

# *Truth for Today*

## **The Bible Explained**

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## **Matthew's Gospel – Chapter 14**

### **Murder most foul**

*[Please note : sections in blue type are not broadcast on every radio station.  
English Standard Version of the Scriptures used unless otherwise stated.]*

#### **Introduction**

In this talk, we continue our series of studies in the Gospel by Matthew, and today we are looking at chapter 14. Before we launch into saying anything about it, let's read the chapter in full.

“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.

Now when Jesus heard this, he withdrew from there in a boat to a desolate place by himself. But when the crowds heard it, they followed him on foot from the towns. When he went ashore he saw a great crowd, and he had compassion on them and healed their sick. Now when it was evening, the disciples came to him and said, ‘This is a desolate place, and the day is now over; send the crowds away to go into the villages and buy food for themselves.’ But Jesus said, ‘They need not go away; you give them something to eat.’ They said to him, ‘We have only five loaves here and two fish.’ And he said, ‘Bring them here to me.’ Then he ordered the crowds to sit down on the grass, and taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven and said a blessing. Then he broke the loaves and gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds. And they all ate and were satisfied. And they took up twelve baskets full of the broken pieces left over. And those who ate were about five thousand men, besides women and children.

Immediately he made the disciples get into the boat and go before him to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds. And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up on the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone, but the boat by this time was a long way from the land, beaten by the waves, for the wind was against them. And in the fourth watch of the night he came to them, walking on the sea. But when the disciples saw him walking on the sea, they were terrified, and said, 'It is a ghost!' and they cried out in fear. But immediately Jesus spoke to them, saying, 'Take heart; it is I. Do not be afraid.'

And Peter answered him, 'Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water.' He said, 'Come.' So Peter got out of the boat and walked on the water and came to Jesus. But when he saw the wind, he was afraid, and beginning to sink he cried out, 'Lord, save me.' Jesus immediately reached out his hand and took hold of him, saying to him, 'O you of little faith, why did you doubt?' And when they got into the boat, the wind ceased. And those in the boat worshipped him, saying, 'Truly you are the Son of God.'

And when they had crossed over, they came to land at Gennesaret. And when the men of that place recognized him, they sent word around to all that region and brought to him all who were sick and implored him that they might only touch the fringe of his garment. And as many as touched it were made well."

We can very simply summarise this passage by saying that it begins with the sordid story of how God's faithful servant John, usually known as "John the Baptist", was murdered by his captors in the palace of King Herod. This, of course, is why we have called this talk "Murder most foul". After that, it goes on to relate three episodes in the ministry of the Lord Jesus, the feeding of the 5000, His walking on the water to help the disciples in distress in a storm, and finally how he healed many sick people at Gennesaret.

But the words of the Bible, the written word of God, are overflowing with power, with instruction and with wisdom. And so, when we come to study any portion of it, there will usually be several different ways in which we can approach it and try to take it in and apply its message.

The way I intend to look at this passage today, probably not the most obvious way, is to focus our thoughts on what, to me, is the really outstanding thing about it. This is the stark contrast between two men, King Herod and the Lord Jesus. The life of King Herod was centred on himself. The life of the Lord Jesus was, most emphatically, not so. I've based the talk, therefore, on that contrast. We are going to look at how these two utterly different men lived out their utterly different lives.

### **Herod - the man for self**

Let's look first at Herod the tetrarch. The term tetrarch means literally "ruler of a quarter" and was originally used to signify one who was ruler over one quarter of some larger province, but by Herod's time it had lost that original meaning, and simply indicated a ruler who was granted some authority by the Romans over a small semi-autonomous region of the Empire.

The picture the Bible paints of the life of Herod provides an example of someone living "according to the flesh."<sup>1</sup> That is to say, his life was governed by his natural desires and appetites, without any regard for what God may have to say.

One of the things we see in Herod, or so it seems to me, is a characteristic which is all too common in men who are rich and powerful. It is the assumption that their power and influence entitle them to have any woman who happens to take their fancy. Herod had divorced his previous wife and married Herodias, herself divorced but formerly married to Philip, Herod's brother. Such a relationship was forbidden in the Law which God had given through Moses<sup>2</sup>, and John had been brave enough to speak out against it. But not only do those who live according to the flesh refuse to be constrained by God's rules, they also positively resent having those rules brought to their attention, and so it was that Herod's response to John's rebuke was to have John shut up in prison – in other words, “if you don't like the message, shoot the messenger.”

This was the state of affairs when Herod's birthday came along, and the daughter of Herodias danced before Herod and his distinguished guests. The scripture (verse 6) says only that she “pleased Herod”, but I imagine that her dancing would be of a sensuous and provocative character, stirring up in Herod the desire to “show off” in front of her and his guests, by hurling out his boastful offer to give her whatever she might ask for.

Matthew omits this detail, but in Mark's account<sup>3</sup> the offer included the rash promise to give her “up to half of my kingdom.” The same promise had been made by King Ahasuerus in ancient Persia<sup>4</sup>. I doubt that it was intended to be taken seriously in either case. It was really just another way of boasting. What it meant was, in effect, “My kingdom is so vast that you could take away half of it and no one would notice.”

What happened next is an example of a technique, skilfully employed by Satan, the enemy of souls, to bring about a result in which I'm sure he takes a great delight. This is where he tricks a human being into painting themselves into a corner so that they end up doing something much more evil than they had really intended. They do it, against the promptings of their conscience, because they feel they have left themselves with no alternative. When the girl came back, after asking her mother's advice, with the gruesome request for the head of John the Baptist upon a platter, Herod, with a heavy heart, gave the order for the deed to be done, and John's path of faithful service was brought to an abrupt end.

Notice that Herod, the scripture says, was sorry. He wasn't sorry enough to lose face before the girl and all of his guests, but he was still sorry. Although verse 5 tells us that Herod's reason for imprisoning John, rather than putting him to death immediately, was a political one – He didn't want to offend public opinion – I don't feel that this scriptural statement rules out the possibility that he did also still have some remnants of a conscience and that he did genuinely feel remorse for this dreadful act.

The account of this “murder most foul”, which we've been considering, is only brought in by Matthew to explain what he tells us at the beginning, that when Herod heard of the fame of Jesus, he jumped to a seemingly far-fetched conclusion. He decided, and communicated this to his servants, that this newly prominent Teacher and Healer, Jesus of Nazareth, was in reality John, back from the dead.

Remorse, and feelings of guilt, can do things to the mind. I referred earlier to Satan's favourite ploy of trapping his victims into going further down the road of sin than they have really intended. Very often, he then piles on the agony by playing on the remorse they feel in order to prey upon the mind. I do very much suspect that this was the story with Herod. In plain, down-to-earth, terms, he was suffering from a guilty conscience.

To sum up, then, Herod was a man “after the flesh”, a man who lived for self. On the outside, perhaps, in the eyes of others, he was a man to be envied, someone who had everything anyone could wish for. But on the inside, he was a slave to his passions, beset by fears, and knew nothing at all of what it was to be at peace.

## Jesus – the Man for others

What a happy contrast greets us when we turn from the man portrayed in the first 11 verses of the chapter to the Man portrayed from verse 12 onwards! Here, supremely, is the Man who is never for self. Here is the Man who, as the apostle Paul describes Him in his letter to the Philippians chapter 2 verses 7 & 8:

“Made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.”

Here is the Man whose life perfectly displays all the hallmarks of divine love. That is, not love as something slushy and sentimental, but love as it is defined in the Bible’s great “love chapter”, chapter 13 of Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians, love that “does not envy or boast”, “is not arrogant or rude” and “does not insist on its own way.”<sup>5</sup>

We first see this demonstrated, I believe, in verse 12. John’s disciples have just received the shock news of how their leader has been brutally murdered in prison. They come to honour him and to arrange for his burial. Then where do they go? They turn to someone they know will be there for them, someone whose ear will always be open to listen to the outpouring of their grief, and someone who will be a sure and solid rock of strength to comfort them in their loss. And so, as the scripture simply says “they went and told Jesus.”

We cannot today go to Jesus physically, as was possible when He was here on earth, but, as the risen and glorified Lord, He is just as available today if we simply call on His name<sup>6</sup>, and those who come to Him in prayer today are promised the same reception<sup>7</sup> as was given to those traumatised disciples of John.

To quote from an old hymn:

“Are we weak and heavy-laden,  
Cumbered with a load of care?  
Precious Saviour, still our refuge,  
Take it to the Lord in prayer”

Joseph M Scriven (1820-86).

Verse 13 now tells us that when Jesus heard about John, he withdrew to a desolate place by Himself. It seems to me blindingly obvious why this was. Though He was God, Jesus was also truly human, I sometimes feel I want to say that He was more human than we are. His feelings and sensitivities were unspoilt. They had never been blunted by sin. He alone was truly, and perfectly, human. And He too needed to grieve, and so He needed to be alone with God in prayer. His utterly pure spirit must have felt the horrific way in which John had been murdered much more keenly than we ever could, and on top of that, John and He were actually related in some way through their mothers.<sup>8</sup>

But the next verse shows us again the Man who was always there for others. Have you ever needed to be alone, to have time to come to terms with some tragedy which has just befallen you? – or simply been in the situation, as probably most of us are from time to time, in which you have your day all planned and have a set of goals you are determined to reach? How then do we react when others come crowding in, apparently oblivious to our needs, and start demanding our attention?

Just compare how we would behave with what Jesus did. As soon as He comes ashore from the boat, the crowds are there. They’ve followed Him on foot from the towns. And, without a murmur,

we might say, Jesus puts His own needs completely to one side and devotes Himself to the crowd, healing the sick amongst them.

The main event which occupies verses 15 to 21 is, of course, the miracle, reported in all four of the Gospels, which we usually call “the feeding of the five thousand.” That number, as verse 21 tells us, was just the number of the men who were fed. There would presumably be a roughly equal number of women, and probably many more children.

Before the miracle itself takes place, we are given to listen in to a conversation between the disciples and the Lord. The disciples want Him to send everyone away into the local villages, so that they can buy something to eat there. But He says, “No. You give them something.” In this, I’m sure, there is a distinction between the Lord’s attitude towards the people and that of the disciples. Were the disciples perhaps growing weary with being constantly, as it were, on duty, and now becoming impatient to get some time to themselves and some peace and quiet?

But Jesus has something entirely different in mind, and the disciples need to learn that following Him is a 24/7 commitment. And what do we make of the instruction He gives them: “you give them something to eat?” Surely, we might think, it was obvious that they couldn’t possibly have anywhere near enough food to hand for that. But this is a lesson in faith. We, like them, need to learn that whatever the Lord asks of us, He would not have asked if He was not ready to make obedience possible. I wonder, if they had had the faith to simply take Him at His word, to take what little they did have and begin distributing it, would He have conferred on them the power to actually perform this wonderful miracle of abundance themselves, rather than simply acting as His assistants? Somehow, I suspect that He would, just as, later on, He was going to empower Peter to walk across the surface of the raging sea.

But no such faith was forthcoming, and in response to their protest “We have only five loaves here and two fish”, the Lord simply steps in, just as we can perhaps remember our parents, or our schoolteachers, or our more senior colleagues at work stepping in, when something they’ve asked us to do seems to be beyond us. It’s as if He is saying to them, “all right then, you’ll just have to let me deal with this.”

I once heard this miracle explained in the following terms. Every moment of every day, the Lord Jesus is actually sustaining the entire universe by the word of His power.<sup>9</sup> It is His hands which cause the grain to multiply in the fields through the seasons, and make possible each fresh harvest and each new batch of bread. It is His hands which cause the fish in the sea to multiply and yield food to feed the hungry. On that memorable day by the Sea of Galilee, He simply continued to do what He normally does. The only difference was that, on that occasion, He did it in a flash!

At the end of the day, the Lord sends the disciples ahead of Him by boat, whilst He dismisses the crowds. He is then able, at last, to enjoy that communion with His Father which He has been waiting for since learning of the death of John. It is true that you can pray anywhere, no matter what the circumstances. You can pray in a crowded bus or metro, or on a city street. But it is better to be away from all possible distractions, although it is not usually practical for most of us to do what the Lord did on this occasion, which is to go up into the mountains.

We then read that the Lord came to the disciples in the boat, walking on the sea, by what was clearly a further exercise of divine power, but that this was in the fourth watch of the night. The fourth watch means the final hours of the night, the hours just before dawn. Whilst the scripture does not clearly state this, I do get the impression that the Lord had spent the entire night in prayer. Yet now, once again, His heart is moved because the disciples are in distress, struggling against the waves, and, in order to help them in their need, He comes to where they are.

The Lord's dealings with Peter are a great encouragement to all of us who are conscious of how often we get things wrong in our relationship with Him. In this incident, Peter seems to swing from one extreme to the other. One minute He is full of confidence, saying, "Lord, if you can walk on the water, I want to do the same." The next he is sinking in despair. But the Lord Jesus deals just as graciously with both. He is always there for us, whatever state we are in.

The chapter concludes with the arrival of the party at Gennesaret, and yet more lives are touched by the healing power of the Lord Jesus.

### **Which King?**

In conclusion, let me say this. I am fully persuaded that God has given us four inspired accounts of the life of the Lord Jesus so that each of the four writers can show us a different aspect of who He is, and that therefore each can show us His glory from a different angle. I'm also fully persuaded that one of the traditional ways of describing these four views of His person fits very well with the actual content of each of the four gospels.

According to that description, we can place over each of the gospels a biblical exhortation. Over the Gospel by John, we can write the words "Behold your God!"<sup>10</sup>, over the Gospel by Luke, "Behold the man!"<sup>11</sup>, over the Gospel by Mark "Behold My Servant"<sup>12</sup> and over the Gospel we are currently studying, that by Matthew, "Behold your King!"<sup>13</sup>.

In the first part of this talk, we spoke about King Herod, the man who lived according to the flesh. In the second part, we've spoken about an altogether different King, the Man who was always there for others. Let me therefore leave you with the searching question: "Which of these kings has your allegiance?"

Thank you for listening to the Truth for Today talk entitled "Murder most foul" in our series on the Gospel of Matthew talk number T1310.

<sup>1</sup>Rom 8:5-8, <sup>2</sup>Lev 18:16, <sup>3</sup>Mark 6:21-29, <sup>4</sup>Est 5:3, <sup>5</sup>1 Cor 13:4-5, <sup>6</sup>Rom 10:13, <sup>7</sup>John 6:37, <sup>8</sup>Luke 1:36, <sup>9</sup>Heb 1:3, <sup>10</sup>Isa 40:9, <sup>11</sup>John 19:5, <sup>12</sup>Isa 42:1, <sup>13</sup>John 19:14.

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