

The Need for Courageous Christians

Matthew 14:1-12; Proverbs 28:1

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What is true courage, biblical courage?

It is NOT the absence of all fear. What is there to be courageous about if you sense no fear? To the contrary, it is trusting God in spite of the fear that you face. Biblical courage recognizes that fears are common to us all. However, biblical courage will not be controlled by fear, for the living God is my helper and I will not fear what man can do unto me (Hebrews 13:6).

Biblical courage is NOT exercised in an unrighteous cause. Biblical courage can only shine forth as we stand for the truth and righteousness of Jesus Christ. To defend 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.

Biblical courage is NOT just for soldiers, cops, firefighters, magistrates, or ministers. Biblical courage is for the housewife and mother, the husband and father, the child, the student, the builder, the computer analyst, the engineer or wherever the Lord has you. Regardless of your calling, God calls you to be a courageous Christian; especially as we see more and more tyranny being exercised in high places and more of our God-given rights threatened by those in power. This is not a time to cower in fear, but a time to take a courageous stand for Jesus Christ.

Our text today has something to say about both fear and courage: (1) The Fear 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 Fear 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 pursues them? 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, or in the family, 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).

B. Herod Antipas was fleeing when no man pursued him in our text. 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 has murdered that faithful witness for Christ: John the Baptist (the first recorded martyr in the New Testament). He is also the Herod before whom Jesus appeared before His crucifixion. The blood of John (like that of Abel) was crying unto God for justice against Herod. That cry for justice did not escape the hearing of Herod’s conscience (abortion).

C. When Herod heard of the fame of Jesus, he thought that Jesus was John resurrected (Mark 6:16—“It is John, WHOM I HAVE BEHEADED”—that’s fear produced from guilt). Herod’s fears are the lot of all who hear the truth and turn away from Christ. Their fears pursue them, catch them, and consume them. They cannot escape them.

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 became the first recorded martyr in the New Testament. John was murdered by Herod because he would not cower in fear before the king by compromising God's Word. Even as Luther would offend neither the truth of Christ nor his conscience before the Emperor; 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. He trusted, revered, esteemed, and loved the Lord his God more than any man. That is the root from which biblical courage grows. Biblical courage is not necessarily loud, flashy, breaking down doors. It is meek like Jesus and stands for His truth (like Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego in Daniel 3:13-18; Acts 5:29).

B. The truth of God in this instance which brought John the Baptist into a head-on collision with Herod was over Herod's incestuous relationship with Herodias, the wife of his brother Philip. Herod and his sister-in-law, Herodias, had divorced their spouses and had come together, but God declared it no marriage at all. This was a violation of God's Law against incestuous relationships (Leviticus 18:16). Listen to the summary of God's Law in the *Westminster Confession of Faith* (24:4):

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 of backslidden nations and 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"). This was/is a moral law of God like that against adultery (Leviticus 18:20).

C. This courageous stand by John the Baptist did not please either Herod or Herodias, but especially it did not please Herodias (Matthew 14:3; Mark 6:17-19). On account of John's courageous testimony, he was cast into prison. For his faithful testimony, he suffered and eventually was martyred.

1. Here is where biblical courage is put to the test. What are you willing to give up for Christ and His truth: relationships, a job, a promotion, the applause of men, your freedom, and life itself? If we cannot courageously stand for Christ and His truth when it means suffering only the loss of a relationship, how will we possibly stand for Christ and His truth if Christ should call us to suffer much greater losses (freedom, health, life)? One who is biblically courageous is willing to sacrifice all for Jesus—only He cannot be taken away.

2. Dear parents, teaching your sons/daughters how to physically defend and provide for themselves is very 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 Jesus.

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

A. A faithful and courageous witness for Christ will sooner or later incur the wrath and hostility of the world and sadly at times even of other professing Christians.

1. Herodias wanted John and his testimony for the truth of God silenced (Matthew 14:3; Mark 6:19). But Herod preserved the life of John, because he feared the multitudes who rightly understood that John was a prophet (Matthew 14:5), and because he feared John as a just and holy man of God (Mark 6:20). Herod even called for the imprisoned John on various occasions, and “gladly” heard John preach to him (Mark 6:20).

2. Even the unbelieving can find things about God’s Word 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 who trusts in Christ delights in all that Christ reveals (1 John 5:3) and wants to know the truth of Scripture and grow in it (like a sponge in soaking it up).

3. This selective delight in certain doctrines and practices of Scripture is also the sad lot of many who profess faith in Jesus Christ (contrary to Matthew 28:20). Many professing Christians will rejoice in what they call the “fundamentals” of the faith upon which all professing Christians may agree, but they do not rejoice in the difficult truths of Scripture which bring them into conflict with family members, friends, co-workers, or other professing Christians. Remember, Herod liked to hear John preach, but he did not receive the truth and love it (not all of it, for he did not repent of his sin). John’s courage was manifested in that he rejoiced in all the truths taught in Scripture (even the most difficult and unpopular ones), and stood for them in the face of ridicule, isolation, and opposition (even if few or none were standing for those despised truths of Christ in an age of compromise and toleration).

B. Note how a coward behaves when it comes to God’s truth.

1. On Herod’s birthday, Herodias plotted a way to silence John. She sent her daughter to dance before Herod and his guests. The seductive charm of the daughter of Herodias and perhaps his own intoxication combined to lessen Herod’s discretion at this point.

2. 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.

3. After consulting with her mother, the daughter of Herodias asked for the head of John the Baptist. In order to show her disdain for John and for the truth for which he stood, she wanted it given to her on a “charger” or platter.

C. Here is where we see how a coward (like Herod) behaves.

1. Herod pretends to be honorable by keeping his wicked oath. He orders John to be beheaded (which was murder). 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.

2. In order to save face before his guests and in order not to look foolish before his friends, he played the coward, kept his wicked oath, and committed murder. 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 (John 12:42-43). Herod’s sinful oath did not oblige him to murder John; for 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” (*Westminster Confession of Faith*, 23:4,7).

D. Cowards are men and women of convenience and expediency (they do what is in their own best interests at the present time). Whereas courageous men and women of biblical conviction do what is in the best interests of Christ’s kingdom according to the revealed will of God.

1. Nothing is more important in the world than upholding the truth of Christ in the courage of Christ and out of supreme love for Christ. We cannot uphold Jesus apart from upholding His truth (gospel, commandments, doctrine, and worship) which is revealed in Scripture.

2. So the question is not will we be 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, who knew what it was to hear such slander:

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").

E. I ask you, dear Christian, how do you face the enemies of this world that attack your soul, your faith, your health, or your life? Do you cower in fear before them? Do you indulge them because they appear so strong and so mighty? 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 that God has established in His Word 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). Let that be the line we draw in the sand—faithful unto death.

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