

## Dark Days: The pain of rejection and senseless violence

Matthew 13:53-14:12

Mark Vroegop

---

53 And when Jesus had finished these parables, he went away from there, 54 and coming to his hometown he taught them in their synagogue, so that they were astonished, and said, "Where did this man get this wisdom and these mighty works? 55 Is not this the carpenter's son? Is not his mother called Mary? And are not his brothers James and Joseph and Simon and Judas? 56 And are not all his sisters with us? Where then did this man get all these things?" 57 And they took offense at him. But Jesus said to them, "A prophet is not without honor except in his hometown and in his own household." 58 And he did not do many mighty works there, because of their unbelief.

14 At that time Herod the tetrarch heard about the fame of Jesus, 2 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." 3 For Herod had seized John and bound him and put him in prison for the sake of Herodias, his brother Philip's wife, 4 because John had been saying to him, "It is not lawful for you to have her." 5 And though he wanted to put him to death, he feared the people, because they held him to be a prophet. 6 But when Herod's birthday came, the daughter of Herodias danced before the company and pleased Herod, 7 so that he promised with an oath to give her whatever she might ask. 8 Prompted by her mother, she said, "Give me the head of John the Baptist here on a platter." 9 And the king was sorry, but because of his oaths and his guests he commanded it to be given. 10 He sent and had John beheaded in the prison, 11 and his head was brought on a platter and given to the girl, and she brought it to her mother. 12 And his disciples came and took the body and buried it, and they went and told Jesus.

Jesus is an enigma because he promises great joy in the midst of great sacrifice. He says things like "whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it" (Matt 10:39), and "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. Whoever loves his life loses it, and whoever hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life" (John 12:24-25).

As we saw last week, Jesus offers something far more valuable than anything you can imagine: peace with God. What we are talking about is the gospel – that through Jesus' sacrifice a person's sins can be forgiven – and there is nothing more valuable than this. When God gives you spiritual sight to see the value of the gospel it eclipses everything else.

Now that doesn't mean that the "everything else" goes away. Following Jesus is costly and sometimes very painful. Hurtful words, malicious gossip, rejection from family or friends, subtle comments, or active opposition are often a part of a disciple's life. Following Jesus guarantees

that trials, difficulties, and personal pain will come. Jesus himself promised that we would face difficulties, and the comfort is not the absence of problems but in the fact that Jesus has overcome the world (see John 13:33). Part of my role as your pastor is to help you anticipate the fact that suffering and difficulties will come so that you will not be surprised, and I believe that I am to help you learn how to respond to those moments when your faith proves costly.

## **The Consequences of Unbelief**

Our text today reveals two examples of the personal pain living for the kingdom of heaven. The first pain is the personal trauma of being rejected, and the second is the pain of what seems to be senseless violence at the hands of wicked people. Both are familiar consequences of those who side with the Kingdom of Heaven, and both are at the hands of those who do not believe. Matthew turns from the collection of parables in verses 1-51 to where he left off in chapter 12: the growing unbelief of people those who hear Jesus' teaching.

### ***1. Unbelief can create personal rejection***

Remember that Jesus' family wanted to speak to him in 11:46-49, and it was likely (according to Mark's account in 3:21) because they were concerned that Jesus had lost his mind. Now that the parables are finished, Matthew tells us that Jesus heads for Nazareth, his hometown. However, Jesus will get the same response that he received in Capernaum: blatant rejection. But this time it will be even more personal.

According to verse 54, when Jesus arrived in Nazareth, he went to the synagogue and began to teach the people. The synagogue was the central place for Jewish worship and instruction for the Jews who didn't live in close proximity to the temple. The synagogue experience often included various teachers who would take turns instructing the people based upon a particular passage of Scripture.

Jesus began to teach the people in this setting, and Matthew records that the people were astonished at the teaching of Jesus.<sup>1</sup> The word means to shock, create panic, or to amaze. It comes from two words meaning "to strike" and "out of" and it includes a sense of striking something or even blowing something out because of being shocked. Think of how you respond when something is shocking. Don't you often hit someone or make a sound that is similar to blowing out the candles? Well, that is the tone of what is happening here. The people in Jesus' hometown are shocked at what is coming out of his mouth.

What they do next is a typical way that people react when they hear a shocking truth delivered from a familiar source; they assail and discredit the messenger. Notice that they ask five questions which are really veiled statements:

---

<sup>1</sup> See Luke 4:16-30 for a further explanation of the text and what Jesus said.

- Where did this man get this wisdom and these mighty works? (v 54, v 56)
- Is not this the carpenter's<sup>2</sup> son? (v 55)
- Is not his mother called Mary? (v 55)
- Are not his brothers James<sup>3</sup> and Joseph and Simon and Judas?<sup>4</sup> (v 55)
- Are not all his sisters with us? (v 56)

Do you see what they are doing? The authority and power are clear, but they cannot and will not accept it. Therefore, they explain away what was obvious by focusing on his humble and familiar background. "Who does this guy think that he is?" They dismiss Jesus because they know him, his past, and his background. They are minimizing his words by an ad hominem attack: "God does special things but not through your kind. We know you. What's your trick?" They used their social bias as a covering for their unbelief.

"In view of his family connections, they are reasoning, his rightful place was in their own community, doing the things that villagers did. He had no business teaching people and doing miracles. In their minds they cut him down to size... He didn't fit their categories, so they rejected him."<sup>5</sup>

The result was that they "took offense" at him. This word refers to bait that when touched by an animal would set the trap in motion. Therefore, they viewed Jesus and his teaching as dangerous or making trouble.<sup>6</sup> Jesus was invading the status quo of their lives, and they could not accept it, especially from him.

Jesus then says, "A prophet is not without honor except in his hometown and in his own household" (v 57). Jesus experienced what many of you in this room know to be true: it is often those closest to us who are the most skeptical and the strongest opponents to the work of God in our lives.

I have seen this play out so often. God begins to do a work in someone's life and a person's closest friends or even family are critical. At the root of this rejection are numerous reasons:

- Pride ("you're not better than us")
- Bitterness ("there's no way you are ever going to change")
- Selfishness ("you're not going to make me look bad")

---

<sup>2</sup> Many commentators now believe that the word "carpenter" should be translated as builder, and they suggest that Joseph was likely a stone cutter not just a wood-worker.

<sup>3</sup> The eventual pastor of the Jerusalem Church and the author of the NT book James.

<sup>4</sup> The author of the NT book Jude.

<sup>5</sup> Leon Morris, The Gospel of Matthew, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans Publishing, 1992), 366.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid

Regardless, unbelief is at the root of it all. And this kind of unbelief, when it comes to those closest to us, is extremely painful. You'd think that the people who supposedly know you and love you the most would be thrilled with what God is doing. But this is often not the case. This is a painful rejection that feels very personal. But here's the thing: Jesus knows all about it.

That isn't the only painful situation in our text. There's another.

## ***2. Unbelief can embrace senseless violence***

The second example of unbelief is Herod. Matthew 14 records that "Herod the tetrarch heard about the fame of Jesus." Apparently the fame of Jesus was spreading and reaching into the realm of politics. Herod must have heard about Jesus' teaching and his miracles. His response is interesting: "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'" (v 2). What you are hearing here is a guilty conscience and a ruler loaded with fear. Why would he say that?

Matthew then gives us a flashback as to what happened. The explanation begins in verse 3:

"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, 'It is not lawful for you to have her.'"

Now this "Herod" is not Herod the Great at the time of Jesus' birth, the one who built the temple in Jerusalem. He had died, and Rome had divided up Israel into four provinces, giving each of Herod's sons a region to rule. That is why he is called Herod the tetrarch. He was the son of Herod the Great, and he ruled the northern area which included Galilee. His name was Herod Antipas.

Years earlier Antipas had married the daughter of a northern non-Israelite king named Aretas. However, Antipas fell in love with another woman named Herodias, and there were three problems. First, he was already married. Second, Herodias was already married. And third, Herodias was married to his half-brother, Philip. Therefore, in order to fulfill their desired to be married both Antipas and Herodias left their marriages and unlawfully married each other. Incidentally, Antipas' divorce from Aretas' daughter caused a war that Herod would have lost had Rome not intervened.

John the Baptist apparently was continually pointing out that Antipas had no right to marry Herodias, and his outspoken rebukes landed him in jail, probably in the name of national security. Herod's rule was hanging by a thread, and he needed John out of the picture, but he couldn't kill him because of John's popularity (14:5).

However, the text tells us that Herod changed his mind because of a new pressure. Verse 6 tells us that Herod hosted a birthday party, and in the midst of that party Herodias' daughter

came and danced for the party guests. Now we are not sure what kind of dance this was (it seems likely to be risqué), but for some reason Herod was very pleased. He then made a rash statement (v 7), promising to give her whatever she asked. The daughter, in consultation with her mother, asked for the head of John the Baptist on a platter. Herod was stuck. Mark 3:26 says, "And the king was exceedingly sorry, but because of his oaths and his guests he did not want to break his word to her." In other words, Herod didn't want to look weak. So he ordered John to be executed by the dishonorable means of beheading, and his severed head was brought to the party.

The section ends with two painful verses:

"his head was brought on a platter and given to the girl, and she brought it to her mother. 12 And his disciples came and took the body and buried it, and they went and told Jesus" (Matt 14:11-12).

Now just stop and consider this. Here is how the great fore-runner of Christ was killed. He spoke the truth, was arrested for political reasons, and executed on the whim of king who was more concerned about saving face than he was about doing what was really right. Here was an Elijah-like figure, known for his bold and in-your-face preaching, and he was killed by the lascivious and paranoid King because Herod liked how his step-daughter danced. Herod killed John out of fear and then he refused to believe that Jesus was who he claimed to be.

So this account shows us the unbelief of Herod which leads to incredible and seemingly pointless violence being brought on a choice servant of God. Herod is filled with everything wrong and ignores everything that is right. He is reckless with the rule of God in his life, he is more afraid of his friends and what will happen to his image than he is in what is really right. He is beholden to a drunken rash statement and willing to put an innocent man to death simply because his wife and daughter will be pleased.

No wonder Herod, when he heard about Jesus, was worried. His superstitious syncretism and his guilty conscience were getting the best of him.

### **Light for the Dark Side of God's Will**

So put this section together with me: Jesus is rejected by his hometown and his family, and John the Baptist is beheaded by a wicked ruler who cares more about saving face than true justice. This is a dark day.

Aren't you glad the Bible talks like this? I sure am. Do you know why? Because dark days – when the pain is so personal and seems so pointless – is where we really live. And if you are not prepared for those days, you might think that God is capricious, impotent, or maybe even a fraud.

There are many things that I could say about this kind of moment in your life, but let me give you three things to cling to when the pain of following Christ becomes personal or seems pointless. I'm going to make them brutally simple so you'll remember them.

## **1. Jesus really understands**

As I was preparing for this message I couldn't help but be reminded of the extent to which Jesus really understands what it is like to live in our sinful, fallen world. Part of the beauty of the incarnation is the simple fact that Jesus knows what it is like to be rejected. His family didn't understand him, the religious rulers wanted to kill him, his hometown ridiculed him, an inner-circle follower betrayed him, and in the end every disciple abandoned him. He knows what it is like to feel all alone. In fact he knows what it is like to feel the Father's absence when he bore the wrath of God. Jesus faced sinful rejection and divine rejection.

But there's more. He also knows what it is like to face abuse and injustice at the hands of wicked people. There was no greater crime ever committed than the execution of Jesus. Unbelief reached its most sinister and wicked moment at the cross. Jesus knows unfairness and mistreatment in a way that we can hardly even understand. And this is immeasurably comforting. Hebrews 4 puts it this way:

14 Since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. 15 For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin (Heb 4:14-15).

When the dark side comes, remember – you are not alone. Jesus really understands.

## **2. Satan and evil are not free**

It is far too easy to think, "I can't bear this!" or "There is no point to this!" And in those moments you might begin to believe the lie that Satan has unlimited power and that the wicked seem to prosper.

I love the gutsy honesty of the Psalms:

For I was envious of the arrogant when I saw the prosperity of the wicked. 4 For they have no pangs until death; their bodies are fat and sleek. 5 They are not in trouble as others are; they are not stricken like the rest of mankind. 6 Therefore pride is their necklace; violence covers them as a garment. 7 Their eyes swell out through fatness; their hearts overflow with follies. 8 They scoff and speak with malice; loftily they threaten oppression. 9 They set their mouths against the heavens, and their tongue struts through the earth. 10 Therefore his people turn back to them, and find no fault in them. 11 And they say, "How can God know? Is there knowledge in the Most High?" 12 Behold, these are the wicked; always at ease, they increase in riches. 13 All in vain have

I kept my heart clean and washed my hands in innocence. 14 For all the day long I have been stricken and rebuked every morning. 15 If I had said, "I will speak thus," I would have betrayed the generation of your children (Ps 73:3-15)

And notice how the Psalmist's perspective changed:

16 But when I thought how to understand this, it seemed to me a wearisome task, 17 until I went into the sanctuary of God; then I discerned their end (Ps 73:16-17).

I love what Paul says in 2 Corinthians 1:8-9 -

8 For we do not want you to be ignorant, brothers, of the affliction we experienced in Asia. For we were so utterly burdened beyond our strength that we despaired of life itself. 9 Indeed, we felt that we had received the sentence of death.

Notice his perspective in the second half of verse 9: "But that was to make us rely not on ourselves but on God who raises the dead."

So one of the anchor truths that you must cling to during dark days is the simple fact that Satan and evil are not free; everything is a part of God's plan. You just don't see how right now.

### **3. Jesus is ready to help**

Why would God tell us about the dark days in Jesus' life and the seemingly pointless killing of John the Baptist? One reason is to highlight the depth of unbelief. But there is another. I think it is so that you'll be motivated to run to Jesus when you experience the dark days of trying to live out the kingdom. Dark days will come. Jesus told us they would.

But in the midst of those dark seasons we are invited to come and ask Jesus for help. We are invited to trust that God is able to give us what we need for everything we face. Again, Hebrews 4 is helpful here:

16 So let us come boldly to the throne of our gracious God. There we will receive his mercy, and we will find grace to help us when we need it most (Heb 4:16 – NLT)

We no longer come into the sanctuary to understand the dark days; now we come to Jesus. We come to him personally when the pain is personal and seems pointless. And what a comfort he is! He understands like no one else.

Following Jesus means that dark days will come. When they do, anchor your heart to these three simple truths:

- Jesus understands
- Satan and evil are not free
- He's ready to help me

Some time ago the words of an old hymn touched me. I'm sure that many of you know this one, but consider the words anew today:

### ***Day By Day***

Day by day, and with each passing moment,  
 Strength I find, to meet my trials here;  
 Trusting in my Father's wise bestowment,  
 I've no cause for worry or for fear.  
 He Whose heart is kind beyond all measure  
 Gives unto each day what He deems best.  
 Lovingly, its part of pain and pleasure,  
 Mingling toil with peace and rest.

Help me then in every tribulation  
 So to trust Thy promises, O Lord,  
 That I lose not faith's sweet consolation  
 Offered me within Thy holy Word.  
 Help me, Lord, when toil and trouble meeting,  
 Ever to take, as from a father's hand,  
 One by one, the days, the moments fleeting,  
 Till I reach the promised land.

© College Park Church

**Permissions:** You are permitted and encouraged to reproduce this material in any format provided that you do not alter the content in any way and do not charge a fee beyond the cost of reproduction. Please include the following statement on any distributed copy: by Mark Vroegop. © College Park Church - Indianapolis, Indiana. [www.yourchurch.com](http://www.yourchurch.com)