

# The Gospel According to Matthew

By

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## CHAPTER FORTY-TWO

### MATTHEW 14:1-22

IN this passage we are introduced to two other opposing forces:

- First, the opposition of the false king Herod, which was threatened;
- Secondly, that of the multitudes, which did not seem to be opposition, but which Christ treated as hindrance rather than help.

To see this division of our paragraph is to understand the place of these narratives in the history of the King.

Let us, then, carefully notice its structure. First observe the connection between verses one and two, and verse thirteen. **“At that season Herod the tetrarch heard of the fame of Jesus, And said unto his servants, This is John the Baptist; he is risen from the dead; and therefore mighty works do shew forth themselves in him.”** **“When Jesus heard of it, He departed thence.”**

That is the true connection. Verse thirteen should be read, as to the continuity of the story, in immediate connection with verses one and two. It was not when He heard the story of the death of John. That had taken place before, and is introduced here for a special purpose, as we shall see. It was when Jesus heard what Herod the tetrarch was saying concerning Him that – **“He departed thence by ship into a desert place apart.”**

In verses three to twelve we have the story of the murder of John, told here because of the light it throws upon the character of Herod, and because it explains Herod’s attitude at that time toward Jesus.

Herod heard of the fame of Jesus, of the mighty works that were manifesting themselves wherever He went, and he said, **“This is John the Baptist; he is risen from the dead.”**

We do not understand that opinion, until we have read the story that follows of how Herod had rid himself of John, and until we begin to enter into the feelings of Herod, and remember how a guilty conscience makes cowards of us all. It was the cry of a terror-stricken conscience, but it created his attitude toward Christ. When, presently, he pulled himself together, he in all probability said: “Of course it is not John the Baptist, but it is another who is saying similar things; I must be rid of him.”

Opposition threatened the King therefore from that quarter. When Jesus heard that His claim had reached the Herodian dwelling, and that Herod was at first afraid, He withdrew thus in a boat, and departed to a desert place, for Herod's case was utterly hopeless. It is at this act of Jesus, that we must look very carefully.

In John's Gospel we have an explanation of the action of Jesus, when He withdrew from the multitude. It was when He found they would take Him by force and make Him King, that He withdrew. Our King is seen therefore withdrawing Himself from the fear and opposition of the false king; and He is seen moreover withdrawing Himself from the desire of the multitude to crown Him under certain clearly defined conditions.

*First, the attitude of Herod.*

The story of Herod is the most terrible in the whole of the New Testament. We will only touch upon certain points which are necessary to our understanding of his relation to our King.

*Herod was a tetrarch that is, the ruler of a fourth part who claimed the title of king.*

That sentence should be enough to give us an insight to one side of his character. He was not a king in the true sense of the word, but one who held rule under authority; and yet he was a man who was rebellious against the authority under which he held sway, and had, as far as possible, established for himself the full courtly life and regime. He was ambitious, aspiring, and rebellious politically.

Think again of the man himself.

It is an astonishing fact, and one revealing the condition of the age, that he was a descendant of Esau, reigning over a portion of the children of Jacob. He was a dissolute man, giving himself over to all excesses, yet he was a man troubled with a conscience, and perpetually refusing to obey its call.

If we trace the story of Herod, we find there was a day when he heard John gladly. In all probability, setting aside for some brief hour the purple of his royalty, he found his way to the prophet to listen to him, and he had come very near the Kingdom which John had proclaimed. Even in that hour of drunken and shameless debauch, in which he ordered the murder of John, there are the evidences of the pain of his conscience.

He did not desire to kill John; and yet he did so.

- It was an hour of drunken and shameless revelry, an hour in which the central attraction was something sprung upon a half-drunken crowd, the dancing of a shameless wanton.
- It was an hour that becomes most tragic and awful, when we look carefully at this man Herod;
- It was an hour when he felt himself bound by the maudlin honour of an evil oath to violate every principle of right and truth. **“For his oath's sake.”**

When shall we be rid of the idea that because we have said a thing, it must be done? If we have taken an oath that violates righteousness, let us break it before the sun sinks. If under some stress we have sworn an oath, let us not think we save our conscience by keeping it; if the oath be evil, then we sear our conscience and spoil it, and wrong ourselves in the keeping of it.

The reports of Jesus reached this man. There came, through the crowds of men about him, the sycophants who had helped him in his baseness, news of some new Power working through the district, doing mighty deeds, speaking wondrous words; and the king, shaking in his purple, said, **“ This is John the Baptist; he is risen from the dead; and therefore mighty works do shew forth themselves in him.”**

There is hardly any doubt that Herod was of the sect of the Sadducees. It has been said he could not be a Sadducee, because he spoke of John’s rising from the dead. But that is to forget that in a moment when conscience troubles, a man’s false philosophy generally breaks down.

Herod’s Sadducean philosophy was forgotten as he said, **“This is John the Baptist; he is risen from the dead.”**

He was nearer accuracy than he knew, or would have acknowledged, perhaps five minutes after. You cannot murder truth, though you may silence the voice that utters it. It filled him with alarm, and the issue of it must inevitably be a new antagonism to Jesus Christ, for it is a remarkable fact that frenzy born of fear will do the most foolhardy things. Even if he really did believe that this was John the Baptist risen from the dead, that there was a reincarnation of the prophet, under whom he had been almost persuaded; that would not hinder the man who had violated his conscience and refused the claim of truth, from attempting to lay unholy hands upon him.

That is a very graphic picture which Jesus once drew of a man who had passed the borderline, and was lost, and who said, **“Father Abraham, have mercy on me . . . I have five brethren,”** send Lazarus to them. And the answer was startling and strange, Christ’s own interpretation of Heaven’s estimate, however we may account for it; **“They have Moses and the prophets, let them hear them . . . if they hear not Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded, thou one rose from the dead.”**

And if Herod would not listen to John, living, he would not listen to him risen from the dead. If Herod would not listen to John ere he murdered him, he would attempt to murder him again, though he came back from the dead. There was a frenzy in his soul as well as a terror; there was a determined opposition to that which he once rejected in the fear that paralyzed him; and, **“When Jesus heard of it, He departed thence by ship.”**

This withdrawal of Christ was final. Herod never saw Jesus until Pilate sent Him to him, a few hours before His death. He had long wanted to see Him, and he had been intensely curious about Him; and it is an awful fact that he and Pilate were made friends over the death of Jesus.

Herod never heard a single accent of the voice of Jesus. Though he cross-questioned Him, gathered his soldiers about Him, laughed at Him, mocked Him, made sport of Him, and put Him to shame, through the whole process Christ never opened His mouth.

There are men for whom Christ has no word. But what a fearful revelation it is of Herod's condition! How far this man must have gone in his determined opposition to truth, before Jesus would be silenced! Upon the very cross, in the midst of all the mystery of His dying pain, a malefactor who demanded His attention, received His pity, and before His glazing eyes the dying Christ flung open the pearly gates of God's own Kingdom to let him in. Yet He had not a word for Herod.

Why did Jesus withdraw Himself?

It was the attitude of the true King towards the false. He once sent Herod a message:

**“Go ye, and tell that fox, Behold, I cast out devils, and I do cures to day and to morrow, and the third day I shall be perfected. Nevertheless I must walk to day, and to morrow, and the day following: for it cannot be that a prophet perish out of Jerusalem”** (Luke 13:32, 33).

Mark the pathetic majesty of this word of Jesus to Herod. It is reported that Herod would kill Thee, said the Pharisees, and with the only touch of contempt we ever find in the words of Jesus, He said, “ **‘Go ye, and tell that fox,’** go tell him that he is helpless, there is no fear in My heart of him, he cannot kill Me until I have done My day's work. I have three days' work to do this was figurative, poetic two of them will be for works of wonder wrought in the sight of men, the third will be a day of mystery and darkness and passion, the perfecting day.”

So that when He withdrew, it was not for fear of Herod, but it was because the two days' work was not yet finished. The hour had not yet come for the third day's mystery and perfecting; and He passed with quiet dignity out of the reach of the man, left him to his terror, his fear, and his frenzy; abandoned him.

*There are occasions when it seems as though men are rejecting Jesus; when as a matter of fact, He is rejecting them.*

He never rejects a man until the man rejects Him; but there is a moment when the line is crossed.

We often speak of Jerusalem's rejection of Christ. Never forget that we have not told all the story until we remember that there came a day when He went back to Jerusalem officially, with Kingly dignity, and rejected it.

There were tears in His voice, there was pain in His heart when He did it, for God's act of judgment is always a strange act. There was a day when He looked out over Jerusalem and said, **“O Jerusalem, Jerusalem . . . how often would I have gathered thy children together, even as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings, and ye would not; Behold your house is left unto you desolate.”**

If Jerusalem rejected Him, the final word, the higher word, the reigning word, the word that had the throne of God behind it, was the word that declared that He rejected it. So with Herod. The King turned His back upon the man who had his opportunity, and had flung it away.

Then the scene strangely changes.

Christ, escaping to a desert-place, there found the ubiquitous crowd waiting for Him. One never reads these stories without noticing how the multitudes flocked after Him. Then follows the story of the feeding, a beautiful story in itself, which we must pass over now so far as making any application of it to our own condition is concerned. He had fed the multitudes, and again He withdrew.

In John's Gospel we find an explanation of Christ's withdrawal in this case: "**Then those men, when they had seen the miracle that Jesus did, said, This is of a truth that prophet that should come into the world. When Jesus therefore perceived that they would come and take him by force, to make him a king, he departed again into a mountain himself alone**" (John 6:14, 15).

*There Jesus is seen withdrawing from Kingship.*

He had just fed five thousand men, besides women and children; and they were gathering around Him, most likely consulting in crowds, and He saw the popular will and wish to compel Him to become their King.

It was one of those tense moments when a man may do anything with a crowd. Jesus Christ might at that moment have been crowned King, He might have gathered that five thousand men about Him and led them up against Jerusalem, not to victory perhaps, but He might have roused them. It was an electric moment. They were determined to have Him for their King. It was His chance, His opportunity, even the disciples might have said. But what was the motive behind the popular acclaim? Their motive was that of the material benefit they found He was able to bestow. "If this Man can feed us as He has done, with five loaves and two fishes, let us crown Him; we can have perpetual spring-time, perpetual harvest, perpetual plenty. There will be no more sighing or material discomfort; let us crown Him." The motive was material.

*And then mark the method.*

**"When Jesus therefore perceived that they would come and take Him by force, and make Him King;"** which may mean, either let us compel Him to the Kingship, or let Him claim His Kingdom by force.

What was Jesus' answer to this attitude? Refusal.

- He refused the motive,
- He refused the method.
- He would not be made King upon any such basis.

It is well to remember to-day that Jesus Christ declines to be made King upon the basis of His ability to feed hungry men with material bread. If we will make Him King as He ought to be made King, He will take care of all the things that follow; but He will not begin there.

We cannot make Jesus King of the social order, until we have made Him King of the spiritual fact at the center of our being. He refused the method of force, He dismissed the multitude, first sending His disciples away. Perhaps there was a touch of sweet art and high policy in the sending of the disciples away, knowing they would side with the multitude. They were always attempting to force Him.

There are some who believe that Judas's action in betraying Him, was an attempt to force Him to take up His Kingdom. After He was risen they came back with the same old question, "**Wilt Thou at this time restore again the kingdom to Israel?**" Art Thou not going to do something?

So He sent them away first, very tenderly and beautifully, over the lake out of the way of the crisis, for He alone was equal to it. Alone He dismissed the multitudes, and went to the mountain. We have no account of what He said or did in the mountain when He was alone. One feels one would have liked to go with Him. But it is only permitted for us reverently to see Him as He turned His back upon the false king Herod, and upon the false thinking of the multitudes to look into the face of Him from Whom He should receive the Kingdom, the One Whose Throne He was here to establish and defend, and bring men into relationship with, as He turned from the clamour of the crowd that fain would have crowned Him.

The real meaning of this act of Jesus is to be gathered from a study of the discourse chronicled by John wherein, on the next day, coming back to the crowds, Jesus reopened the question of that feeding of the multitude, and rebuked them because they were still materialized, seeking Him not because they saw signs, not even because of the wonder of what He did, but because they ate of the loaves, and were filled.

In that discourse, following His action of turning His back upon the crowds, is contained the rebuke of all material ideals, and His enforcement of the fact of the supremacy of the spiritual.

And now, in conclusion, let us take these two movements in our study, and ask, "What have they to say to us?"

Very solemnly one looks back at Christ's attitude toward Herod, and remembers that Christ's victories over corrupt rule were gained by withdrawal from that rule. There are things which are self-destructive. To such He makes no appearance. To such He utters no word. He leaves all the false rule and authority to work out its own inevitable destruction. Herod's curiosity was forever unsatisfied. Herod's opposition was always eluded

Herod's doom was sealed by his own choice; and all that Jesus did for the ensuring of his doom was, when he had chosen, to let him alone. Oh, is there not in that some voice for us also? Is there not in it more than the message to kings and those in authority? How often have we put Him away when He has come to us? Remember if He goes, He abides by our decision; and that is our unutterable undoing. He has nothing to do save to leave us alone.

But turn to the other side. What are we to learn from Christ's attitude to the crowd?

That Christ fed the multitudes despite their sin and despite their folly. Christ did not even ask that they should bring a recommendation from the synagogue, before He gave them a meal. He took them just as they were, the hungry crowd; and we cannot gather together five-thousand men, beside women and children, without having a strange assortment. He never asked a question about character. He fed them because they were hungry, and a hungry man, if he is the worst in the city, touches the heart of God with pity, and it is for us to feed him.

Jesus did not begin by saying to a man, If you will enter My Kingdom, I will feed you. He fed him. But then He will not let a man say, Now, because You have fed me I will come into Thy Kingdom. No, a man must begin somewhere else. I will feed you, I will care for you, My pity will manifest itself in benevolent activity toward you, even though you are going to crucify Me. But I will not be crowned King upon the basis of that feeding.

He will not ascend the throne of our life on that basis. He does not begin in the accidentals but in the essential. He does not base His throne upon the shifting sand of a man's material needs; He must establish it upon the rock of a man's spiritual recognition and spiritual life. He begins in the realm of spirit, but having begun there He proceeds through all the life, and the man who crowns Him honestly in the depth of his spiritual nature, may rest assured that He will take under His care and guidance and provision all his material life, and all his mental life.

It may be He will make poorer instead of richer; one of the most beneficent things that could happen to some. To crown Christ in the spiritual, and to obey Him, is sometimes to have to disgorge in the material. Jesus Christ will only be crowned upon the basis of Deity, the spiritual in us finding essential Deity in Him and bowing to it. When we do that He comes to us as King, and when He comes, He comes oppression, to set the prisoner free! May God help us to crown Him there, and so to find His gifts extending through all our lives.

**~ end of chapter 42 ~**

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