

January 25, 2004 by Steve Brandon



The Death of a Prophet

Matthew 14:1-12

- 1. Guilt will bring delusion (verses 1-2).**
- 2. Boldness will bring difficulty (verses 3-5).**
- 3. Sinfulness will bring destruction (verses 6-12).**

Last week we looked at the end of chapter 13 of Matthew. We saw how Jesus was rejected in His hometown of Nazareth. Jesus summed up the situation very well in verse 57, when He said, "A prophet is not without honor except in his home town, and in his own household." Jesus pointed out that a prophet of God will often receive honor away from his home. But when he comes back home, he is often dishonored. Rather than being received as a man of God, he is often rejected, as Jesus was. Last week I mentioned that this is the pattern, but this is far from being a rule. In fact, today, we will see the last of the Old Testament prophets being dishonored far from his hometown. John the Baptist was from Judea, near Jerusalem, as his father, Zacharias was a priest (see Luke 1:39). John's ministry was in Perea, north east of his hometown. It is there that he loses his life, after being imprisoned in the fortress called Machaerus, which Herod the Great had built.

Our passage this morning tells us how John the Baptist lost his life. Thus, I have entitled my message, "The Death of a Prophet." I believe that Matthew has placed this account here to demonstrate the mounting opposition that the ministry of Jesus will face. Jesus was spurned from His hometown (Matt. 13:53-58). The political environment of the day is far from receptive to those who would proclaim God's truth (Matt. 14:1-12). In a few weeks, we will see how the Pharisees resisted Jesus as well.

Matthew 14:1-12

At that time Herod the tetrarch heard the news about Jesus, and said to his servants, "This is John the Baptist; he has risen from the dead; and that is why miraculous powers are at work in him." For when Herod had John arrested, he bound him, and put him in prison on account of Herodias, the wife of his brother Philip. For John had been saying to him, "It is not lawful for you to have her." And although he wanted to put him to death, he feared the multitude, because they regarded him as a prophet. But when Herod's birthday came, the daughter of Herodias danced before them and pleased Herod. Thereupon he promised with an oath to give her whatever she asked. And having been prompted by her mother, she said, "Give me here on a platter the head of John the Baptist." And although he was grieved, the king commanded it to be given because of his oaths, and because of his dinner guests. And he sent and had John beheaded in the prison. And his head was brought on a platter and given to the girl; and she brought it to her mother. And his disciples came and took away the body and buried it; and they went and reported to Jesus.

In many ways it is a very sad passage. Jesus had testified of John that "there has not arisen anyone greater than John the Baptist" (Matt. 11:11). Yet here we see his death, by the hands of a misguided king. I have outlined this passage according to three lessons that we can learn. We learn our first lesson from Herod, ...

1. Guilt will bring delusion (verses 1-2).

In verse 1, we are introduced to Herod, "at that time Herod the tetrarch heard the news about Jesus." Here, he is identified as "Herod the tetrarch." He was also known as "Herod Antipas." You must not confuse this man with his father, "Herod the Great." Herod the Great was one of the most evil men ever to walk the planet. He was the one who had attempted to kill Jesus by killing all the male children in Bethlehem who were two years of age or under (Matt. 2:16). This was typical of his actions. He ordered the murder of three of his sons when he felt threatened by them. He also murdered one of his many wives. At one point, he had more than half of the ruling Sanhedrin murdered, because he saw them as a threat to his power. He was a wicked man who would stop at nothing to maintain his power. He is an ancient equivalent to Saddam Hussein -- a brutal dictator. When we come to Matthew 14, Herod the Great has been dead for more than thirty years.

The Herod we see here in verse 1 was one of Herod the Great's sons, who survived his father's sword. He is identified here as "Herod the tetrarch." "Tetrarch" simply means "ruler." When Herod the Great died, his kingdom was split up into three parts and given to three of his sons. Herod the tetrarch was given the regions of Galilee and Perea. So, as Jesus was up in Galilee, ministering and working miracles and Chorazin, Bethsaida, and Capernaum, he was in the territory of Herod the tetrarch. In fact Herod's administration was the city of Tiberias, which is located on the south-west side of the sea of Galilee. Jesus' ministry was primarily focused on the north-west side of the sea, some ten to fifteen miles from Tiberias. You could travel there easily in a day. So, Herod wasn't very far away from Jesus.

We don't know how Herod heard of Jesus. Perhaps Herod's soldiers had witnessed the activity around northern Galilee and had seen some of the results of Jesus' healing ministry. Perhaps some of those who were healed of their illnesses had visited Tiberias and had told those in Herod's administration. Perhaps Chuza, Herod's steward, had told Herod of Jesus. Chuza's wife was a financial supporter of the ministry of Jesus (Luke 8:3). However it was that Herod heard of Jesus, we know that it was second-hand information. When Jesus was tried before the Roman court, He spent some time in front of Herod Antipas. Luke tells us that "Herod was very glad when he saw Jesus; for he had wanted to see Him for a long time" (Luke 23:8).

We find in verse 2 how Herod responded to the news concerning Jesus. Herod said to his servants (verse 2), "This is John the Baptist; he has risen from the dead; and that is why miraculous powers are at work in him." This is a strange reaction. It's simply not natural to explain a phenomenon by thinking that someone had risen from the dead. We just don't think that way. In Mark's account of this story in chapter 6, we see how insistent Herod was that it was John the Baptist. When Herod first raised the possibility that it was John, "others were saying, 'He is Elijah.' And others were saying, 'He is a prophet, like one of the prophets of old.'" But when Herod heard, **he kept saying**, "John, whom I beheaded, has risen!" (Mark 6:15-16). Herod was insistent, "John, whom I beheaded, has risen! John, whom I beheaded, has risen!" Others must have perceived him to be a ranting maniac, out of his mind.

So, why would Herod give such a bizarre explanation for the life and ministry of Jesus? I believe that it was Herod's guilty conscience that got the best of him. More than a year after he ordered the murder of John the Baptist, John was still on Herod's mind. He couldn't stop thinking about it. Perhaps he had nightmares about John. Perhaps he was thinking about the evil thing that he had done. He was deluded to think that Jesus was John, risen from the dead. He was out of his mind. Sure, there were some similarities in the ministry of Jesus and the ministry of John the Baptist. They were both convicting preachers. And they were both baptizing their converts. They both had multitudes following them. They were both politically threatening. But, to explain that Jesus was John the Baptist, risen from the dead, without ever even seeing or speaking with Jesus, demonstrates that Herod was still haunted by the evil thing he had done.

Herod knew that John was a "righteous and holy" (Mark 6:20). He knew that he had wrongfully ordered John's death, and that John should have stood trial before execution. Yet, without a trial, because of the scheming of his wicked wife, Herodias, Herod ordered John to be beheaded. Proverbs 28:1 says, "The wicked flee when there is no one pursuing." The wicked are often aware of their sin. They are often fearful of being caught. God described the curse that will fall on the wicked: "the sound of a driven leaf will chase them and even when no one is pursuing, they will flee as though from a sword and they will fall" (Lev. 26:36). A guilty conscience is fearful of being exposed. Herod believed Jesus to be John, coming after him again. These first two verses teach us that your guilt will bring delusion.

I remember being in a car accident about ten years ago. I was on Interstate 90, heading east into the city. The traffic was stop and go. At one point, the traffic stopped suddenly, so I stopped suddenly. Then, I looked in my rear view mirror and saw a car coming toward my car. It was going very fast and I didn't think that it would stop in time. Sure enough, the car rear-ended me. My car hit the car in front of me as well. For several years after this accident, whenever I was forced to stop quickly in traffic, I would look to my rear view mirror and think that the cars behind me would rear-end me. Some of you may have had similar traumatic experiences in your past that still impact your thinking today. This is especially true of your sin.

Your sin, if it remains unconfessed, will continually come and remind you of its power over you. It will affect you. David said, "When I kept silent about my sin, my body wasted away...My vitality was drained away as with the fever heat of summer" (Ps. 32:3, 4). You may seek to cover your sin. You may seek to hide your sin. But your body will feel its effects. When others get close to discovering your sin, you may be led to lie and cheat and deceive others, as David was after he sinned with Bathsheba.

But the good news of the gospel is that sin doesn't have to continually haunt you. It can be forgiven. It can be forgotten. "If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9). Perhaps you remember the story of Pilgrim's Progress. Christian had been walking to the Celestial City with a burden on his back, but when he looked to the cross, it fell from his back. He was free! This is also true of the Christian. When you confess your sins and trust in Christ and know of His forgiveness, He will set you free and give you a clear mind. I believe that if Herod had openly confessed his sin, repented of it, and trusted God to forgive him, he wouldn't have been terrorized like he was.

Perhaps there is some sin that you need to confess this morning. Perhaps there are areas in your life where you aren't thinking clearly (or acting rightly). It could be because your sinful way has deluded you and your thinking. Confess it before the Lord and trust that He will forgive you your sin.

As we transition to our next lesson, let me quote Proverbs 28:1 in its completeness, "The wicked flee when no one is pursuing, but the righteous are bold as a lion." In verse three we will encounter a lion, John the Baptist. The lesson we learn from Him is that ...

2. Boldness will bring difficulty (verses 3-5).

This was the case with John the Baptist. He boldly proclaimed the truth and was persecuted for it.

Verses 3-12 are a flashback. Many novels begin with some type of climax or crisis. Yet, as a reader, you don't quite know what the climax is about. So, the novelist will transport you to another time and another place to explain the situation. Just this past week, my wife and children were reading a book about Abraham Lincoln that began with the Gettysburg address. Then, the writer began with Abraham Lincoln as a young man and described everything that lead up to the Gettysburg address. This is a good literary technique called a flashback. This is what Matthew does here for us.

We are taken back a year or two when these events took place. At this point in Matthew's gospel, Jesus is a year or two into His ministry, which began on the foot heels of the imprisonment of John. Mark 1:14 says, "After John had been taken into custody, Jesus came into Galilee preaching the gospel of God." Our flashback begins with these words, "For when Herod had John arrested, he bound him, and put him in prison on account of Herodias, the wife of his brother Philip. For John had been saying to him, 'It is not lawful for you to have her'" (verses 3-4).

To explain these verses, it is best to start at verse 4. We encounter the preaching of John the Baptist, the one who was "bold as a lion." Matthew has already told us that John came "preaching in the wilderness of Judea saying, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand'" (Matt. 3:1-2). The wilderness was the region east of Jerusalem. If you travel east of Jerusalem, you can go about five to ten miles, and then you will quickly find yourself in the Jordan Rift Valley, which is utter wilderness. The moisture that comes from the Mediterranean Sea from

the west comes to a halt just east of Jerusalem. It is downhill all the way to Jericho and the Dead Sea. It is a barren place.

John was in the wilderness, preaching a message of repentance. He was stationed along the Jordan river, in the land of Perea, which was governed by Herod the tetrarch. People from all around were repenting of their sins. They were coming out to him and "were being baptized by him in the Jordan River, as they confessed their sins" (Matt. 3:6).

John's preaching was forceful and confrontational. When the Pharisees and Sadducees came out to be baptized by him, he refused to baptize them, calling them a "brood of vipers" (Matt. 3:7). He was exposing their false repentance by telling them to "bring forth fruit in keeping with repentance" (Matt. 3:8). [11](#)

John's preaching to Herod was no less confrontational. John was saying these things directly to Herod. It wasn't that John was preaching about some distant law maker. It wasn't that Herod had second-hand information about what John was preaching. He was saying these things, "to him" (verse 4). Also, the sense here is that it wasn't just once. We get the sense that John had repeatedly said this. The verb is in the imperfect tense, which denotes a repeated past action, "John was saying to him" is a good way to translate this phrase. John wouldn't let the issue die. He was a preacher of righteousness and truth.

John has been saying to Herod the tetrarch that his marriage was unlawful: "It is not lawful for you to have her" (verse 4). Herod and Herodias had both been married before. Herod was married to the daughter of Aretas, king of the Nabateans, to the south of Perea. Herodias was married to Herod the tetrarch's half-brother, Herod Philip (Herod the Great was the father of both of them, though they had different mothers). At some point, Herod and Herodias decided that they would rather be married to each other, rather than married to their current spouses. We don't know why, but my suspicion is that Herod was driven by his lustful attraction to Herodias, while Herodias was driven by her desire for power. So, they divorced their spouses and married each other. It is interesting that the Spirit of God never calls their union a marriage. In verse 4, John said, "It is not lawful for you to have her." In verse 3, Matthew identifies Herodias as "the wife of his brother Philip."

John took his stance based upon the law. Leviticus 18:16 clearly forbids the marriage of your brother's wife. Leviticus 20:21 says, "if there is a man who takes his brother's wife, it is an impure deed; he has uncovered his brother's nakedness." You couldn't marry your brother's wife (unless, of course, your brother died. In this case you were bound to take her as your wife, Deut. 25:5). But, Philip, Herod's half-brother, was alive and well. So, the union of Herod and Herodias was unlawful and immoral. As we have seen, John wasn't silent about this fact. He was saying it to Herod again and again and again (verse 4). So Herod had him bound in prison (verse 3). The one spreading political strife is best bound up.

Verse 5 tells us what Herod wanted to do with John. "Although he wanted to put him to death, he feared the multitude, because they regarded him as a prophet." Herod is in a dilemma. On the one hand, Herod would like to get rid of John the Baptist. He would like to kill him. If John was out of the way, this trouble-making prophet would be silenced and Herod wouldn't have to deal with his immoral union with Herodias. He could go on as if nothing were wrong. Also, Herodias wanted John killed (verse 3, "on account of Herodias"). Mark says that "Herodias had a grudge against him and wanted to put him to death and could not do so" (Mark 6:19).

However, Herod's dilemma came from the fact that he "feared the multitude" (verse 5). Many people respected John the Baptist. John was a righteous man, who spoke the truth. In the gospel of Mark, we are told that Herod knew that John was a "righteous and holy man" (Mark 6:20). Herod knew that killing such a man would be wrong. Herod knew that killing John the Baptist might instigate a riot among the people. Mark even says that Herod "used to enjoy listening to him" (Mark 6:20). Herod had a fondness for John. He respected John for being everything Herod was not. John was a righteous man, but Herod was a wicked man. John stood firm in his convictions, but Herod was like a weather vane--swayed by the winds of public opinion. John was self-disciplined, but Herod was driven about by his lusts.

So, Herod is in this dilemma. And when you are in a dilemma and you don't know what to do, what often happens? You do nothing. And that is precisely what Herod did. John sat in prison. Herod would listen to him, but do nothing.

John is sitting in prison, awaiting a possible execution at any moment. He knows full well that he could change his message and his circumstances would instantly change. He knows full well that he could simply shut his mouth and he would be let go. This is how it has always been for imprisoned preachers. Four words from their lips would free them instantly: "I won't preach anymore." But these words are the devil's words. Many preachers have chosen to stay in prison rather than say them. John Bunyan sat for eleven years in a Bedford prison for refusing to say the devil's words. John would not say them either, for he couldn't keep silent. He was the forerunner to the Messiah. God had raised John up to announce to the world that Jesus was the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world (John 1:29).

Here is our lesson: Boldness will bring distress. When you speak to others of the gospel of Christ, you will bring distress and difficulty upon your life. Boldness put Peter and John in prison (Acts 4:2-3). Boldness caused Peter and John to be flogged (Acts 4:40). Boldness caused Stephen to be killed by stoning (Acts 7). Paul was seized in the temple for being bold about the gospel (Acts 21). Paul was sent to Rome as a prisoner because of his bold witnessing for Christ. These early apostles couldn't keep silent either. I love Peter's testimony, "We cannot stop speaking what we have seen and heard" (Acts 4:20). They had been with Jesus. They saw Jesus. They knew that Jesus had risen from the dead. They couldn't help themselves. Perhaps our struggle in being bold is the lack of time we spend with Jesus. When you spend time with Jesus, your life will be impacted. You will be able to do no other than to speak of Him. When you do, you will bring distress and difficulty upon your life.

Do you want to live an easy, peaceful life? Just shut your mouth. Button your lip. Don't say a word, and the world will leave you alone. Please remember that the Christian life is a life of difficulty, hardship, and distress. It is not a life of ease. Do you desire to live godly in Christ Jesus? Paul says that you will be persecuted (2 Tim. 3:12). Take the words of Jesus to heart, "Woe to you when all men speak well of you" (Luke 6:26). Perhaps it is time to be straight with your boss or your co-worker about eternal realities. Perhaps it is time to tell your neighbor what awaits him if he doesn't repent. Perhaps there is a family member who needs to hear some hard (but true) words. Perhaps it is time to find a few people who aren't speaking well of you.

John's life was a life of difficulty. But, John's life was a life of great blessing. Jesus said, "Blessed are you when men cast insults at you, and persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you falsely, on account of Me. Rejoice, and be glad, for your reward in heaven is great, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you" (Matt. 5:11-12). John became an example of great blessing. He was bold, and he was killed for it. If you are bold with your mouth, realize that your life will be a life of difficulty. But, it will be a blessed life as well.

Let's look at our last lesson this morning:

3. Sinfulness will bring destruction (verses 6-12).

As we look at these verses, I want you to notice the volume of sin that takes place in them. I want you to notice what comes as a result of the sin. You will see that it is destruction.

Verse 6 describes the opportunity that finally came for Herodias to put an end to this thorn in her flesh, "But when Herod's birthday came, the daughter of Herodias danced before them and pleased Herod." According to Josephus, her name was Salome (Josephus 18.5.4). According to what we knew of the customs of those times, the king was celebrating his birthday in a drunken frenzy with his male friends. Furthermore, we can surmise that this dance wasn't an artistic, high-class, ballet routine. This dance was certainly a sensual, sexual, seductive dance. Herod, who was probably drunk at the time, was caught in the seduction, hook, line and sinker. He was so pleased and aroused, that "he promised with an oath to give her whatever she asked" (verse 7). We know from Mark that Herod promised, "Up to half of my kingdom" (Mark 6:23).

How sad it is that Herod would give away half of his kingdom that he worked hard to obtain for an hour of pleasure. It's not much different than the man who would give up the wife of his youth for the bosom of a foreigner (Prov. 2:17; 5:20). Countless marriages of years have been destroyed because of an hour of pleasure. The Proverbs are clear, "The house of an adulteress sinks down to death. And her tracks lead to the dead. None who go to her return again. Nor do they reach the paths of life (Prov. 2:18-19). On account of a harlot, one is reduced to a loaf of bread (Prov. 6:26). Men, please remember these things when you are tempted in ways that Herod was. Teach your boys (as Solomon did in the Proverbs) of the danger of destroying your life for the passing pleasures of sin.

The plan of Herodias had worked. She had sent her daughter to seduce the king. Could you imagine sending your daughter on a sexual display to sway the opinion of your husband? What wickedness! Now, she induced her daughter to say, "Give me here on a platter the head of John the Baptist" (verse 8).

When Herod heard her request, verse 9 says that "he was grieved." The king knew that he had been trapped. He preferred to keep John alive. He knew that he had made a foolish oath. In the end, Herod granted the request, "because of his oaths, and because of his dinner guests" (verse 9). I'm not sure why Herod felt the need to keep this vow. He didn't keep his marriage vow (which is why he got into this mess in the first place). He should have confessed his wrongful vow. He should have refused to kill this righteous man. But, he succumbed to the pressure of those who heard him make his vow. Herod was always making decisions based upon public opinion polls (which is why John was in prison in the first place).

We are told that Herod "sent and had John beheaded in the prison. And his head was brought on a platter and given to the girl; and she brought it to her mother" (Verses 10-11). This wasn't the first time that it ever happened in history. The head of Cicero was brought to Fulvia, the wife of Antony. Fulvia hated Cicero so much that she pierced Cicero's tongue with a pin and spit in his face upon seeing his head presented on a platter. Jerome claims that Herodias did the same thing. We don't know whether or not the claim is true. But it would have been consistent with her wicked character and her hatred of John to do so.

This whole story reads like a modern day movie. There are several divorces. The plot is filled with adultery and immorality. There's a marriage that is not lawful, someone resisting that marriage and a resulting plot to kill that person. There's a drunken feast with a seductive, sexual dance resulting in a man driven by his hormones. You have a false vow and a man trapped in his words. There's a man swayed by public opinion. Someone is brutally murdered and it all comes to a climax in a grotesque presentation of a dismembered body part. Sin after sin after sin after sin. All of it leads to destruction. This is our lesson: "Sin will bring destruction."

Historians tell us that all of Herod's misfortunes can be attributed to the horror that spread through all the people as a result of this murder. There may not have been a revolt of the people. But Herod lost the trust of many that day. Shortly after this event, Aretas, the father of his former wife attacked his country and overthrew it. Eventually, Herod and Herodias spent their days in exile in Gaul, despised and hated by many (Alfred Edersheim, *Jesus the Messiah*, p. 462). Herod and Herodias thought that killing John would solve their problem. In actuality their sin became their downfall. They killed the messenger, when they should have killed their sin. In the end, it was their sin that killed them.

Sin always leads to destruction. Romans 6:23 says it as clear as any place in the Bible, "The wages of sin is death."

The story ends in verse 12 with a tender scene, "[John's] disciples came and took away the body and buried it; and they went and reported to Jesus." What a sad day it was in the life of Jesus. Jesus lost a close friend, a cousin, and a co-worker in the ministry on that day. John had baptized Jesus and had been the forerunner to Jesus. John knew his place. He said, "He must increase, but I must decrease" (John 3:30).

As Jesus was told of the fate of John the Baptist, He certainly contemplated the death of his cousin. He certainly felt the pain of it to the very core of his being. He certainly knew that His death would be somewhat similar. Jesus was like John--a bold preacher of righteousness. Jesus knew full well of how John's fate would soon be His. In two chapters, he is going to tell His disciples how "He must go to Jerusalem, and suffer many things from the elders and the chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and be raised up on the third day" (Matt. 16:21).

Jesus, as our high priest, has felt the sting of the death of His loved ones. We can be comforted to know that Jesus is able to sympathize with those who lose loved ones (Heb. 4:14-16). This is especially appropriate for us this week, as the mother of one of the members of our congregation passed away last week. Jesus knows what it is to lose a loved one and can sympathize with us.

Sin leads to destruction. But realize that this is why Jesus came into this world: to reverse the curse. Romans 6:23 says "The wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord." Your sin in your life will lead you to destruction. But faith in Jesus can free you from this fate. Trust Him.

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For more information see www.rvbc.cc.

[1] - John's Baptism is a perfect picture of New Testament baptism. It is repenting of your sins and bringing forth fruit in keeping with repentance. It is believing on Jesus and identifying with Him. Baptism is a public declaration of your repentance from your sins and of the forgiveness that you have found in Christ. Baptism is a public declaration that you are a disciple of Jesus. Jesus commands us to be baptized. Perhaps there are some of you in this room who have never been baptized. You have never publicly confessed your sins and identified with Christ in the waters of baptism. If this is you, come talk to me and I'll tell you a bit more about baptism.