

We had a technical issue with our special music. We may get it fixed, and I can play it at the conclusion of the second session. But we're going to go ahead and resume at this point with our study in Matthew chapter 14.

And as I suggested, it seems to me that the reason we have this account in Scripture—you ask yourself, if I observe and interpret and apply the story of John the Baptist's arrest and execution, we could say, well, he was faithful unto death. But it doesn't really say that he witnessed in prison. We could say, well, sometimes God allows events to take the saints away in death, martyr's death, or whatever. But I have always kind of wondered, what is the purpose of this story when you take it in the traditional sense that, well, the reason Herod thinks Jesus is a resurrected John the Baptist is because—and then you've got the dance and so on.

But as another reminder of what happens when we lose focus, or we rationalize something into our primary mission, it does seem to resonate. And even if I am committing a mistake here in seeing it in this story, it is certainly true over and over again that focusing on that which is essential, that which is primary, that which is the reason for which we have been given our assignment in space and time—it's always good to prayerfully go before the Lord and examine ourselves to see if our faith is functioning in those primary areas.

If I am a spouse, how am I doing as a husband or as a wife? If I am a child, how am I doing as a son or a daughter? If I am a parent or a grandparent, how am I doing in that role? If I am an employer, an employee, if I am a friend, if I am in a circle of acquaintance, any place where I am in the midst of circumstance and personalities, am I being what I should be and doing what I should do?

And it is easy to get off track and to adopt for ourselves a mission of correction or rebuke or instruction in righteousness, take that upon ourselves to decide that we are the evangelist, that we are the Holy Spirit who will convict of sin and righteousness and judgment, that we need to be the one to tell somebody something, and/or we're going to take a preemptive action that is really in God's province. The Elijah made this mistake.

I think the Apostle Paul made this mistake. I think Peter made this mistake when he decided he would advise the Lord Jesus on what he should and shouldn't do and where he should and shouldn't go. And when the Lord Jesus looks at you and says, "Get thee behind me, Satan," we'll see that coming up in our study here before long, you know you have stepped off the right path.

So John is in prison. We have backed up in time, and all of this has happened earlier, and we're getting this retrospective story. But Herod, as I have said before, as the king, serves as a metaphor for the people themselves. The heart of the king often reflects the heart of the people. Herod doesn't want John running around loose telling him about his sin, so he locks him up. He constrains him and tries to control him. But he can't make up his mind.

He has not himself decided that he should execute John, but he doesn't turn him loose either. And you get the idea that he is pacifying Herodias, and she is not to be pacified. She's come back, and this is a blight and an insult to her social standing, and she wants the man gone.

And if you look around today, the prophets of the past power are now being hunted down and canceled. We want to not just defeat you and remove you from influence and power. We want to destroy you. And this is what evil does. This is not what the people of God do. We leave disposition of the defeated enemy to God.

I don't go around claiming authority over demons and trying to bind Satan with my word of power in the name of Jesus. God will deal with the defeated enemy. Elijah messed up in taking over the fate of a defeated enemy for himself. That's what evil does. That's what Jezebel does. You remember the fellow back in that same context that is patting himself on the back because he hid the prophets of God because they were going to be hunted down and destroyed. That's the Jezebel game.

That's the Ahab: I will wield political power. Our power is not in the realm of politics. It's not in the realm of the earthly and the physical and the temporal. It is spiritual power. It's the presence and the power in this age of God's Holy Spirit.

And the Lord Jesus, when Peter decides he's going to pull a sword and start slaying people that are arresting the Lord Jesus, Jesus says, "Put your sword back in its place. If this was a battle where force was called for, I could talk to my Father and have twelve legions of angels here." It's not the place, not the time. God the Father will

decide when Armageddon is coming and the kingdoms of the world become the kingdoms of our Lord and of His Christ. But that is not yet.

And to the extent that Christians try to engage in nationalism and, you know, political influence and so on, we fall afoul of things like this. Even calling out political power to its face. And you notice, if you read this in verse 4 of chapter 14, it doesn't say, "Because John had said about him, 'He should not have his brother's wife.'" John said to him, "It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife."

This was not just commentary on current events to the people who came down to the Jordan. Evidently, John went to the palace and requested to see Herod and told him to his face, "You are in violation of the law of God." Well, Herod doesn't give two hoots in a rain barrel about God or His Word. He's a politician. He's a Herod. He's literally connected to Rome and to the Roman Empire. And to try to use spiritual standing or a spiritual commission to change the mind and influence the policies and the personal behavior of a political figure was manifestly not a part of John's commission, and it's useful for us to think about.

We want to shine as lights in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, but we don't take the light and march down to the nearest courthouse or assembly room or Capitol and shove it in someone's face and say, "Swallow this, because I'm right and you're wrong." He went down and told Herod personally, "It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife." What does he expect to happen there? Herodias and Antipas are going to fall down in repentance and reverse the marriage and send Herodias and Salome back to Rome and reunite with Philip, and that's not going to happen. That has no useful outcome.

But it seems as though those that did not leave—and this is a guess on my part, it's a speculation on my part—that the disciples of John who did not leave to follow the Lord Jesus, which in my mind they should have: "He must increase; I must decrease. I'm not worthy to touch the sandal and the buckle on it. Follow Him. Go to Him. Behold, He is the Lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world." But these disciples kept clinging to John. They got stuck at one point and didn't make progress.

They are the ones who are shocked. They are the ones who are dismayed that the king of their area is a moral outrage. And it appears that John is speaking not just for himself but for that group of disciples who are going to stick with him even after he's arrested. They are the ones who are going to come to the Lord Jesus and convey John's questions and so on.

But ideally, in my view, John should have no disciples. Everybody that comes to John, John should say, "Go to the Savior." In the same way that in this day and age, I don't think ministries should have followers and devotees. I don't think ministers, pastors, or teachers or authors ought to have fans. Anyone who is communicating the truth of God, if someone comes to that communicator, the communicator should send them to the Lord. Send them to the Scriptures. Send them to the Lord Jesus. Send them to the Savior. Send them to the presence and power of the Holy Spirit, the presence and the power of the Word of God, and get out of the middle. Get out of the way.

There is only one mediator between God and men, right? Who is it? The man Christ Jesus. Nobody else. We don't have an intermediate priesthood.

This is where the Catholics went wrong. This is where a lot of denominations go wrong. You don't have bishops. You don't have cardinals. You don't have popes. You don't have priests. You don't have somebody you call father. Jesus said, "Don't let anybody call you father," to His disciples. Don't put yourself between a believer and the Lord. Get out of the way.

John evidently did not get out of the way, and he's going to have disciples. He'll still have disciples even after he's executed. What's the matter with these guys? Why aren't they following Jesus? How much can John teach them about the word of the kingdom, the mystery of the kingdom? Can John say to someone, "I'm going to tell you some parables of the kingdom. I'm going to reveal to you truth about the upcoming providence, providence and rule in the kingdom of God"? John doesn't know those things. He is the messenger. He's the forerunner. Go to the Lord.

Instead, he goes to Herod and starts getting involved in politics and morality, gets locked up, because if he's not going to do his job, then he doesn't need to be down at the Jordan. And evidently God allows him to be locked up, and he's in prison for an indeterminate amount of time, and then he's ultimately executed.

So I freely admit I could be wrong about this, but this is how it appears to me. And this passage in the beginning of chapter 14 is a warning. We have it elsewhere in Scripture. We should not think of ourselves more highly than we ought to think. We shouldn't start dabbling in things that are not in our wheelhouse, not a part of our assignment.

I have my hands full with the assignment that God has given me. I don't have any business getting political, getting economical, you know, getting into merchandising and advertising and branding and product development. And many of the things that Christian ministries are currently engaged in are not a part of what a church should do.

And you'll notice that many of the most popular ministries that offer Bible studies, some of these by men and women whose names you would recognize, are not under the provenance, not under the authority or the oversight of a church. I can only really think of one that is actually under a church, but it has become a separate organization. I think it started in a church, and now it has become its own thing, and it's got its own board and its own trustees, its own directors, its own leadership, and they go off and do what they do. And it's, it's, it's not a church ministry. It is a separate thing that started in a church.

But there is no authority in the New Testament for ministry or function outside a local assembly with elders that are accountable to God and tasked with oversight. If you're going to feed widows, there better be an apostle or a pastor there to supervise. There had better be elders who are directly accountable for that ministry under the auspices of a local church.

There is no authority in Scripture for denomination. There is no authority in Scripture for a nonprofit Christian organization. And I think such organizations have to be really careful about what they do and how they do it, because the only authority structure that God authorizes under the witness and ministry, the Holy Spirit and the Word of God, is the local church and the elders, pastors, and teachers in that assembly. There is no other in Scripture. So you're kind of waiting in the unbroken snow to do anything else.

John is a prophet. Prophets were sent to prophesy to kings in earlier days, but Herod is not a legitimate king. He's a puppet of Rome, and he is not a son of David by any stretch. So John, I think, would have misunderstood his role and his mission to be asking for an audience with Herod.

So he ends up with his disciples coming and taking away the body. You will notice, by the way, there are many parallels with Elijah. Who is the real power that goes after Elijah and tries to have him slain back in First Kings? It's not Ahab. Who does Ahab go and tell? It's Jezebel. She's the one that gets incensed and outraged and goes after the life. And she says it: "If I do not make your life like the life of one of those, one of those prophets," right?

So in the same way, you have Herodias coming after John the Baptist. You have Elijah leaving and being replaced with Elisha. And in the same way, you have John the Baptist leaving and being replaced by the Lord Jesus. There is division of the waters when Elijah and Elisha are making the transition, and here you have the division of John's body as his ministry ends and that of the Lord Jesus comes to the prominent forefront.

That's a bit of a stretch, but I mean, it's, it's not many times that you have the body and the head actually spoken of. We know from church tradition, or we believe, that Paul was beheaded in Rome because that was the typical execution for a Roman citizen, but there is no Scripture to that effect. But this is a beheading that takes place as a form of execution. We know that Saul lost his head after death, but of course he died by being falling on his sword. And anyway, it's this, this idea of division is present.

But what's particularly interesting is that when it says in verse 13 of chapter 14, because we've backed up and we've, we've gone out of sequence in the chronology, so the feeding of the five thousand that we're about to see in chapter 14 is actually earlier than the kingdom parables, because we have this reversal at the time that Jesus goes to Nazareth and cannot do many mighty works there in Capernaum. Herod hears about Jesus and says, "This is John. He's back from the dead." Then we go back to the time of the execution.

And in verse 13, when Jesus heard of it, He departed from there by boat to a deserted place by Himself. When He heard of what? Not when He heard that Herod thought John was back from the dead. It's when He heard of the execution of John. And you get the idea that Jesus departs to a deserted place by Himself. This is, by way of implication, to mourn. He's not celebrating. He's not saying, "Oh great, John has finished his mission and he's in a better place." He goes off to a deserted place to think his way through what has happened to John the Baptist.

And you can understand that in various ways. Did Jesus think that perhaps John's ministry was going to end in a different way and not with execution by the king? Is He simply mourning the loss? Is He thinking, well, I'm entering a new phase here. This is, this is something of a marker and time for a new phase of His own ministry? We don't know. It just says that when Jesus heard of the death of John the Baptist, He departed from there by boat to a deserted place by Himself.

But the multitudes follow Him on foot. He goes across by boat. They figure out where He's going and take the long way around by land. So He doesn't have much time to Himself before He goes out and sees the great multitude, and He is moved with compassion for them.

Well, this feeding of the five thousand, of course, is an episode unto itself, and we'll study it in detail this coming Sunday. But by way of conclusion for tonight's study, what can we bring away from this observation? There are times when the people of God are going to be in the hands of higher authority and will lose their lives. It happens to the disciple James. It happens to the Apostle Paul. It happens to the Apostle Peter. John is going to be incarcerated on the Isle of Patmos, and although he lives to a long and fruitful age, he's not free. He is in exile, and he cannot travel.

Tradition tells us that he founded the churches in Asia to which the Lord Jesus has him pen these letters, and you get the idea that they believe that it is from the Lord Jesus because it comes from their founder, the Apostle John, those second and third chapter of Revelation letters.

But there is going to be interference. There is going to be suppression. There may be great persecution, up to and including loss of life, on the part of civil authorities. Whether it is our fault, whether it is through no fault of our own, one thing we know for sure is God works all things together for good. If our government becomes oppressive, if it begins to restrict our freedom, restrict our rights, restrict our opportunities to communicate the truth, as is the case with John, it doesn't limit God.

If God wants something done, it's going to be done. If God wants someone to speak, that testimony is going to be heard. It is our mission. It is our task. It is our responsibility to remain faithful, to be as obedient as we know how to be, to be as trusting as we know how to be, to endure unto the end, whatever that may involve, knowing with confidence that God has a purpose in every day that we live. And whether we paint ourselves into a corner or we are caged into a corner by others, God knows the corner, and He knows what He can do. Whether by many or by few, whether we are great, whether we are small, we look to Him in hope and confidence.

And recognizing that if we are endeavoring to respond to the upward call of God in Christ Jesus, He will see to it that our lives reflect His glory. Even when we mess up, God works all things together for good. You review Romans 8:28 through 30 in that regard. God uses John's life, uses John's question, records it in eternal Scripture for our benefit. John's experience at the hands of Herod is recorded for our eternal benefit. Paul's experience, Elijah's experience, Peter's experience, Samuel and Agag and Saul—all of these things are written for our instruction, upon whom the ends of the ages have come.

So we want to learn and grow thereby, profit therefrom, reflect and think about these things, and be careful that we do not end up trying to use the tools and techniques of the world to accomplish those things that are supposed to be done in the Spirit and the power of God. And I can state that confidently and boldly, whatever else we understand by way of interpretation. We are not to trust the arm of flesh. The arm of flesh will fail you. You dare not trust your own. Put on the gospel armor, and let the power be God's power. Let the guidance be God's guidance. Let the timing be of God. And we will have accomplished our purpose in representing the Lord Jesus Christ on this earth.

Well, we'll close here in a word of prayer, and we will resume our study next time.

Father, we thank You for the truth of Your Word as we find it revealed to us here in these pages. We pray that God the Holy Spirit will help us see its pertinence and its applicability in the time that remains to us in this life, that we can grow in grace and knowledge of the Savior, that our testimony will be one that draws others to the saving grace and saving power that You have expressed toward us and toward the world in the Lord Jesus Christ. We pray these things in His name. Amen.