

“The Weakness of the Kingdom”

Matthew 14:1-12

May 27, 2018

INTRODUCTION:

This is the only story in either Matthew or Mark that doesn't feature Jesus. So why is it here? It was definitely a significant event, but I don't think that's why Matthew included it. There were many significant things that happened in Israel during the time period of which Matthew writes, and most of these were not included. Why this event that doesn't feature Jesus? In a way, it features Jesus by his absence when we would expect him to be present. His friend and relative, John the Baptist, was unjustly imprisoned by Herod Antipas. John the Baptist was acknowledged by Jesus as the greatest prophet of the Old Testament era. He was the forerunner of the Messiah, leading a powerful renewal movement in Israel. He is now in prison simply for telling the truth to Herod. This is an encounter between the kingdom Jesus has come to establish and the kingdom of this world. What kind of kingdom is Jesus bringing? If the kingdom of God is coming in Jesus, wouldn't we expect one of the chief figures of that kingdom, John the Baptist, to be protected by the might of this new King? But Jesus doesn't intervene on John's behalf, resulting in his martyrdom. What makes it even worse is the mockery associated with John's execution. His head was brought in on a platter in the midst of a birthday party, as if the death of this great prophet were nothing more than a dish served up at a party.

We can appreciate the impact John's death must have had if we update the characters to our own day. John was something of a celebrity in Israel, widely known as the leader of a mighty renewal movement. He was not unlike Billy Graham in his fame and stature. Billy Graham was noted for his access to several U.S. Presidents. Imagine if he had rebuked President Richard Nixon for something that elicited the President's extreme anger. Further, imagine the president putting Billy Graham in prison for that and eventually ordering his execution. Such an event is almost unimaginable to us in our democracy, but it wasn't unimaginable in Jesus' day. Kings could pretty much do whatever they wanted to do without fear of reprisal from anyone. But there is another King who has arrived on the scene. Why doesn't he come to the aid of his friend? I think this gets to the heart of why Matthew includes this event in his Gospel. Matthew's message is that Jesus' kingdom is going to advance through weakness instead of power. Or to say it negatively, there are two primary obstacles to the coming of the kingdom in your life. The first one was covered at the end of the previous passage, when the people of Jesus' hometown rejected him. Matthew concludes that incident by saying, **“And he did not do many**

mighty works there, because of their unbelief” (13:58). If unbelief is the first obstacle to the kingdom, worldly power is the second.

I. The Weakness of Power

There are several different Herods in the New Testament. The Herod mentioned in this passage is a different man than the Herod mentioned at the birth of Jesus, the Herod who ordered the execution of the babies of Bethlehem. That was Herod the Great, and this is Herod Antipas, one of the sons of Herod the Great. He was the ruler over Galilee, where Jesus was raised, as well as a region to the west called Perea. Though he didn't have the power of his father, Herod the Great, he still wielded almost complete power in the regions he controlled. The only thing he had to worry about was doing something that would upset the Roman emperor, Tiberius at this time.

When a person has power, it can only be used for two things. One is to serve others, which is what Jesus did with his power. The other alternative is to serve self, to do what you want. That was the path taken by Herod. What did Herod want? I see two things he wanted in this passage. First, he wanted to feel good through sensual pleasure. That was the desire that led him to seduce his brother's wife, even though Herod was married at the time to the daughter of an Arabian king. He divorced her in order to marry Herodias, his brother's wife. As things turned out, this divorce and remarriage brought nothing good to Herod. The Arabian king whose daughter he divorced didn't appreciate Herod's unfaithfulness and attacked him. The woman he chose in her place turned out to be a vindictive, scheming woman. Because John the Baptist spoke the truth to her husband, her heart was inflamed with anger and a desire for vengeance that far exceeded any perceived harm John had done to her. Imagine what it would be like to be married to a woman who remembers offenses against her and who determines to pay them back in spades?

The setting for the tragic events of this day also reveals the sensuality of Herod. It was his birthday party. The fact that Herodias' daughter danced before him indicated his decadent sensuality. Women didn't dance before men in this day, and this dance was almost certainly one that was sexually provocative. It is also likely that Herod and the other men gathered with him were drunk. I like what John Calvin says about the way birthdays should be celebrated.

For as often as it recurs the day should remind each of us that we must give thanks to the Lord for bringing us into the world and leading us by His blessing through many years; and it should also recall to our mind how we have wasted in evil and uselessness the time divinely allowed us; and lastly, it should make us commend ourselves to God's keeping for the rest of our life.

The second thing Herod wanted was to look good. He had an image of himself that he wanted others to see and embrace, and it becomes clear that he is in bondage to this image. The image of himself that bound him was to look like the mighty potentate he wanted to be regarded as by others. So in his drunken stupor, with the filters removed, he made a rash oath to his wife's daughter after her dance that he and his drunken friends had enjoyed. "Ask what you wish," he promised, "and I swear that I will give you whatever you ask, up to half my kingdom." Herodias seized the moment and directed her daughter to ask for the head of John the Baptist, delivered to her on a platter. Though Herod really wanted to execute John, he had refrained from doing so, not for reason of conscience but for expediency. John was popular, and for selfish reasons Herod didn't want the citizens of his kingdom to rise up in revolt against him.

Herod's desire to look good, to maintain this image of the mighty potentate, had now delivered him to the place of being stuck between the proverbial rock and a hard place. If he killed John and the people rebelled, Tiberius might remove him from his position and all would be lost. If on the other hand, he went back on his vow after Herodias' daughter asked for the head of John the Baptist, he would look weak before the men he was most concerned to look good before. Like most weak men, he feared being thought of as weak. So he went ahead and ordered John's execution.

I wonder how Herod slept that night, after he had sobered up. I doubt that it was a restful sleep. It would seem from the opening verses of the chapter that his conscience troubled him. When he heard about the fame of Jesus, his conclusion was, **"This is John the Baptist. He has been raised from the dead; that is why these miraculous powers are at work in him"** (14:2). Though his conclusion was mistaken, it does reveal that he considered John's ministry as God-inspired.

Though Herod had great earthly power, at the end of the day he was a weak man. Because of his great power, he could have everything he might want. But because he was a man with a heart of sin, he wanted the wrong things, self-destructive things that would only bring harm to him. He was weak because he was evil. The apostle Paul teaches in Romans 1 that one of the most common judgments God brings upon people is to give them what they want. He refers to it as turning people over to their desires. One of the ways you will know that the kingdom of God is coming in your life is when God brings weakness in the form of not getting what you want. He brings weakness that we might learn dependence on him, and that's what the kingdom of God is all about. Our next point will show this more clearly.

II. The Power of Weakness

John the Baptist is in an obvious condition of weakness here, in prison and at the mercy of an evil king. I think, though, that we need to see the weakness in the events that led to his imprisonment. John was a man who courageously spoke the truth to a king who had the power to do him harm. He rebuked Herod for his unlawful marriage to Herodias. He stood for righteousness in an atmosphere of unrighteousness, and to do so is to experience weakness. I see the same opportunity today. I don't have to tell you that ours is an age of moral relativism in which people are told they can do pretty much anything they want to do, as long as it doesn't violate the free will of another person. By that standard, John the Baptist should never have spoken up. It would seem that both Herod and Herodias were in favor of their respective divorces and remarriage to one another. But speak up he did, losing his head in the process but maintaining his integrity. We may not be at risk of execution by decapitation when we speak up for what is right, but we will probably experience the weakness of rejection and condemnation. We will be told that we are being harsh and judgmental. Many will want nothing more to do with us.

There is also weakness in his imprisonment and martyrdom. As we saw a few chapters back, John even began to have doubts about Jesus while imprisoned (11:1-6). There were no courts available to him, no legal due process guaranteeing him a fair trial. And he awoke each day wondering if it would be his last. That last day finally came on a day of feasting and celebration in the palace, the day of Herod's birthday.

Many in the kingdom of heaven have suffered martyrdom like John's. I think of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German theologian imprisoned by Hitler for his complicity in an assassination plot against that evil leader. He was executed less than a month before the Germans surrendered to the Allies. Many continue to experience such persecution. Two-thirds of the world's 2.3 billion Christians live in regions of the world that are overtly hostile to Christianity. On the conservative end of the estimates, at least ten thousand of them are martyred each year.

The title of this point is "the power of weakness." So where is the power in these things? Let's start with the execution of John the Baptist. The result of this is recorded in verse 12. **"And his disciples came and took the body and buried it, and they went and told Jesus."** John's disciples went to Jesus. They went to the king of whom John had been speaking. As John had said earlier about Jesus, **"He must increase, but I must decrease"** (John 3:30). That had now happened.

This same King Herod would later encounter Jesus himself. It would happen when Pilate was asked to execute Jesus and sent Jesus to be interrogated by Herod. Not surprisingly, given the weak character of Herod, he too bowed to popular opinion by failing to intervene and do what was right and release the innocent Jesus. And we know what happened as a result. Jesus

was crucified and then raised to life. Salvation and forgiveness has come to the entire earth. The power of God is on display and the kingdom of God is growing rapidly, just as Jesus said it would.

CONCLUSION:

How do we apply this to our lives? I think it requires two things of us. First, we are called to accept weakness. What form might that weakness take? Perhaps it is suffering for doing what is right. Maybe, like John the Baptist, you have spoken up for righteousness and are suffering for that. For others, the weakness might just be some trial you're undergoing. Maybe you find yourself in a health challenge, a marital challenge, a difficult job situation, financial poverty, or trouble with children or parents. Or it could be any number of other issues. What should you do in such a situation of weakness? I would say the first thing you should do is to pray and ask God to remove it. He is your loving heavenly Father and he delights to have you come to him with such prayers. I would also recommend asking others to pray the same for you. Then I think you need to do all that God permits to allow you to gain relief from that difficulty in your life. But recognize that there may be times when we do all such things and we still find ourselves in the difficulty, as was the case with John the Baptist here. God sometimes elects to keep us in the place of weakness. What do we do in that case?

That brings us to our second application. When God decides not to deliver us from whatever weakness we are facing, we submit to God and depend upon him. Jesus spoke about this in the metaphor of the vine and the branches, particularly when he said that the Father prunes the branches. He makes them weaker that they might deepen their attachment to the vine and to its roots, drawing their life there. This is the way of the kingdom.

Let me close by reminding you of that wonderful word from Psalm 2, where all the mighty kings of the earth set themselves in opposition to God's anointed King. How does the Lord respond? **"He who sits in the heavens laughs; the Lord holds them in derision."** Why does he do so? Because they only serve to accomplish his will, for he has determined this about his son. **"I will make the nations your heritage, and the ends of the earth your possession"** (Ps. 2:8). The kingdom of God advances in this world and in your life through weakness. Accept the weakness God brings to you and let it deepen your dependence on him.