

# THE LAST DAYS OF THE LAST PROPHET

## MATTHEW 14:1-12

*At that time Herod the tetrarch heard about the fame of Jesus, and he said to his servants, "This is John the Baptist. He has been raised from the dead; that is why these miraculous powers are at work in him." For Herod had seized John and bound him and put him in prison for the sake of Herodias, his brother Philip's wife, because John had been saying to him, "It is not lawful for you to have her." And though he wanted to put him to death, he feared the people, because they held him to be a prophet. But when Herod's birthday came, the daughter of Herodias danced before the company and pleased Herod, so that he promised with an oath to give her whatever she might ask. Prompted by her mother, she said, "Give me the head of John the Baptist here on a platter." And the king was sorry, but because of his oaths and his guests he commanded it to be given. 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 the body and buried it, and they went and told Jesus.*

— Matthew 14:1-12 (ESV)

## INTRODUCTION

### CONTEXT

Matthew has just closed out a long set of Jesus' teachings through parables. We've heard a lot from Jesus about the kingdom of heaven. The purpose of these parables was to reveal truth to those who have ears, and to conceal it from those who didn't. As Jesus enters his hometown of Nazareth, he does very little there because of their unbelief and outright rejection of him.

The story of Jesus in Nazareth closes out with a quote that points us to his nature as a prophet, and that theme of prophets continues into this portion of chapter 14 that we're taking up today.

### THIS STORY'S PLACEMENT

Right off the bat, we can slow down and begin to ask a question: Why has Matthew introduced this story of John's death here? This entire story is built from a single observation that Herod now knows of Jesus, which Matthew uses to tell us about John's departure from this earth. Herod heard about Jesus, and Matthew seems to convey that Herod has been walking around with some sense of guilt about John's death. When the stories of Jesus reach his ears, the memory of John the Baptist comes flooding back to him. Matthew chooses this placement in his book to tell us about John. Let's keep that question in mind and see how Matthew uses this story and see if we discover the answer to that question.

## HEROD RECOGNIZES JESUS' UNIQUENESS

*At that time Herod the tetrarch heard about the fame of Jesus,<sup>2</sup> and he said to his servants, "This is John the Baptist. He has been raised from the dead; that is why these miraculous powers are at work in him."*

— *Matthew 14:1–2 (ESV)*

### JESUS IS FAMOUS!

As we pick up this passage, Jesus is still in his hometown of Nazareth and a Roman ruler, Herod Antipas, begins to hear about this man named "Jesus". By this point in Jesus' ministry, his fame had begun to spread. As Herod is going about his business, the fame of Jesus captures his attention. He is so captivated by this man Jesus that he comments to his servants. However, something about this man has gotten to Herod.

Now, Herod mistakenly assumes that Jesus is some kind of resurrected John the Baptist that's come back to haunt him. (And we'll see why in just a few verses). Nevertheless, Matthew is showing us that Jesus' fame is growing and spreading because even this popular Roman ruler is taking note of him.

### JESUS IS KNOWN FOR HIS POWER.

Lately, Matthew has focused much of Jesus' interactions on his teaching ministry. The last verse of chapter 13 points out while he was in Nazareth, Jesus was not performing many miracles because of their unbelief. It's been almost two chapters since Matthew has highlighted any significant miracles of Jesus. At this point, Jesus' work has focused on teaching people who came to him.

Yet, the fame of Jesus still seems to lie with the "...miraculous power..." he's been displaying through miracles. Herod's comment reflects the kind of rumors and popularity that circulated this peculiar man named Jesus. So many people had encountered the incredible power of Jesus in both his miracles and his teaching. He was drawing a lot of attention. He had repeatedly outwitted the religious rulers' attempts to trap him in his words. He had healed incurable diseases. He has commanded and conquered uncontrollable demons. He had even displayed God-like powers over the weather. The crowds loved Jesus!

John, however, wasn't someone that Herod loved. And if this Jesus character really was a resurrected, spiritually empowered John the Baptist, that meant that Herod had a *big* problem. Herod's fear is on high alert.

## HEROD DESPISES JOHN THE PROPHET

<sup>3</sup>*For Herod had seized John and bound him and put him in prison for the sake of Herodias, his brother Philip's wife,* <sup>4</sup>*because John had been saying to him, "It is not lawful for you to have her."* <sup>5</sup>*And though he wanted to put him to death, he feared the people, because they held him to be a prophet.*

— *Matthew 14:3–5 (ESV)*

## HEROD'S SINFUL LIFE

You can see the problem now. John the Baptist had been imprisoned by Herod because he grew tired of hearing John's rebukes. Herod had stolen his brother Philip's wife. If you were to read the history books surrounding these events, you would see how gross these events were. Both Herod and Herodias were married to other people, and they decided to divorce their current spouses to marry each other. That's bad, but what's worse is that Herodias is the daughter of Herod's half-brother, Aristobulus. So, Herodias wasn't only Herod's sister-in-law. She was also his half-niece.<sup>1</sup> Herod's life of sinful passion is evident in this passage and John came to rebuke him with God's law.

## JOHN'S MESSAGE

John the Baptist came to Herod proclaiming his breaking of the Jewish laws that Moses recorded in Leviticus 18:6-18 and 20: 17-21. In these passages, God's law forbids sinful, sexual relationships between family members. While God made provisions for lawful marriages for the purpose of provision and protection, Herod's marriage was nothing like that. John was preaching to Herod about his blatant disregard for God's commands in this area.

Herod's response was not favorable. Matthew records here that Herod wanted to put John to death. Now, there's more to the story that we can read in Mark and Luke, but Matthew is showing us a particular view of these events. John, a nuisance of a man, openly opposed Herod's sinful marriage with some outdated religious rule.

There are some interesting observations about John in this story. He came preaching God's truth, and he was hated for it. Herod wanted to silence him. Herod wanted him to die, but he feared the people's reactions. The crowds realized that John was a great man, proclaiming truth but the ruling elite would not hear and obey. Does this story remind you of anyone else? This is a good point of reflection for us. When we heard the word proclaimed, are we willing to listen and obey? Do we despise the message and the messenger? Do we make excuses and work to silence words that convict us? Are we the wise, or the foolish, person from chapter 7? Do we hear and obey the words of Jesus resulting in a stable home on a solid foundation? Or, are we one who hears, rejects, and ends up with a crumbling house? How tender is our conscience and our heart to the Lord?

There's also a quick side note on this text. Some of you may wonder why John would even be bringing Jewish law on a non-Jewish Roman ruler? After all, the Levitical law didn't apply to Gentiles. Does this mean that we should go out and hammer the world with all the rules in the Bible? Should we expect unbelievers to obey God's word? These are excellent questions, but not necessarily the point of this text. John's message of repentance (Matthew 3:2) is one for all people, including Gentiles which Matthew is writing to. Romans 1 reminds us, though, that the world will exchange God's truth for human lies and call themselves wise. Romans 8 teaches us that unbelievers have no power to obey God. Furthermore, we are no longer in an Old Covenant era. We can approach unbelievers differently, engaging them in the hope that Jesus offers from the burden of laws and perfect living. We repent from our sin and turn to Jesus as

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<sup>1</sup> *Lexham Bible Dictionary & Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible* under "Herodias"

our hope. And this hope in Jesus brings us back to the text and part of the point of this story in Matthew. So let's continue to see more about this hope.

## THE CONSPIRACY THAT KILLS JOHN

*<sup>6</sup>But when Herod's birthday came, the daughter of Herodias danced before the company and pleased Herod, <sup>7</sup>so that he promised with an oath to give her whatever she might ask. <sup>8</sup>Prompted by her mother, she said, "Give me the head of John the Baptist here on a platter." <sup>9</sup>And the king was sorry, but because of his oaths and his guests he commanded it to be given. <sup>10</sup>He sent and had John beheaded in the prison, <sup>11</sup>and his head was brought on a platter and given to the girl, and she brought it to her mother. <sup>12</sup>And his disciples came and took the body and buried it, and they went and told Jesus.*

— Matthew 14:6–12 (ESV)

### HEROD'S BIRTHDAY PARTY

This section acts as a flashback. It's like a modern movie where the plot line pauses to give you some back story that will reveal important information to the current plot. Matthew recalls this depraved birthday party for Herod. This event is the setting that leads to the departure of John. For Herod's birthday gift, his stepdaughter came and danced for him and the rest of his party with the hope of 'pleasing' him. His lifestyle was anything but pure, and this kind of gift seems to be a strategic move to manipulate Herod through his sinful heart desires. In his compromised state of mind, Herod makes a fool-hearty promise to her. He swore to give her whatever she wanted. Herodias had prepared her daughter for this moment. Since Herodias also wanted to see John the Baptist silenced, she planned with her daughter to bring the life and ministry of John to an end. The daughter makes a simple request, "...the head of John the Baptist...." It's at this point that Herod recognizes the foolishness of his offer to his stepdaughter. He was sorry, not because Herod was a good man wanting to preserve John's life, but because Herod knew this could hurt his political reputation. Verse 5 makes it clear that John is still alive because of how people would see him. Herod is stuck in a mess of his own making. He must fulfill the request of his stepdaughter and kill John. And, since the stepdaughter's request has a sense of urgency, demanding the head of John *here* on a platter, Herod must act quickly and make good on his promise.

### JOHN'S GRUESOME DEATH

Herod does exactly what his stepdaughter asks. He sends the guards to rip John the Baptist from his prison cell and gruesomely execute him. What a grim death for God's prophet! And since death wasn't the only objective in the request, they further degrade John by placing his head on a platter and parading it around, delivering it to his stepdaughter. Then, she promptly delivers the 'gift' she received to her mother who is the apparent mastermind behind the whole plot. In God's sovereign plan, these are the circumstances and timing that John the Baptist departs the earth.

## JOHN'S PROPHETIC MISSION IS FULFILLED

The disciples of John come to take what's left of John and give him a proper burial after a grotesque and degrading death. Then, once John's body is in the grave, they depart and go to tell Jesus what's happened to his extended family member and ministry forerunner.

This is where Matthew closes this story. We're inclined to feel a sense of darkness and gloom. The one who was promised to prepare the way of Jesus is now dead (Matthew. 3:1-3; Isaiah 40:6). John's disciples are left without a master. They are spiritually needy, not knowing where their provision will come. Yet, Matthew closes this story with John's disciples standing in the presence of Jesus. Hope is not lost.

## THE ERA OF OLD TESTAMENT PROPHETS ENDS WITH JOHN DEATH

With John's death comes a glorious realization. His mission has been fulfilled. His mission was to:

*"Prepare the way of the Lord..." and "...make his paths straight."*

— Matthew 3:3 quoting Isaiah 40:3

John's ministry was to turn the hearts of the people to repentance of their sin, and to Jesus who is their redeemer. As John departs the scene, so departs the last prophet. As the last prophet departs, so departs the Old Testament era. Everything is now pointing to Jesus! The sense of anticipation and hope is in the air. The law that John was proclaiming to Herod is now waiting for full and final fulfillment in Jesus. Jesus is left in the spotlight. Jesus, only Jesus.

This is point of the story. This is also the answer to our question we opened with: Why has Matthew introduced this story of John's death here? John the Baptist has shown up multiple times through this book as a means to point us to Jesus. Matthew is using this story as a major turning point in his Gospel. So as we continue exploring Matthew, we can be on the lookout for what's changing.

## REFLECT AND RESPOND

What do we do with a story like this? A story that seems to be out of place in the book of Matthew.

If you walk away from this sermon only to know that this is a transition point in Matthew, that's good. But Matthew isn't writing this to tickle our intellectual sensibilities. He isn't just trying to teach us some historical facts to make us feel smarter. He's pointing us to something far greater.

We could also go to the opposite extreme to look at Herod, Herodias, and his stepdaughter, and condemn them for all their wickedness. We can judge the characters of the story for their faithlessness and rebellion against all that God commands. However, I don't believe that's what Matthew has in mind here. I believe Matthew is trying to point us to our desperate and ultimate need of Jesus, and who he actually is. He is showing us that the Kingdom of God is at hand as we move from Old Covenant to the New Covenant. The narrative of Matthew is shifting and are seeing a transition point.

Here are a few questions we can reflect on...

### WHO DO YOU BELIEVE JESUS IS?

The first question I have is whether you believe that Jesus is your *only* hope. When Herod hears of Jesus, his guilt leads him to misidentify Jesus. He believes that Jesus is someone other than the promised Messiah who has come to save. Matthew is making it clear that Jesus is the one who was promised. He is God. He is the one in whom we can hope. Jesus is the way, the truth, the life. If you are listening to this today, come to him. His yolk is easy, and his burden is light. He is the only way to be saved from the destruction of God's judgement to come. Stop working to earn your salvation and believe that his work is enough.

### HOW DO YOU RESPOND TO THE CONVICTION OF HIS WORDS?

Second, how do we respond to the truth of God's word when we hear it? Are we quick to listen and change? Are we eager to die to ourselves and follow Jesus? This life is full of shiny distractions that bring pleasure and comfort for a moment. There was a time in my life when I treated Jesus like my ticket to heaven, so I could indulge in the world. I praise God that he revealed to me the folly and danger in that kind of thinking. True disciples listen and obey. True disciples become more and more like Jesus. Are you eager to become more and more like your savior?

### ARE YOU PREPARED TO LAY DOWN YOUR LIFE FOR JESUS?

Third, true disciples will suffer. John the Baptist shows us the ultimate cost of discipleship. At a basic level, we must lose our lives in the sense that we give up the passions of our flesh and live by the Spirit for God's purposes. But, sometimes we may also literally lose our lives for our great redeemer just like John. John's commitment to living for and proclaiming God's truth brought imprisonment and ultimately death.

Brothers and sisters, Christians in our country have had relatively very little suffering because of our faith. However, America is changing more and more every day, and we may begin to experience greater suffering. Are you committed to the truth of God as recorded in Scripture? Are you prepared to live in ways that follow our Scriptural calling, but bring may bring suffering? Many believers worldwide experience incredible persecution and suffering for the sake of Jesus. Will you stand firm and confident for the truth of the Gospel?

### WHERE DO YOU PLACE YOUR FAITH? JESUS ALONE SAVES.

Last, where is your faith? In this section of Matthew, he leaves us standing at the feet of Jesus. As believers in the New Covenant era, we can look back and see how Jesus, the promised one, stands alone as our salvation. No temples, no sacrifices, no works, nothing but Jesus. Jesus has done it all. Our righteousness is not our own. Our hope is in the only sufficient sacrifice of Jesus. Our kingdom is with Jesus. There is nothing we can do to earn favor with God. There is nothing we can do to save ourselves from the wrath of God. Jesus has done it all. Is this what you believe? Do you believe, really believe that destruction is coming? Do you live your life knowing that we need salvation from the immeasurable punishment for humanity's rebellion against God? Do you look to Jesus alone for salvation from it? And for those of you who've answered yes, does your life show a deep hope in that truth? Does every area

and every day of your life show evidence as a person who has been saved? Praise God that Jesus has accomplished what we could not!

Let's stand before our Savior and King, ready to serve him.