“An Opportune Moment”

Matt. 14:1-12

1 At that time Herod the tetrarch heard the report about Jesus and said to his servants, "This is John the Baptist; he is risen from the dead, and therefore these powers are at work in him." 2 For Herod had laid hold of John and bound him, and put him in prison for the sake of Herodias, his brother Philip's wife. 3 Because John had said to him, "It is not lawful for you to have her." 4 And although he wanted to put him to death, he feared the multitude, because they counted him as a prophet. 5 But when Herod's birthday was celebrated, the daughter of Herodias danced before them and pleased Herod. 6 Therefore he promised with an oath to give her whatever she might ask. 7 So she, having been prompted by her mother, said, "Give me John the Baptist's head here on a platter." 8 And the king was sorry; nevertheless, because of the oaths and because of those who sat with him, he commanded it to be given to her. 9 So he sent and had John beheaded in prison. 10 And his head was brought on a platter and given to the girl, and she brought it to her mother. 11 Then his disciples came and took away the body and buried it, and went and told Jesus. 12 When Jesus heard it, He departed from there by boat to a deserted place by Himself.

A. The conclusion of John the Baptist’s story

1. Back in chapter 11, we read where John was put in prison and began to have doubts about Jesus being the Messiah. He had sent messengers to ask whether or not Jesus was the One they were expecting?
2. Jesus reassured His fiery cousin, the prophet, that indeed, He, Jesus, was the One to come. He had all the “credentials” to prove it, what with all the miracles and healings He was doing. But He wasn’t going to do everything John and others expected, in the way they expected and at that particular time.
3. For example, John had spoken of Messiah coming in fiery judgment of the wicked, and yet, the wicked king Herod Antipas had put John in prison and Jesus wasn’t doing anything about it. Naturally it was difficult for John to not lose faith. Jesus didn’t rescue him. He left him to a cruel fate.
4. We know from our vantage point that Jesus doesn’t explain such things, but He Himself would suffer and die shortly after this Himself. So He doesn’t explain, but neither does He not care or not understand. Jesus too, would cry out, “My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?” To me it’s beautiful and comforting to know that although God doesn’t explain the whys of human suffering, He surely is with us in them and knows what it’s like to suffer. One day, He’ll explain it all. Till then, we must trust Him.
5. Herod’s reaction to the news of Jesus’ miracles is interesting. He said the reason Jesus could do these wonders was because He was actually John the Baptist risen from the dead. Now a little research would have shown that Jesus and John were relatives, born 6 months apart, so there was no way Jesus could have actually been the same person as John. He didn’t just show up fully grown, shortly after John’s death!

6. Nevertheless, Herod explained the news of Jesus’ miracles by saying He was John, risen from the dead. I believe he was really suffering from a guilty conscience that caused him to invent such things.
7. Be that as it may, Matthew goes back in time a bit, to explain how it was that John died in the first place.
8. Herod had put John in prison for publically offending him and his wife by saying their relationship was wrong. It’s really worth thinking about the boldness and bravery of John to say such a thing to a man with such power, and from a family with such a reputation for cruelty and ruthlessness.
9. So many preachers would do the opposite – they would pander to a man in Herod’s position. They would tell him things he wanted to hear, and certainly not talk about his sins. Many today don’t even mention sin to anybody. They know it doesn’t tend to draw in big crowds. It’s much better to tell people how to have “their best life now,” and that “God is on their side.”
10. People who talk about sin are seen as negative, hurtful, and unloving. But really, the opposite is true!
To tell someone what they want to hear is to fear man more than God, and it’s good for neither. If we love God, we have to obey and fear Him more than people.

11. And if we truly love people, won’t we tell them the truth about sin, so they can repent and be forgiven, and live their lives in right relationship with God? Real love desires the highest good for a person. Real love doesn’t hide or ignore the truth! Prov. 27:6 says “faithful are the wounds of a friend”!

B. Some background on Herod and his new wife

1. There are various Herods spoken of in scripture, and it’s easy to confuse them. This particular man was Herod Antipas, and he was one of 7 sons of Herod the Great, the man who’d killed all the babies in Bethlehem when Jesus was born. The word tetrarch means one who rules over ¼ of the kingdom. There were three Herods ruling, not four. Nevertheless this term was used.

2. Antipas had his own wife, the daughter of a neighbor king, Aretas, king of the Nabateans. But he divorced her to take Herodias, the wife of his brother Herod Philip. She also divorced her husband. Her father Aretas was furious when he heard what Herod had done. He declared war on Herod and marched against him, humiliating him by cutting his army to pieces, a defeat from which Herod never recovered.

3. Both Herod Philip and Herod Antipas were actually Herodias’ uncles! So when John said it wasn’t right for her to be with Antipas, he was surely right. It wasn’t right for her to be married to either! But she married one, then had an affair with the other and ended up divorcing and remarrying. Her daughter ended up married to yet another of the uncles. So this was a really fine, upstanding family!

4. Whereas John was strong and upright, Herod was a weasel, a true politician, the son of a politician! Now there are various contradictory statements in scripture about him, not because the Bible is contradictory, but because Herod was.

5. Vs. 5 says he wanted to put John to death, but he didn’t do it because he was more concerned about what people thought than what was right or wrong. He didn’t have a strong moral compass.

6. Vs. 9 says when Salome asked for John’s head, Herod was sorry. Why, if he really wanted him dead anyway? Mark’s version of this story, particularly Mar. 6:19, 20 gives us further insight.

7. Mark implies it was mostly Herodias who hated John and wanted him killed. Herod actually used to listen to him gladly. John was a classic model of what a witness should be. He told the hard truth, but he made sense, and apparently, he was “salty.” That is, Herod knew he was holy and just, and yet, he was also interesting to talk with. Herod feared or respected John, and listened to him gladly.

8. I believe Herod’s soul was troubled by talking with John. He knew John was right. I believe Herod probably felt convicted talking with John. He may have even considered repenting and separating from Herodias, and going back with his wife. He may have thought about getting right with God.

9. The contrast between John and Herod is revealing. One had great position, wealth, and worldly power, but was weak morally and couldn’t commit to do the right thing. The other was austere and poor. He lived in the deserts and ate locusts and wild honey. He probably didn’t even have a wife or family. He didn’t live long. He didn’t have worldly possessions. But he was holy and righteous. He was fiercely devoted to God, and he lived to proclaim God’s truth. He didn’t think about what the people would say. He didn’t pander to the rich or powerful. He didn’t try to gain position or power for himself. He cared only what God would say about him. He lived to please God. Jesus said he was the greatest prophet who ever lived.

C. But then there came, “the opportune time”

1. When Satan tempted Jesus in the desert and lost, the Bible says he left Him, waiting for “an opportune time.” (Lu. 4:13) There are moments in time when crucial decisions must be made, when critical opportunities present themselves, either for good or for evil. God gives us divine appointments we must take advantage of. But Satan also watches all the time for his opportunity to cause havoc.

2. Herod had opportunities to get right with God. Though not a Jew himself, he was surrounded by Jews
who worshipped the true and living God. He had access to God’s Word. As a king in Israel, he was privileged to live in the place of God’s Temple, His Word, His law, His priests.

3. The greatest prophet who ever lived rebuked Herod, telling him that his life was out of order. Admittedly, that’s not a pleasant thing to experience. It probably embarrassed the king. It stung him and his new wife. It humiliated him publicly. But though not pleasant, it was still a blessing!

4. God had spoken to him directly. That was a special privilege! Though it hurts sometimes, there’s nothing better than to be spoken to by God, to be shown how to live, and what we’re doing wrong. God only does that for our good. If we’re rebuked for sin and we repent, we can be forgiven and made clean. We can be made right and accepted by God. We can be part of His family and of His Kingdom. It’s a privilege!

5. But Herod put John in prison for it. Not the right response! Nevertheless, it brought the prophet right in close, where Herod could speak with him in private and hear still more of God’s Word. Herod had the greatest prophet right in a place where he could converse with him, and the Bible says he heard him gladly. He must have really thought a lot about what John was saying. But he didn’t do anything about it.

6. God was watching. He had given Herod every opportunity to repent. But the man kept putting it off. Satan was also watching, waiting, and laying his traps. He was working in the mind of Herodias, fueling the fire that seethed in her. Reminding her of how humiliated she’d been by John. Stoking her pride, stirring up her anxiety as her illegitimate husband kept talking to this wild man of the desert.

7. She knew Herod’s birthday celebration was coming up. She knew he would have a party, and there would be entertainment of various sorts. Though she was probably a good-looker herself, she knew she was getting older, and her daughter Salome was young and beautiful. She’d seen her lustful husband’s eyes follow her from time to time as she’d walked by. She knew Salome was likely to be asked to dance in front of Herod’s guests. It wasn’t going to be a ballet either!

8. Women and men did not dance together in ancient Israel. It was considered wicked. Both men and women did dance before the Lord in worship, but that was a spontaneous thing. They never danced together, and Jews didn’t watch dances as spectators. Salome’s dance before Herod and his high officials wasn’t a Jewish thing. It wasn’t a righteous thing. It was pagan and it was sensual. Herodias probably wasn’t there with her husband, because men and women didn’t dine together either. So this young girl danced sensually before her step father and his men, and they were probably more than a little under the influence of alcohol at the time.

9. The alcohol, coupled with the sensuality, and the natural lust of the king, all worked together perfectly to create Satan’s “opportune moment.” Herod, the man who’d been under conviction, who’d been listening to the voice of God’s greatest prophet, was now listening to the voice of lust and alcohol.

10. His sinfulness suddenly got the best of him, and he offered the girl anything she wanted, up to half his kingdom, something he wasn’t even authorized to give under Rome’s rule. But the words were uttered foolishly, impetuously, and all his guests heard them. What would the girl ask for, something innocuous?

11. Oh no! Someone had been anticipating this night. Someone had set things up. Herodias had already spoken with her daughter. She already had thought about this night, and what was likely to happen. She had already made it clear to her daughter what she was to ask for – John’s head!

12. The enemy knew Herodias’ hatred of John, and he also knew the lust in Herod’s heart, the sensuality and desire to tease in Salome’s. He watches us all very diligently. He knows our weaknesses and wrong tendencies. God gives us armor, the armor of righteousness. If we put it on by living in a godly way, we’re protected. If we let down our guard, the enemy’s fiery darts easily pierce us and bring us down.

13. Herod had been given the opportunity to listen to God’s Word and repent, but he waffled. He didn’t take it. That would have protected him and kept him safe. Being double-minded and a man-pleaser instead of a God-pleaser made him weak and vulnerable. When Satan set him up, he fell in a big way!

D. The tragic results of not listening to God
1. Herod was trapped by his own stupidity. Though he was sorry, he couldn’t get out of what he’d promised. The executioner was sent to behead John in the prison. A cruel sword or axe ended his life.
2. This young beautiful girl, the great dancer, was brought a grisly head on a platter. She could’ve had whatever she might have asked, and this is what she ended up with! This is what sin and evil lead to.
3. Mothers should guide their daughters toward righteousness, but Herodias influenced her’s to be an accomplice to murder! People either humble themselves under God or they do all they can to shut out His voice, His conviction. Herodias would not humble herself. She would seek to silence God’s voice.
4. John didn’t even have a family. His disciples came to take his body away and bury him. Then they went to find Jesus and tell Him what had happened. It was a very dark and sad day for all who were righteous.
5. Vs. 13 says when Jesus heard it, he went away to a deserted place by Himself. He was grieved and saddened. He knew that it wouldn’t be long till He Himself suffered an even worse fate at the hands of those He’d come to save. John was His cousin. He loved Him and called him the greatest prophet who ever lived, the forerunner, the one sent ahead of the Messiah Himself.
6. And this is how that greatest prophet was treated. His life was counted only as a nuisance. He died ignominiously in a dark prison cell on the edge of the Dead Sea, the victim of a drunken tyrant’s lustful party and utterly foolish promise, a tease of a step-daughter and a proud, selfish, easily offended and immoral woman. Rather than be embarrassed before a few of his men, the king ordered the execution of one of God’s greatest servants. His image was more important to him than pleasing God or His Son.
7. It wasn’t long after this that Herod’s army was disastrously defeated by Aretas’ forces. Soon after that, Jesus Himself was brought before him. He had been curious about Jesus, had heard He was a miracle worker, and wanted to see Him do something supernatural. He questioned Him extensively.
8. But the Son of God had not one word for this wicked, selfish king. God had already spoken to Herod, but Herod hadn’t listened. Herod hadn’t repented. Instead, Herod had silenced forever the voice of God to him. God would never speak to him again. The “opportune moment” had forever passed.

In this life, there are opportune moments. God gives us the opportunity, if we’re in a country like the US, to hear His Word. If we’re blessed to hear of our sins and the need to repent, we are truly blessed. But we have to seize such moments! We have to set our hearts that we’re going to choose what’s right. We’re going to repent and believe. We’re going to follow the Lord. If we don’t make firm decisions like that, there will be other opportune moments, times when the devil will set us up. We either set ourselves to follow Jesus, or we vacillate weakly, undecided, uncommitted. To those who waiver, Satan will present sensual “opportune moments,” times when the world and the flesh present us the opportunity to sin. If we don’t seize what God has for us, the enemy will seize us when we’re weak, and our opportunity will be lost, maybe forever. Which voice will we listen to? Will we take what God is offering, or will we waiver and fall into the traps of the devil?