

“A DISHONORABLE DISCHARGE?”
MATTHEW 14:1-12

At that time Herod the tetrarch heard about the fame of Jesus, ² 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.” ³ For Herod had seized John and bound him and put him in prison for the sake of Herodias, his brother Philip’s wife, ⁴ because John had been saying to him, “It is not lawful for you to have her.” ⁵ And though he wanted to put him to death, he feared the people, because they held him to be a prophet. ⁶ But when Herod’s birthday came, the daughter of Herodias danced before the company and pleased Herod, ⁷ so that he promised with an oath to give her whatever she might ask. ⁸ Prompted by her mother, she said, “Give me the head of John the Baptist here on a platter.” ⁹ And the king was sorry, but because of his oaths and his guests he commanded it to be given. ¹⁰ He sent and had John beheaded in the prison, ¹¹ and his head was brought on a platter and given to the girl, and she brought it to her mother. ¹² And his disciples came and took the body and buried it, and they went and told Jesus.

Let’s face it: From a human perspective, this is an unpleasant and disturbing story, and there is no way to spin it to make it otherwise. One of the most important characters in God’s salvation story is a tragic victim in a seemingly senseless murder. Who would have thought? Who, when reading about John in the early part of Matthew’s Gospel, could have predicted it? It seems so ignoble. It seems so inglorious. It seems so...unnecessary. And, probably most of all, it seems so contrary to some of the things we cherish about God’s character—goodness, justice, and power.

I can think of several other endings to John’s story that would have been much more pleasing and satisfying than this one. God could have instantly turned Herodias into a leper when she demanded the head of John the Baptist on a platter. He could have caused Herod to suffer a sudden heart attack *before* giving the decree. He could have sent an angel to open John’s prison door so he could escape before Herod’s henchmen could seize him. He could have turned the axe head into a marshmallow as it was brought down upon John’s neck. I can think of a dozen endings that would have demonstrated God’s power and provision and protection, none of which are unreasonable, for Scripture is full of such stories. And had He done this for John, it seems to me like it could have dramatically reinforced His message that the kingdom of God was near.

Instead, one of the most important characters in God’s salvation story is a tragic victim in a seemingly senseless murder. And we are left to scratch our heads and say, “NO!” and then “Why?”

By the way, if there ever was a portion of Scripture that I have been tempted to skip over and move on to the next one, this is it. As I read it a dozen times on Monday morning (as I am in the habit of doing when I am preparing to preach on a passage) I thought to myself, what is the benefit of spending an entire sermon on this story? What relevance does it have to our lives? What application can we possibly derive from it?

Then, the Holy Spirit graciously reminded me that *“All Scripture is inspired by God and is profitable for teaching, reproof, correction, and training in righteousness that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work”* (2 Tim. 3:16). That includes this Scripture. So, we are going to put this passage under a microscope and try to discern, with the Spirit’s help, what is profitable.

I’m going to read the story again, stopping at intervals to provide some commentary

that I think might be helpful, and then I would like to share with you something that I believe is very practical.

Look again at **verse 1**. *At that time Herod the tetrarch heard about the fame of Jesus...* There is more than one Herod in the New Testament (all related to each other), so I want to clarify which one this is. The Herod to whom we are introduced at the birth of Jesus is Herod the Great, considered by many historians and Jewish scholars as a political genius. Even though he was Arab in ethnicity, he was called the King of the Jews because the Roman Emperor assigned him the task of governing Palestine, where most Jews lived. Before he died, he divided his kingdom into three parts, and assigned his sons to reign over them. Matthew 14 is about one of his sons, Herod the tetrarch (also known as Herod Antipas), who governed the region of Galilee where Jesus lived.

Herod the tetrarch had naturally heard about Jesus since He was famous throughout Galilee, but when he heard reports about the miracles He performed, he assumed that Jesus was actually a resurrected John the Baptist. Look at **verse 2**. *At that time Herod the tetrarch heard about the fame of Jesus, ² 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."*

In Mark's account of this story we are told that while John had offended Herod to the degree that he wanted to kill him, he was afraid of John and protected him because he regarded John as a genuine prophet of God, and he knew that God does not take kindly to those who harm his prophets. So, after John was killed, Herod must have assumed that God had resurrected John, AKA Jesus, in order to avenge his death.

Matthew goes on to provide the backstory of why Herod believed this. He says in verses **3-5**. *³ For Herod had seized John and bound him and put him in prison for the sake of Herodias, his brother Philip's wife, ⁴ because John had been saying to him, "It is not lawful for you to have her." ⁵ And though he wanted to put him to death, he feared the people, because they held him to be a prophet.*

The reason John was in custody in the first place was because he had the audacity to call out Herod and Herodias for transgressing God's law. Herodias, Herod's lover, was especially offended by John's indictment and tried to convince Herod to kill him. She was the granddaughter of Herod the Great and daughter of Herod Aristobulus, the son who governed Judea. Herodias initially married her uncle, Philip, the fourth son of Herod the Great, but later divorced him so she could be with Herod Antipas, Philip's half-brother, who (incidentally) was also her uncle. Obviously, this was scandalous, and John the Baptist did not hesitate to point it out, though he euphemistically called it "unlawful" rather than sinful or shameful or incestuous. Indeed, this behavior is expressly forbidden in the book of Leviticus (18:16).

By the way, John's confrontation of this royal, Gentile couple reveals that the moral laws of God are binding, not only for Jews, but for all people, including those who have high positions and think they may be above the law. No one is above the law, and it is appropriate, even today, to point this out. John was no respecter of persons when it came to denouncing evil, and we must not be either.

Because Herod was afraid of John and because, as Mark indicates, he admired John, he kept him in prison but refused to kill him, as Herodias had urged him to do. John languished in prison for some time. We learned in Matthew 11 that he was so discouraged that he wondered whether Jesus really was the Messiah, and he sent his disciples to ask Him.

Matthew continues the story of John's unhappy fate in **verse 6**. ***6** But when Herod's birthday came, the daughter of Herodias danced before the company and pleased Herod,*

Interesting piece of Bible trivia: this is the first and only birthday party that is recorded in Scripture. Of course, birthday celebrations are often important and lavish social occasions in our day and age, but this was not the Israelite custom, nor was it the custom of any other ancient culture that we know of besides the Greeks. But apparently, Herod, an Arab, adopted it for himself.

According to the word translated "girl" in verse 11, the daughter of Herodias who danced at Herod's birthday party was probably twelve years old. Her name was Salome, and she was the offspring of Herodias and her previous husband Philip. But she must have been an impressive dancer because her performance compelled Herod to make a rash promise. Look at **verse 7**. ***7** so that he promised with an oath to give her whatever she might ask.*

In Mark's account we are told that Herod clarified what he meant by saying, *"Whatever you ask I will give you, up to half my kingdom."* (6:23). And, notice, he confirmed this promise with an oath, which meant that it was binding.

Look now at **verses 8-11**. ***8** Prompted by her mother, she said, "Give me the head of John the Baptist here on a platter." **9** And the king was sorry, but because of his oaths and his guests he commanded it to be given. **10** He sent and had John beheaded in the prison, **11** and his head was brought on a platter and given to the girl, and she brought it to her mother.*

Herodias reminds me of another queen in the Bible—Jezebel. Her request shows just how cruel, hard-hearted, and manipulative she was. When her daughter consults with her, she doesn't just ask that John the Baptist be merely executed, but that he be beheaded, immediately, and that there be proof—John's head delivered at the party on a platter. Perhaps she feared Herod would renege on his offer if he sobered up or if he thought about it long enough.

It is doubtful Herod expected that his offer to twelve-year-old Salome would result in such a request. Verse 9 tells us that he was "sorry," but that is too mild a translation for this word. It would be more appropriate to translate it, "Herod was aghast," or "Herod was stricken with grief." Clearly, he wanted no part in John's demise. But because he had made an oath and it was witnessed by his guests, he had no choice but to comply. So, he gave the necessary order, making him complicit in the death of John.

Verse 12. ***12** And his disciples came and took the body and buried it, and they went and told Jesus.* John's disciples would have naturally done everything they could to preserve his dignity and honor in spite of his ignoble death. So, they retrieved John's body, gave it a proper burial, and then informed Jesus. Matthew does not say why they went to Jesus, but they certainly knew that John had pointed out that Jesus was the Messiah, and they would have been aware of John's role as Messiah's forerunner.

So, what to make of this tragic story, which I have entitled "A Dishonorable Discharge"? When I am preparing to preach on a passage of Scripture, after reading it several times, I write out a number of what I call 'Interpretive Questions' that are either raised in the text or are necessary to answer in order to understand the text, how it is relevant, and how to apply it. I came up with a dozen questions that I felt needed to be answered concerning this passage. But the biggest one for me was, "Why did God allow this to happen to John?" As I said earlier, allowing John to languish in prison and then be killed in such a brutal manner makes us wonder about God's goodness, God's concern for His servants, and God's power

and protection. I mean, John was a bona fide VIP. Jesus himself said of him, *“Truly I say to you that among those born among women there has arisen no one greater than John”* (Matt. 11:11). He was one of the most important characters in God’s salvation story.

So why didn’t God take better care of him? Why didn’t he rescue him? Why does it seem like God abandoned him? Why leave him, in prison, to die alone...in such an ignoble way, at the hands of a foolish king who made a reckless promise?

Matthew does not even raise these questions, let alone answer them. But the questions *are* important, and they are inescapable. So, I’m going to do some theological reasoning from other portions of Scripture to attempt to give an answer.

First, Scripture affirms—and we must acknowledge—that we do not have God’s thoughts or perspective. Isaiah says,

⁸ For my thoughts are not your thoughts,
neither are your ways my ways, declares the LORD.

⁹ For as the heavens are higher than the earth,
so are my ways higher than your ways
and my thoughts than your thoughts (55:8-9).

One of the ways in which God’s thoughts are higher than our thoughts is that He knows everything. He knows and comprehends every detail, every factor, and every facet that comprises every situation, including the things that have not yet happened. Because His knowledge transcends time, He knows the beginning and the end all at the same time. Because His knowledge transcends this earth realm, He knows all the things going on in the spiritual realm that contribute to the full meaning and purpose of every situation. And that comprehensive knowledge enables God to interpret and evaluate things in a completely different way than us.

Conversely, our knowledge is finite, limited, earth bound, and time bound, and therefore our judgments are skewed by our lack of information, and our inevitable assumptions and biases based on that lack of information. So, as it relates to what happened to John the Baptist, our perception, naturally, is that it was a horrible tragedy in which John got the shaft. Our perception is that John’s story ends when he is beheaded.

But I assure you, that is not God’s perspective. Since God’s knowledge is infinite and unlimited, and is not earth bound or time bound, He viewed John’s death, not as a tragedy, but as a promotion. So, He was not distressed by John’s inglorious death, because He knew that John would immediately receive a glorious welcome into his eternal home, and He himself would be part of that welcome.

God was not dismayed by the fear and anxiety John may have felt in the moments before his execution, because He knew that immediately after the axe man performed his dastardly deed, John would be experiencing sheer delight and pure pleasure from then on—for all eternity.

God was not troubled by John’s loneliness and anguish for those few months in prison prior to his execution, because He knew that John would be soon be relishing and resting in His presence, and never be lonely, afraid, or troubled again. Indeed, since God sees the beginning and end at the same time, He does not have an aversion to temporary pain and suffering.

But there is something else I would like you to consider about why God allowed John’s earthly story to end like it did. John’s mission on earth was accomplished. He had done what God had called and created him to do—to be the forerunner of Messiah, to prepare the way

for the Lord—and now that Jesus had been introduced and was fully capable of fulfilling his mission by himself, John was not needed anymore.

So, from God's perspective, what's the point of hanging around? He wasn't married; he didn't have children. He did not have another ministry assignment. Why not take him out of earth's sin-tainted, sin-scarred environment and promote him to heaven, where he could start to really live? Instead of having an occasional, tense conversation with King Herod who would summon John on a whim, why not talk to Moses and Elijah and David?

And what about this? Why not be celebrated in heaven? John truly was one of the most important characters in God's salvation story, and he had performed his role beautifully. Why not be congratulated by God and the host of heaven ASAP?

Brothers and sisters, this story shows us once again the nature of God's upside-down kingdom. Things do not happen the way we think they are going to happen or the way we think they should happen. But the way they do happen is the best possible way, because God is in it.

I wonder, a hundred trillion years from now, as we are basking in the glory of the Lord and relishing His presence, do you think that we're going to see John-the-Baptist sitting over in a corner, by himself, head down, sulking because of the dishonorable way the Lord had him exit this earth realm? Do you think he will be complaining about why the Lord let him languish in prison the last few months of his earthly life? Do you think he was even tempted to sulk or complain the *moment* after the axe head came down upon his neck and he was in the presence of the Lord?

Not when he saw the smile of his heavenly Father, and heard those words, "Well done, my good and faithful servant, enter into the kingdom that has been prepared for you since the foundation of the world."

I would be remiss if I did not make a similar application to our circumstances today, where we are tempted to cry out, "NO!" and then "Why, Lord?!!" Circumstances that seem to contradict God's love and kindness and goodness. Circumstances where there is a seemingly untimely or tragic or horrific end to something or someone's life that was so beautiful and dear to us. I want to remind you, *"God's thoughts are not our thoughts, neither are His ways our ways. For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so are His ways higher than our ways and His thoughts than our thoughts"* (Isa. 55:8-9).

For a believer in Christ who is the victim of a sudden and seemingly senseless tragedy, the story isn't over—not even close. We who are left behind may not see it now, we may not comprehend it in this life, but one day, we will know and understand that, indeed, *"God works all things together for good to those who love God and are called according to His purpose"* (Rom. 8:28).

A Dishonorable Discharge? Matthew 14:1-12

Main Idea: One of the most important characters in God's salvation story died as the tragic victim of a seemingly senseless murder

Haunted by a Reckless Promise (1-2)

He hears about the many miracles Jesus is doing

He assumes Jesus is a resurrected John-the-Baptist

The Backstory of John's Imprisonment (3-5)

Herod marries his brother's wife, Herodias (3)

John calls out Herod for his sin (4)

Herod and Herodias want to kill John

Herod was afraid (5)

Of the people, who considered John a prophet

Of John, who was holy and righteous (Mk. 6:2)

Herodias nursed a grudge (Mk. 6:19)

The Backstory of John's Beheading (6-12)

Herod's birthday party

His stepdaughter's impressive performance

His foolish promise

Herodias' vengeful request—John's head on a platter

Herod's dilemma

He was distressed

He was obliged to keep his oath

He wanted to save face in front of his guests

John's "senseless" death

John's disciples' actions
They buried John

They informed Jesus

The Big Question: Why did God allow this tragedy?

We do not have God's thoughts or perspectives

Our interpretations are limited/biased by our earthly existence, (i.e. "death is negative")

God sees the beginning and end at the same time, and knows that pain and suffering are temporary

John's mission on earth was accomplished
What's the point of hanging around?

Why not be celebrated in heaven?