

## A Coward And A Braveheart Meet

Matthew 14:1-12

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Courage is not an optional virtue in the character of a Christian. Along with love, humility, faithfulness, contentment, and holiness, all Christians are likewise to be bold “in the Lord” (as were the disciples of Christ who spoke the truth in the face of much opposition, Acts 14:3). There are a few misconceptions about courage that should first be cleared away.

**First**, biblical courage is *NOT* rude, or inconsiderate of others. Moses certainly exemplified courage in facing Pharaoh, but was noted to be the meekest man upon the face of the earth (Numbers 12:3). The Lord Jesus was certainly bold as He fearlessly faced those who hated Him and faced the curse of the cross, but He was also gentle, compassionate, and gracious (“A bruised reed shall he not break, and smoking flax shall he not quench” Matthew 12:20). In fact, the bully who harshly pushes around those weaker than himself is not courageous at all, but cowardly.

**Second**, biblical courage is *NOT* the absence of all fear. What is there to be courageous about if you sense no fear? To the contrary, it is fearing God (by way of our reverence, holy awe, and wonder of Him) more than our fear of any person or circumstance. There was written on the grave stone of a certain Lord Lawrence, who is buried in Westminster Abbey: “He feared man so little because he feared God so much.” Biblical courage recognizes that fears are common to us all. However, biblical courage will not be mastered and controlled by fears, for the living God is our defense, our strength, and our refuge (“The LORD is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? the LORD is the strength of my life; of whom shall I be afraid?” Psalm 27:1).

**Third**, biblical courage is *NOT* exercised in an unrighteous cause. Biblical courage can only shine forth as we stand for the righteous Cause of Christ. To plant one's feet in defending an unrighteous cause (even to the point of death) is not biblical courage, otherwise, it might be said that suicidal terrorists, who are willing to take their own lives in the explosion of a bomb within a shopping center, are biblically courageous.

**Fourth**, biblical courage is *NOT* just for ministers, elders, magistrates, and soldiers. Biblical courage is for the housewife and mother, the husband and father, the child, the student, the contractor, the office manager, the computer analyst, the engineer or wherever the Lord has you. Regardless of our calling, God calls each of us to be willing to give up all for Christ, even to the point of laying down our lives for Christ and His truth. That is biblical courage.

This Lord's Day we shall consider from our text in Matthew 14:1-12 the consummate coward and the consummate braveheart. The main points from the text are these: (1) The Fears Of Herod (Matthew 14:1-2); (2) The Courage Of John the Baptist (Matthew 14:3-4); (3) The Cowardliness of Herod (Matthew 14:5-12).

## **I. The Fears Of Herod (Matthew 14:1-2).**

A. "The wicked flee when no man pursueth" (Proverbs 28:1). Why do the wicked flee when no man pursueth? They flee from the guilt of their own conscience which relentlessly hounds them. They may seek to drown that guilty conscience in work, pleasure, a girlfriend/boyfriend, booze, drugs, the family, or even in the church, but at night when they are all alone with their conscience, the fearful judgment of God chases

them. Adam knew no fear, till he sinned against God and became a guilty creature. When God sought Adam after he had partaken of the forbidden fruit, He asked Adam, “Where art thou?” Adam replied, “I was afraid, because I heard thy voice in the garden, and I hid myself” (Genesis 3:9-10). Dear ones, if we are mastered by our fears, I submit to you it is due to one or more of the following three reasons: (1) a wounded conscience (a sin we are not willing to give up); (2) a neglect of communion with Christ through fervent prayer and faithful feeding on His Word; and/or (3) a lack of trust in an absolutely trustworthy, loving, almighty God.

B. Herod Antipas was fleeing when no man pursued him, as we begin this section of Matthew chapter 14. Herod the Great, the father of Herod Antipas, had murdered the male babies in Bethlehem in hope of destroying Christ the King. And now his son, Herod Antipas, has murdered the faithful witness of Jesus Christ: John the Baptist (a courageous martyr of Christ). The blood of John (like that of Abel) was crying unto God for justice to be served against Herod. And that cry for justice did not escape the hearing of Herod’s conscience.

C. When Herod Antipas heard the news concerning the power of Christ in His teaching and miracles, he concluded that Christ was John the Baptist resurrected and reincarnated. Herod’s guilt chased him into believing that John the Baptist had surely risen from the dead and had assumed the body of Jesus. For Herod was unwilling to confess his sin to God, to commune with the Lord, or to place his trust in the living God alone as his help and salvation. Herod’s fears are the lot of all who turn away from Christ. Their fears pursue them, catch them, and consume them. There is no peace of mind and soul.

## **II. The Courage Of John the Baptist (Matthew 14:3-4).**

A. Whereas the wicked flee when no one pursueth, the righteous are bold as a lion (Proverbs 28:1). Beginning with Matthew 14:3, we have a flashback whereby we learn how it was that John the Baptist was martyred for the faith. Basically, John was murdered by Herod because he would not cower in fear before the king by compromising the truth of God. Even as **Athanasius** would not compromise the truth although the whole world would stand against him; even as **Luther** would offend neither the truth of Christ nor his conscience before the Diet of Worms; even as **Knox** and **Melville** chose the smile of God over the frown of Queen Mary or King James; even so John the Baptist courageously stood for the truth, even if it meant he must stand against a king. For he feared, revered, esteemed, and loved the Lord his God more than any man.

B. The truth of God in this instance which brought John the Baptist into a direct conflict with Herod was over Herod's incestuous marriage to Herodias, the wife of his brother Philip. Herod and his sister-in-law, Herodias, had conspired together to divorce their present spouses so as to be united together in marriage. This was a violation of God's Law against incestuous relationships (Leviticus 20:21). The only exception to the Jews in the Old Testament to that law was when a man died childless, his nearest unmarried male relative was to marry the widow and to raise up an heir to the deceased relative (Deuteronomy 25:5-10). God called this incestuous relationship (not a marriage), but one of the abominations which the nations practiced and for which God cast them out of Canaan (Leviticus 18:24-30, wherein sodomy and bestiality are also included). This prohibition makes it clear that it is not only sexual and marital relations with those who are directly blood relations that are forbidden, but also various in-law relations as well. *The Westminster*

*Confession of Faith* (24:4) has preserved the teaching of Scripture on this matter when it declares:

Marriage ought not to be within the degrees of consanguinity [i.e. blood relations—GLP] or affinity [i.e. in-law relations—GLP] forbidden in the Word; nor can such incestuous marriages ever be made lawful by any law of man, or consent of parties, so as those persons may live together, as man and wife. The man may not marry any of his wife's kindred nearer in blood than he may of his own, nor the woman of her husband's kindred nearer in blood than of her own.

To the shame and reproach of backslidden nations and churches (and even Reformed and Presbyterian Churches) today, the same condemnation brought by John against Herod must be leveled against all those who have removed in-law relations from the list of prohibited marriages (“It is not lawful for thee to have thy brother’s wife”). John’s faithful testimony was not merely for the truth, but against the manifest errors and sins of nations and churches. Love for others, dear ones, compels us to such a duty (“Thou shalt not hate thy brother in thine heart: thou shalt in any wise rebuke thy neighbor, and not suffer sin upon him” Leviticus 19:17). On our parts, we must be sure that we do not reprove and rebuke others from malice, envy, or personal vengeance. We must always “speak the truth in love” (Ephesians 4:15). We must sincerely desire reconciliation in the truth out of love, or our witness is not true and faithful, but rather a form of hypocrisy.

C. This courageous stand by John the Baptist did not please either Herod or Herodias, but especially it did not please Herodias. On account of John’s faithful testimony, he was cast into prison. For his faithful testimony, he suffered. For his faithful testimony, he was eventually martyred. Dear ones, here is where biblical courage is put to the test. What are you willing to give up for Christ, for the Cause of Christ and His truth? Family, close friends, jobs, homes, wealth, dreams and ambitions,

the applause and honor of men, and life itself? Dear ones, each of us who have embraced Christ by faith alone are called by God to be willing to suffer loss for the Cause of Jesus Christ. If we cannot boldly stand for Christ and His truth when it means suffering the loss of a comfort (or the friendship of others) in this life, how will we possibly stand for Christ and His truth if Christ should call us to suffer the loss of our lives? Who do you fear and reverence more? God or man? Whose praise do you esteem more highly? God's or man's? Whose love and friendship can you not live without? God's or man's? Is this your sincere prayer: "Let me die the death of the righteous, and let my last end be like his" (Numbers 23:10).

D. The faithful Covenanted Presbyterian martyr, Christopher Love, went to the scaffold with this testimony of boldness in Christ upon his lips and in his heart:

I am not only a christian and a preacher, but whatever men judge I am, a martyr too, I speak it without vanity; would I have renounced my covenant, and debauched my conscience, and ventured my soul, there might have been hopes of saving my life, that I should not have come to this place; but blessed be my God, I have made the best choice, I have chosen affliction rather than sin, and therefore welcome scaffold, and welcome axe, and welcome block, and welcome death, and welcome all, because it will send me to my Father's house; I have great cause to magnify God's grace that he hath stood by me, during mine imprisonment, it hath been a time of no little temptation to me, yet (blessed be his grace) he hath stood by me, and strengthened me; I magnify his grace, that though now I come to die a violent death, yet that death is not a terror to me; through the blood of sprinkling, fear of death is taken out of my heart; God is not a terror to me, therefore death is not dreadful to me (*A Clear Vindication Of The Principles & Practices Of Christopher Love*, pp. 74,75).

E. Dear parents, teaching your sons/daughters how to physically defend themselves is good, but that is not in itself teaching them biblical courage. Are they taught and challenged to sacrifice all to follow Christ? What are our children learning about biblical courage from our life and example as parents and grandparents? Let us love our children enough not only to teach them about biblical courage, but also to live it before

them in what we are willing to sacrifice for the Cause of Christ and in order to follow Christ.

### **III. The Cowardice of Herod (Matthew 14:5-12).**

A. A faithful and bold witness for Christ will sooner or later incur the wrath and hostility of the world and at times even of other professing Christians. Herodias wanted John and his testimony for the truth of God silenced (according to Matthew 14:3). But Herod preserved the life of John, for he knew that John was a faithful witness of God. Although Herod did not conform his ways to the Law of God, he knew that what John spoke was true, and Herod even “gladly” heard John preach to him (according to Mark 6:20). Even the unbelieving can find things about the Word of God in which they can intellectually or emotionally rejoice. But that in which the unbeliever cannot rejoice (apart from the sovereign work of God’s grace) is trust in Christ alone for one’s justification before God and submission to the authority of God and His Word over every area of one’s life. The unbeliever wants to pick and choose the parts of God’s Word in which to delight and the parts in which not to delight. Whereas the Christian in trusting in Christ delights in all that Christ reveals (1 John 5:3).

B. Dear ones, this selective delight in certain doctrines and practices of Scripture (and not in all of the doctrines and practices of Scripture) is also the sad lot of many who profess faith in Jesus Christ. Many professing Christians will rejoice in what they call the “fundamentals” of the faith upon which all professing Christians may be said to agree, but they do not rejoice in the difficult truths of Scripture which bring them into conflict with friends, family members, co-workers, or other professing Christians. It is the act of a coward, like Herod, to

rejoice in certain truths of God (with which all Christians agree). However, it is the act of a braveheart, like John, to rejoice in all the truths that the Holy Spirit has revealed in His Word (even the most difficult and unpopular ones), and to stand for them in the face of ridicule, isolation, and opposition (even if few or none are standing for those despised truths of Christ in this age of compromise and toleration).

C. Note how the cowardliness of Herod was manifested in the death of John. On Herod's birthday, Herodius plotted a way to put Herod on the spot before all his guests. She sent her daughter to dance before Herod and his guests. No doubt the seductive charm of the daughter of Herodius and perhaps his own intoxication combined to lessen the faculties of ungodly Herod (to even a greater extent), so that when she had completed her dance, Herod granted her any request up to half of his kingdom (solemnizing this rash and wicked promise with the holy name of God—for it is called an oath in Matthew 14:9). Herod had fallen into the snare of Herodias. After consulting with her mother, the daughter of Herodius asked for the head of John the Baptist (and to show her mockery for John and for the truth for which he stood, she wanted it given to her on a "charger" or platter).

D. Here is where we see so clearly the consummate coward, Herod. Pretending to be honorable by keeping his oath, he has John beheaded. Even as Pilate could not cleanse himself of the guilt of Christ's blood by washing his hands, so Herod could not escape the blood of John by justifying himself that he had taken an oath and could not break it. In order to save face before his guests, in order not to look foolish before his friends, he played the coward, kept his wicked oath, and sacrificed John's life. The honor and praise of men was more important to Herod (who knew John to be a holy and righteous man) than the honor and

praise of God (“For they [the chief rulers of the Jews who believed in Christ, but feared the Pharisees—GLP] loved the praise of men more than the praise of God” John 12:43). Herod’s sinful oath did not oblige him to sin against Christ or His truth. The biblical truth is accurately summarized by *The Westminster Confession of Faith* (23:4,7), an oath “cannot oblige to sin”, nor can any man “vow to do any thing forbidden in the word of God, or what would hinder any duty therein commanded”).

E. Cowards are men and women of convenience and expediency (they do what is in their best interests at the present time). Whereas bravehearts are men and women of biblical principle and conviction (they do what is in the best interests of Christ’s kingdom according to the revealed will of God). Beloved, nothing is more important in the world than upholding the truth of Christ in the courage of Christ and out of supreme love for Jesus Christ. For we cannot uphold Christ apart from upholding His doctrine, worship, government, and moral commandments, which He has revealed in Scripture. So the question is not whether we are attacked as being a cult, separatists, heretics, or antichristian. Those who have stood for the truth of Christ in the past have endured like treatment (from Abel, to Noah, to the prophets, to Christ, to the apostles). Listen to the words of that godly and faithful Covenanter minister, Samuel Rutherford, one who knew what it was to hear such slander (as he and other faithful covenanted ministers would not join in a sinful compromise of the Solemn League and Covenant):

We pray for the coming of his Kingdom, and praise him that the number of those that seek the Lord in Scotland are not diminished, but grow even under evil shepherds and lazy feeders; which is the lily among the thorns, though we go under the name of Protestors, Separatists, hypocrites, unpeaceable, implacable spirits, are made as the filth of the world, and the off-scourings of all things: yea, troubled on every side (in the streets, pulpits, in divers Synods, Presbyteries, &c. more than under prelacy) yet not distressed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; cast down, but not destroyed (Samuel Rutherford, *A Survey Of The Survey Of That Sum Of Church Discipline*, "Preface").

In conclusion, dear ones, consider with me a very sobering reference to the fearful and the cowardly in Revelation 21:8. Here we see that the first category listed of those who suffer the torments of hell are the “fearful” (or cowards). Why? Because their fear of losing friends, a girl friend or a boy friend, or their fear of losing the approval of others, or their fear of losing a job, family, will keep them from coming to Jesus Christ, trusting him alone for their eternal salvation and submitting every area of life to Christ as Lord, denying themselves, taking up their cross, and following Christ. Let the loss of nothing keep you from coming to Christ. To do so is to take that fear all the way to hell itself.

But now I speak to those of you who profess faith in Jesus Christ. The Apostle Paul declares in 2 Timothy 1:7 that God has not given us “the spirit of fear: but of power, and of love, and of a sound mind.” I ask you, dear Christian, how do you face the enemies (the temptations and sins) that attack your soul? Do you cower in fear before them? Do you compromise with them? Do you indulge them because they appear so strong and so mighty? Dear ones, God has not given you the spirit of fear, but of power through the resurrected Christ to overcome those dreaded enemies. Compromise and moving the boundaries is not standing boldly in the power of Christ, it is weakly and fearfully submitting ground to the enemy ( “Be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee a crown of life” Revelation 2:10).

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