

Bondage (Matthew 14.1-12)

Matthew was a Jew by nature; but, by Super-Nature, a follower of Jesus, a member of God's elect family, a Messianic Jew: a believer & beloved in the long-awaited promised-Messiah. By God's grace, Matthew was given eyes to see that Jesus truly is the Christ sent from God. Such a Savior & salvation he couldn't & wouldn't keep to himself. He longed for his Jewish brethren to know their Messiah, to enjoy Jesus forever.

But this peasant carpenter from nowhere-special-Nazareth wasn't exactly what most of them had in mind for their Messiah. They were more readily looking for a military hero who would come & conquer the Gentiles. They never expected a suffering Servant, a humble Bethlehem-born Galilean, a friend to the sick & sinful, a foot washer who would lay down his life to die for the *ungodly*. Such a "king" & such a kingdom just didn't jive with their expectations. So naturally, at Jesus' first advent, they rejected Him: "*This can't possibly be Him; it must be an imposter, a fake, a false prophet worthy of crucifixion.*" And yet Jesus was, in fact, their Messiah. He proved it with His Words; He proved it with His works. Jesus fulfilled over 350 prophecies concerning the Messiah's birth, life, death & resurrection. While Jewish majority rejected their Messiah, the Lord gave Matthew faith to behold his Savior, to proclaim his Christ with his life & this letter.

And so, with his Gospel account, Matthew was on a Mission: to reveal Jesus as the Christ, to show that, even His rejection by Jews & Gentiles alike was a faithful fulfillment of God's promises. In fact, it was their rejection that secured Jesus to the tree of His crucifixion, where He would be slain for the sins of the world, paying the full ransom to rescue man from God's righteous wrath & granting access to God's righteousness: Indeed, joy to the World, the Savior reigns!

Chapter 13 was full of parables. The first Jesus called "the Parable of the Sower", the broad spread of the Good News about the coming Kingdom; but, though many heard, few would follow. The second parable was of the weeds & wheat, and how, rather than first removing the faithless of the world, the *faithful* would grow up right alongside. That didn't align with Jewish anticipations at all. But that's how the Kingdom would be inaugurated. "Wouldn't the Messiah come in loud & proud, destroying the Romans, not dying for them?" The third parable likened the Kingdom to a Mustard Seed: small, seemingly insignificant beginnings, but, in time, a full tree under which many would find shade & respite. Parables four & five described Christ's Kingdom as a hidden treasure, a pearl of great price: not easily discovered or understood by most, but of infinite value nonetheless, worth trading our entire lives for. Lastly, parable number six described the coming Judgement Day. Now here was one Jews could get their minds around: the separation of all the good fish in God's net, from all the worthless ones, thrown into the place of weeping & gnashing teeth.

So in a nutshell, what was chapter thirteen all about? Though Jesus arrived in some unexpected ways in completely uncompromised purity, power, mercy, grace, holiness & humility, it was, nevertheless, the arrival of the real King & His Kingdom, just as depicted throughout the OT! In Matthew 13 Jesus made clear that He & His Kingdom would suffer rejection, and before the last paragraph, that is in fact what happened. In v55, hometown Jews admitted Jesus met Messianic criteria ("Where did He get this wisdom & all these mighty works?"), yet (v57: "they took offense at Him"), they rejected their Christ.

So, having spent a third of the sermon getting back onboard with Matthew, lets move on to chapter 14. At the end of thirteen, Jesus was rejected by the Jews, by "His own" biological brethren. And now in chapter fourteen, the theme of rejecting is picked up again, this time by a representative & ruler of Gentiles.

There is so much darkness in so few verses: infidelity, divorce, fear of man, corruption, jealousy, strife, bitterness, greed, lust, selfishness, murder, pride, superstition, manipulation, sorrow, violence: Godlessness.

1-2 First a little background on Herod, a relatively minor authority in Palestine. He was moving up the Roman ladder of authority until he divorced his boss's daughter to steal his brother's wife. Probably not smartest political move. Herod suffered from what I call *little-man syndrome*. If you've ever had a modified monster truck pull up next to you at the gas station, and out climbs a wee-little man... *little-man syndrome*.

Now I have no idea how tall Herod was, but I know, like most men, he wanted to be bigger. He had very little influence outside of his own jurisdiction. He was a wannabe.

When the tetrarch heard of Js power, immediately his conscious was pricked. Without any hesitation he connected it to John's resurrection. No matter how long it had been, he couldn't let go of the guilt of murdering John. Herod was haunted by thought of John's resurrection. Note carefully that he didn't attribute Jesus' power simply to John, but to a *resurrected* John: JB2.0. But why was he so afraid of him?

3 Herod struggled with pride. But not John. He wasn't consumed with thoughts of himself, what he looked like, what folks thought of him, how much property he owned or sold, the status of his 401k. John could care less about worldly things. He was an out-of-this-world character. From the Christmas story in Luke's gospel we learn that John was filled with the HS from the time he was in Elizabeth's womb. Jesus called him "the best man ever born of women." He was a wild man, lived out in the desert, sported itchy clothes of camel's hair, lived off locust & honey. I can't imagine that made him too popular with the ladies. But, ironically, the Scripture tells us that he *was* popular: "all Israel was going out to him." He was cousin & forerunner to King Jesus, proclaiming "make straight the way of the Lord, for His Kingdom is coming."

When asked by some visitors, "Just who do you think you are? The Christ?" JB answered: "No." "Well then Elijah?" "No." "Well you gotta be a prophet, right?" "No." "Well then just who are you? We gotta tell them something." "I'm just a voice..." he said. Not a seminarian, not a degreed professional, not business owner, not a salesman, not a teacher, not even a man. Just a voice proclaiming: "God is coming!" John was everything Herod wasn't. Herod spent most of his time trying to be a big shot. The Baptist on the other hand was happy to take a backseat: "I must decrease so Jesus can increase."

While John the Baptist was admired & revered; Herod the tetrarch was hated & feared. Herod was such a mixed bag. He was intrigued by John, he knew John spoke the truth, and so he wanted him close, but since the truth John spoke nagged his soul so much, he didn't want him *too* close. So he kept John locked in a dungeon; a dank, dark, nasty smelling, deep hole. But that didn't stop John, that didn't quiet his godly boldness; he was gutsy, he bowed to no man... but Jesus, whose sandals he said he was unworthy to tie.

Where did John's boldness come from? Complete confidence in his God & in God's Word. John knew the call God had on his life. It didn't matter what men thought of him, or how they ridiculed him. Nowhere do we get any inclination that the Baptist even considered the consequences of his bold proclamation in calling out Herod's sin. That's the mark of a prophet of God. Their confidence in their Sovereign Lord produces a certain fearlessness: *O death where is your sting?* John feared no one but the Lord. Herod on the other hand, feared everyone. He was afraid of J, of JB, of the crowds, of his wife, of his friends at his own birthday party. The tetrarch had the authority to take John's life, and yet that didn't stop John from proclaiming the Truth, from confronting sin. Better to lose a head like John's than have a heart like Herod's.

Now for a little background on Herodias. Time fails us to dig too deep into Josephus' history books, but apparently this woman ranked 2nd only to Jezebel as the most wicked in Scripture. Like her husband Herod, she was well acquainted with JB. And oh how she loved him. Not! She hated him, especially the torch of Truth he carried. What did she hate most? She hated that John upheld the sanctity of marriage...

4 Why was John in prison? Because Herodias was *Philip's* wife, not Herod's. And John called them out for it: adulterers! Don't you know how much she hated even the sound of his voice. She hated the conviction. She'd do anything to kill it. And finally she figured out the perfect way. See, she knew her husband too. She knew what an arrogant, lust-ridden scumbag he was. She knew his perversion, his weakness to sexual seduction. After all her body was the reason Herod left his beloved. Herodias waited for just the right opportunity to trick her husband & murder his imprisoned prophet, to shut him up for good.

But why did she have to trick her husband? Why didn't he just do away with John a long time ago?

5 Now here's a quandary. Though we're told in other Gospel accounts that Herod liked John, he apparently wanted to kill him too. Maybe you can relate to being so sick of the counsel some of your friends keep

giving you—you know they're right—so you just... wanna kill 'em, wanna make 'em stop, to leave you alone. But all the while you know, deep down in your heart, that they're right; that they love you, that they're saying what they're saying because they really do want your best. But you really want your sin, and your just not ready to stop petting it. That's kinda where Herod was. He liked John, he knew he was right, but that's also why he wanted him dead.

But liking John wasn't the only thing that kept Herod from killing him. Take a look at verse five again. Herod's fear of man governed him. He was afraid of the popular vote, of losing their loyalty, of losing his position, his place of supposed importance. The people held John to be a man of God, a prophet; and little Herod didn't want to rock the vote; he might lose his monster truck.

6-7 O the power of sexual sin: it's the making of many a murder. It was Herod's birthday feast, and he was doing his best to show off in front of all his buddies. He loved the idea of his young step daughter's risqué body parading before them. Herodias' plan worked perfect. She caught the little man, hook, line & sinker.

In his drunken sexual stupor Herod made a foolish vow; it should've never been made, and never been kept. But instead, "Whatever you want, baby."

8 And with that, Herod sobered right up. He saw the fix he was in. Would he lose face in front of those he was trying to impress? Would he go back on his word? Would he reveal the tail that was really wagging the dog? Stupid was stuck. The Greek word for "Give" here has the flavor of "right now"! In other words, Herodias wasn't going to permit Herod from weaseling out once his buddies had left! So Herodias got her way, and a good man lost his head. This was the memory Herod was haunted by: conviction of sin. Why didn't just say No! I was wrong. I shouldn't have said that. Why couldn't he? Because "the fear of man is a snare." -Pv29.25. And he was entrapped in his own pride.

9-11 Herod didn't want to kill John, but it was either John or his own pride. What would you do? You sure? He should've never made nor kept that foolish vow. And no matter how much water passed under the bridge, he would never forget it. As soon as he heard of Jesus, he immediately thought of how he murdered His innocent forerunner.

12 What John's disciples do now? Their leader was gone, indeed, he had completely decreased because it was time for Jesus to increase, for John's disciples to follow another. Even in his faithful death, John gave way to the Light of the World.

Herod/Herodias are such typical representatives of mankind: "Oh what a web we weave when we practice the disease" Sin begets sin begets... confusion, collusion, destruction, regret, death. Godlessness. There is no life outside of the Lord of Light.

One quick point regarding the prosperity Gospel: the completely false notion that, if you just come to Jesus, all will be well; you'll get everything you could ever want, "in Jesus' name". If ever there was a man, a good man, who loved Jesus and therefore deserved all the kudos of creation, it was John the Baptist! And yet, like so many faithfuls after him, he was killed for his love & proclamation of Truth. No prosperity gospel here.

Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed. -1 Peter 4.12-13

Upon such dark backdrop the simplicity of Truth, the light & life of the character of God in Christ shines bright! Never wavering, controlled or governed by his pride, his fear of man, sin or sexual temptation. No wonder He was rejected by the world: He is good, and calls you to Himself, to share in His life, His love, His holiness, His suffering, but also His glory & joy everlasting.

Are you free, brother? Truly free, dear sister? The fear of man/sex/sin is a trap, but the fear of the Lord is freedom. If you're trapped, confess your sins, receive your Savior. If you're free, proclaim Him from rooftops!

BENEDICTION: *Hebrews 13.20-21*