhaps he even got glimpses of them firsthand. But Herod Antipas is another person that won't attribute these great works to Jesus' deity and Messiahship. In fact, Antipas is dealing with a troubled conscience which causes him to conclude that this must be the result of John the Baptist coming back from the dead.

Now why would Herod ever link these two together? This is where the story gets interesting.

And this is where the account in Matthew 14 takes a bit of a parenthetical review as to why Herod was so paranoid and troubled in conscience.

14:3-5 - *For Herod had laid hold of John and bound him, and put him in prison for the sake of Herodias, his brother Philip's wife. ⁴ Because John had said to him, "It is not lawful for you to have her." ⁵ And although he wanted to put him to death, he feared the multitude, because they counted him as a prophet.*

We know that many were coming to hear John the Baptist preach. And anytime crowds are following after someone, the ruling class, especially the insecure ones, are going to get a little paranoid fearing they may lose power or control over the masses.

And evidently, John had opportunity to confront Herod about some choices he's made. You see the family line of the Herod's was quite corrupt and dysfunctional. Let me give you a bit of an overview of the Herod family [show slide].

As we see, John the Baptist spoke to Herod Antipas about taking his brother Philip's wife. Antipas was married already to Aretas' daughter. Aretas IV was the

king of Petra (Nabatean Arabs). Herod divorced her so he could take Herodias as his wife (which Herodias also divorced her husband Philip).

- Side note, this infuriated and shamed Aretas, who later engaged in war against Herod. And Herod suffered a great defeat.
- “The comment of Josephus is: ‘Some of the Jews thought that the destruction of Herod’s army came from God, and that very justly, as a punishment for what he did against John, who was called the Baptist’ (*Antiquities of the Jews*, 18:5:2).” ¹

All this is revealing the corruption taking place in the Herodian family. But it also reveals the courage of a man like John the Baptist to speak truth uncompromisingly. I’m sure John knew the risks of speaking out on these things, but he confronted Herod to speak truth into his life. John saw this act as unlawful. It was adultery. And John would not stay silent in the face of sin, especially sin in the life of a man who had many looking up to him.

Two men that we can learn a lot from here today. John no doubt gives us some very practical lessons and challenges today. We’ll get to that in a moment. But the other is obviously Herod Antipas. He’s wrestling with a guilty conscience because of his treatment of John. He had John imprisoned but what he really wanted to do was have him killed. The only reason he didn’t kill John right away was because Antipas feared the response of the crowds if he were to kill him.

- People saw John as a man of God, a prophet. Antipas knew that he would have a potential revolt or riot on his hands if he took John’s life. So, he imprisoned him instead.

Mark’s gospel shares some light on this account.

Mark 6:18-20 in the NLT says: “*John had been telling Herod, “It is against God’s law for you to marry your brother’s wife.”* ¹⁹ *So Herodias bore a grudge against John and wanted to kill him. But without Herod’s approval she was powerless,* ²⁰ *for Herod respected John; and knowing that he was a good and holy man, he protected him. Herod was greatly disturbed whenever he talked with John, but even so, he liked to listen to him.”*

- I wonder what John was saying to Herod while he came to listen of him in the prison? I’m sure John was saying, “*Are you regretting your decision to marry Herodias yet?*”

¹ Barclay, W. (2001). *The Gospel of Matthew* (Third Ed., p. 113). Saint Andrew Press.

- We see that she was one who was putting a lot of pressure on Herod to kill John. She despised John for calling them out on their immorality. She's the one that is manipulating things to silence her conscience as well.
- "She ruled him at her pleasure, as Jezebel did Ahab ... But it never goes well when the hen crows." (Trapp) ²

The conscience is a God given warning light that is meant to keep us on the path of what is good, right, and profitable for us. Many like to ignore the 'check engine light' that I'm sure a lot of us are driving around with hoping the bulb will just burn out before we have to act.

Well, our conscience is like that check engine light. It's revealing a problem. A problem that needs to get dealt with before further and more detrimental problems arise.

Yet, like Herod and Herodias, too many people try silencing their conscience.

- A man met his psychiatrist and said, "I've been misbehaving and my conscience is really bothering me."

The doctor responded, "And you want something that will strengthen your will power?"

The man replied, "Actually I was thinking more along the lines of something that would weaken my conscience."

That's how many people want to deal with these things. Let's try to weaken our conscience so that we don't have to wrestle through the guilt or conviction of our wrongdoings. But this has been placed there by God to lead you to Him. It's only in Him that we can be set free of a troubled conscience and experience His peace.

Herod Antipas thought taking John out would perhaps erase his troubled conscience, yet at the news of Jesus and His great work, Herod automatically jumps to the conclusion that this must be John the Baptist back from the dead on his revenge tour. First stop, Antipas and Herodias!

- When we continually try to cover up or excuse our wrongs, our conscience will be speaking loudly against it.
- Herod Antipas is the great proof that we cannot rid ourselves of a sin by getting rid of anyone who confronts us with it. There is such a thing as

² Guzik, D. (2013). *Matthew* (Mt 14:3–12). David Guzik.

conscience, and, even if the human accuser is eliminated, the divine accuser is still not silenced.”³

- There are 28 verses in the N.T. that speak of the conscience (ie. John 8:9; Romans 9:1; Hebrews 13:18). It is not to be ignored or glossed over.

The retelling of the account continues on...

14:6-8 - *But when Herod's birthday was celebrated, the daughter of Herodias danced before them and pleased Herod. ⁷ Therefore he promised with an oath to give her whatever she might ask. ⁸ So she, having been prompted by her mother, said, "Give me John the Baptist's head here on a platter."*

One day Herod held a big party, a feast, to celebrate (who else?) himself! The wine most likely is flowing freely, people are getting pretty loose, and Salome goes and dances before them all.

- Now this isn't some nice tap dance type number done by a pre-teen. This was meant to be a seductive, provocative dance to get the attention of these men. And this got Herod's attention. He was turned on. So much so that in his lust he offers Salome whatever she wants. Mark 6 qualifies this for us in that he offered her up to half his kingdom.

Little did he know that Herodias is orchestrating the whole ordeal and using her daughter to bring her own evil and selfish desires to fruition.

- It's evil enough that Herodias was bent on John's destruction just for having the courage to speak the truth to her, but evil is magnified in having her daughter engage in sinful activity to accomplish her agenda.

So, the request comes. It's to execute John the Baptist and serve his head on a platter. It may have been John's head, but it was Herod's conscience that was lost that day. And that is more reason to mourn. John just got a one-way trip to glory, but Herod pretty much sealed his eternal state.

14:9-12 - *And the king was sorry; nevertheless, because of the oaths and because of those who sat with him, he commanded it to be given to her. ¹⁰ So he sent and had John beheaded in prison. ¹¹ And his head was brought on a platter and given to the girl, and she brought it to her mother. ¹² Then*

³ Barclay, W. (2001). *The Gospel of Matthew* (Third Ed., p. 112). Saint Andrew Press.

his disciples came and took away the body and buried it, and went and told Jesus.

There was no turning back for Herod. Though he could have, he was too filled with pride to lose face in front of his guests. It's evident in the action he took.

It's a sad occasion when a servant of God loses their life in duty. But we should never shirk away from our service because of potential harm it may bring. Jesus was quite clear for all of us when He said that the world will hate us because it hated Him. 'If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you.' (John 15:18-20). Jesus even made this a part of the beatitudes: *"Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven"* (Matthew 5:10).

The question is, are you willing to give the most precious thing you could for the cause of Christ – that being your life? Are you living and standing for the truth no matter the consequences? As believers living in a foreign place, we must not choose the easy way. The path of pleasure, comfort, and compromise is one that never leads to anything good.

- Herod Antipas is a living testament of this: As time went on, Philip died and Caligula, the Roman Emperor, made Herod Agrippa the ruler of Philip's region: Trachonitis and Ituraea (the northeast part of the kingdom). Caligula also gave Agrippa the title of king. This incited the jealousy of Herodias and she prompted Herod to go to Rome and ask Caligula for a kingly title as well. But on the way, Agrippa told Caligula that Antipas had intentions of rebelling against Roman authority. Caligula believed the report and had Antipas banished to the distant Roman province of Gaul. To the credit of Herodias she had opportunity to remain and keep her treasures but she remained faithful to Antipas and went to Gaul where they died in misery.

John the Baptist did not die in misery. He stood his ground and entered glory. As long as Christians call sin for what it is in our culture, it will be costly. But it will always be worth it. Someone once said, "It cost John his head; but it is better to have a head like John the Baptist and lose it than to have an ordinary head and keep it."

"Let all true Christians remember that their best things are yet to come. Let us think it nothing strange if we have sufferings in this present time. It is a probationary period: we are still at school. We are learning patience,

longsuffering, gentleness and meekness, which we could hardly learn if we had our good things now. But there is an eternal holiday yet to begin. For this let us wait quietly; it will make amends for all. “Our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all” (2 Corinthians 4:17).”⁴

Hebrews 10:32–38, *“But recall the former days in which, after you were illuminated, you endured a great struggle with sufferings: ³³ partly while you were made a spectacle both by reproaches and tribulations, and partly while you became companions of those who were so treated; ³⁴ for you had compassion on me in my chains, and joyfully accepted the plundering of your goods, knowing that you have a better and an enduring possession for yourselves in heaven. ³⁵ Therefore do not cast away your confidence, which has great reward. ³⁶ For you have need of endurance, so that after you have done the will of God, you may receive the promise: ³⁷ “For yet a little while, And He who is coming will come and will not tarry. ³⁸ Now the just shall live by faith; But if anyone draws back, My soul has no pleasure in him.””*

This account was not only a flashback of John’s death, it’s a foreshadowing of Jesus’ death. And it’s Herod’s hardness of heart and unbelief that led to John’s beheading and will lead to Jesus’ crucifixion.

But it’s why Jesus came. He came to give His life that we may gain life. Nobody experiences life by self-preservation. It’s by giving your life away to the One who is life! Jesus died out of love for you and He paid the penalty for you sins by doing so. But He rose again 3 days later that we could have that confidence that true life is found in Him alone. May we thank Him and praise Him for all He’s done for us! And may we commit our lives to Him no matter the cost.

⁴ Ryle, J. C. (1993). *Matthew* (p. 117). Crossway Books.