

How Should Believers Face Death?

Scripture: Matthew 14:1-13

Sermon Series: *Matthew*

Topic: Death

Introduction

We must all face death. Whether it be the death of someone close to us or our own, we must each face death. It is inescapable.

However, the question is how should we as believers face it? This is the dominant question that arises from this text before us today.

Matthew continues to focus our attention on Jesus. His powerful preaching and mighty miracles were bringing him more and more into the attention of those in high places. His popularity among the Jews was growing. The people praised him while the Pharisees hated him. But now Matthew relates what happens when the news of Jesus and his ministry reaches the ears of the regional governor.



At That Time

Matthew continues the story with a slightly ambiguous phrase.

Matthew 14:1-2 (ESV)¹ 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."

At that time. This phrase is a general phrase that Matthew occasionally¹ uses, but without chronological precision. The Greek word here is *kairos* not *chronos*. The word *kairos* means a general time or season while *chronos* means a specific time. We might also say something like, 'around that time.' The phrase clues us in that what follows did not immediately follow after the

¹ Matthew 11:25; 12:1.

events that took place in Nazareth, but rather occurred some time soon thereafter. This allows for movement on Jesus' part, both in time and space (i.e. geographically). In fact, we'll see that Jesus was no longer in Nazareth, but had returned to shore of the Sea of Galilee (v.13).

Matthew now highlights two things that happened "at [or around] *that time*." The first is that the fame of Jesus was spreading and the second was the beheading of John the Baptist at the hands of Herod.

So around the time of John's death and Jesus' rejection at his hometown of Nazareth (which we considered last week), *the fame of Jesus* was spreading. Mark and Luke both record that it was around this same time that Jesus *sent out the Twelve* into the surrounding towns preaching the gospel of the kingdom, healing the sick, and casting out demons² (though Matthew has already reported this to us back in chapter 10). This short term mission trip was hugely effective and led to an increase in the notoriety of the name of Jesus. The news of the power and authority of Jesus began to spread far and wide, even all the way to Herod, the regional ruler. The fame of Jesus and his mighty ministry has reached the ears of Herod and it caused a stir.

Herod then tetrarch heard. Herod the tetrarch is also called Herod Antipas. He was one of the three sons of Herod the Great (who reigned at the time of the birth of Jesus) among whom the kingdom was divided upon the death of Herod the Great. 'Tetrarch' means "ruler over a fourth part"³ of a kingdom.

Herod was the Roman ruler—though he was popularly called king⁴—over Galilee and Perea from 4 B.C. to A.D. 39, which was the area where Jesus had thus far predominately lived and ministered.

These miraculous powers are at work in him (v.2). Herod heard of the miracles that Jesus was performing. He, like the Pharisees, does not deny that "miraculous powers were at work." He does not deny that Jesus was working real miracles. He accepts them as real, so much so that they strike fear in him.



² Mark 6; Luke 9.

³ Leon Morris, *The Gospel according to Matthew*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI; Leicester, England: W.B. Eerdmans; Inter-Varsity Press, 1992), 368.

⁴ Matthew 14:9; Mark 6:14.

He said to his servants. When Herod heard of the powerful ministry of Jesus, he said something that three⁵ of the four gospel authors record. Thus, what he said is important. Matthew records what Herod “said to his servants.” Thus, this could only have been reported by “one of his servants” who heard Herod say this and then later reported it to the disciples of Jesus or someone close to them. Matthew wants us to know what Herod said.

“This is John the Baptist. He has been raised from the dead” (v.2). This is what Herod said and Matthew also wants us to know *why* he said what he did. Verses three through twelve explain why. Verse three begins with “*for*” (*gar γὰρ*), which then points us to the reason *why* Herod said what he did. Herod was afraid because he had a guilty conscience (v. 5, 9). His conscience was guilty because he killed an innocent man, whom all the people believed to be a prophet (v.5). Herod was afraid of the “miraculous powers at work” in Jesus because he was the cause of John’s wrongful death.

Verses 3-12 then explain the terribly unjust circumstances of the death of John the Baptist at the hands of Herod, and his vindictive wife and accomplice daughter. John was brutally beheaded at the whim of Herod’s wife who took advantage of Herod’s boastful oath, which almost certainly resulted from the sinful confluence of pride, drunkenness, and the sensual dance of his step-daughter, who may have been around the age of 12-14 years.⁶

Why would Herod assume that John had been “raised from the dead?” Herod’s mother was Jewish and his father was Greek. Thus he embraced a confused mix of Jewish theology and Hellenistic mythology. Jewish theology supplied the notion of the reality of resurrection while Greek mythology supplied the notion of vindictive spirits. These two competing belief systems were swirling around in Herod’s head. Add to that the fact that he knew he was responsible for the wrongful imprisonment and death of an innocent man, for having unjustly executed John, and we should not wonder that he was afraid that John has returned from the death to seek revenge on him.

Matthew tells us that Herod “*was sorry*” (v.9) to have John executed at the jealous demand of his unlawful wife, however, he was not sorry enough to do what was right. He was more sorry about appearing to be a man who would not keep his oath than he was about appearing to be a man who would wrongfully execute an innocent man. Thus, according to the dictates of a vindictive wife and the hubris of her husband, John the Baptist was beheaded in prison. Matthew concludes this extended parenthesis with,

When Jesus Heard This (v.13)

This brings us to our focal point in verse thirteen, but v.12 sets the scene.

⁵ See Mark 6:14 and Luke 9:9.

⁶ Grant R. Osborne, “Matthew,” *Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament*, ed. Clinton E. Arnold. vol. 1, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 2010), 558.

Matthew 14:12 (ESV) And his disciples came and took the body and buried it, and they went and told Jesus.

The disciples of John came to the prison and took his body and buried it. Then “*they went and told Jesus.*”

Matthew 14:13 (ESV) Now when Jesus heard this, he withdrew from there in a boat to a desolate place by himself.

This verse is a transitional verse and bridges between Jesus’ action and the action of the crowds. We will focus today on the first half of the verse only and then pick up next week with the last half of the verse.

Now when Jesus heard this. While there is debate among scholars⁷ about the exact referent of ‘*heard this*’—does ‘heard this’ refer to hearing the news of what Herod said (v.2) or to hearing the news of John’s death (v.12), or does it refer to both?

It seems abundantly clear to me that, if we *listen* to this being read aloud, as would have been the custom of the NT churches to whom Matthew was writing, then the unmistakable conclusion would be that Jesus’ response of ‘*withdrawing in a boat to a desolate place*’ was primarily due to the news of John’s death and not to the news of what Herod said to his servants.

If this is correct, then this is important for at least two reasons. First, we don’t often talk about how to respond to death. Second, there aren’t many occasions in Scripture when we see Jesus responding to death and if we are his followers—and we are—then, would it not be helpful for us to consider Jesus’ response so that we can form a healthy response to death when we find ourselves in a similar situation?

How did Jesus Respond When Facing Death?

Let’s first consider how Jesus responded when he faced death. In Scripture we find at least four responses of Jesus when he was confronted with death.

1. He Withdrew

We see this from our key verse this morning. As Jesus faced the death of his cousin, John the Baptist, we find that Jesus ***withdrew***.

⁷ Carson, Bloomberg, and Morris conclude that since vs.3-12 is an excursus, then Jesus’ withdrawal is due to what he heard Herod said, while McNeile, Hill, France and Hagner conclude that his withdrawal was due to what he heard said of John, namely of his his death and burial.

Matthew 14:13a (ESV) Now when Jesus heard this, he *withdrew* from there in a boat to a desolate place by himself.

This sad report of the death of John affected Jesus greatly. This was heavy news. John had previously “gone before Jesus preparing the way”⁸ for his new ministry, but now he had gone before him into the presence of God the Father in heaven. He who first began preaching “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand,” had now stopped preaching. He who spoke what was good and right and true, was now speaking no longer. Jesus has now lost a close “relative”⁹ and he wanted some peace and quite.

The news of the death of the “greatest man born of woman”¹⁰ must have deeply moved Jesus, so much so that he sought solitude. One can only imagine what might have been going on inside Jesus’ mind, but whatever it was, it moved him to step away from the crowds and find a *desolate place*, which is another way of saying that he went seeking a place where the crowds were not.

In Luke’s recounting of this story, the disciples went with Jesus.¹¹ Thus, in seeking a “*desolate place by himself*,” his primary purpose is to withdraw from the crowds, not from his closest friends. Jesus was choosing to create some separation from the daily routine and continual chaos of public ministry. A boat was the most effective means of withdrawing from the crowds. The crowds cannot throng you when you’re rowing across the Sea of Galilee.

This ‘withdrawal’ is neither a fleeing from Herod in fear nor a failure of Jesus’ faith. It is a “tactical withdrawal”¹² for the sake of the continuation of Jesus’ ministry. Jesus does this several times throughout his ministry (Mt 4:12; 12:15; 15:21; Lk 5:16). Jesus was personally affected by the news of John’s death. He needed time to grieve and to pray. He needed a brief time away from ministry life. He needed a day off.

This past Sunday night we had our first Arts Cafe. The theme that guided the creation of the works of art was “the kingdom of heaven has come near.” Those works are on display in the lobby.

One of them, by Eva House, is entitled “*Withdraw*.” It is 7.5 feet tall and invites you to into a peaceful and quiet space. It invites you to withdraw from the world and into the peaceful presence of the Father, who alone can restore your soul.



⁸ Matthew 3:3.

⁹ Luke 1:36.

¹⁰ Matthew 11:11.

¹¹ Luke 9:10.

¹² R. T. France, *Matthew: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 1, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1985), 105.

Thus, Jesus withdrew from the chaos and the crowds and sought out a desolate place that would allow him to be alone with his disciples and away from the demands and the needs of the crowds. Jesus needed to rest¹³ and recover from this news. So into the boat he went and off to the desolate place to rest and recover.

2. He Wept

The second thing Jesus did in the face of death was he **wept**. As Jesus faced the death of his close friend Lazarus, we find Jesus **weeping** at his tomb.

John 11:33-35 (ESV) ³³ When Jesus saw [Mary] weeping, and the Jews who had come with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in his spirit and greatly troubled. ³⁴ And he said, "Where have you laid him?" They said to him, "Lord, come and see." ³⁵ **Jesus wept.**

Jesus stood by the tomb of Lazarus and he wept. He wept with along with all those who loved Lazarus. Jesus wept. And when the people around him saw him weeping, they said, "**See how he loved him!**" (Jn 11:36). They saw the tears of Jesus and perceived that they flowed from a deep love for his friend Lazarus. Jesus wept at the tomb of his friend.

Weeping is common in Scripture when people face of death.

- When Jacob had to face the death of his son Joseph, he wept (Gn 37:35).
- When Jacob died, the people of Egypt wept for him for seventy days (Gn 50:3). They then wept another seven days at his tomb (Gn 50:10).
- When Aaron died, the people of Israel wept for him for thirty days (Num 20:29).
- When Moses died, the people of Israel wept for him for thirty days (Dt 34:7-8).
- David wept when king Saul was killed in battle (2 Sam 1:12).
- David wept when his newborn son died (2 Sam 12:21-22).
- David wept when he heard the news that his betraying son Absalom had died (2 Sam 18:33).
- When Hezekiah was faced his own death, he "wept bitterly" (2 Kg 20:3).
- When queen Esther was faced with the death sentence of all Jews, she wept (Est 8:3).
- On Palm Sunday, when Jesus was about to enter Jerusalem, knowing all that was about to unfold, knowing that they would reject him, and looking forward in time knowing the death that would consequently come to adults and children within the city because of their rejection of him, wept over the city (Lk 19:41-44).
- When Mary faced the death of Jesus, she stood by his tomb weeping (Jn 20:11).

¹³ Mark 6:31.

- When Paul explained to the Ephesian elders that he was going to Rome to die and would never again see their faces, “there was much weeping on the part of all” (Acts 20:37).

Weeping is a common response in the face of death.

Weeping is the primary manifestation of mourning. The two words are frequently found together in Scripture.¹⁴ Mourning and grieving are the emotions we naturally experience when someone we love has died. Death brings about separation from those we love. Grieving is the sadness of the soul that results from separation caused by death. Mourning is the prolonged experience of sorrow caused by the grief of death. When Jesus faced death, he was sad. He grieved. He mourned. Jesus wept.

3. He Prayed

The third thing Jesus did in the face of death was he **prayed**. As Jesus faced his own imminent death, we find him praying to God his Father in heaven above. After spending the evening eating and talking with his disciples, Jesus turned his attention to his heavenly Father and openly prayed in their presence in the Upper Room and then later he withdrew to pray in private in the Garden of Gethsemane. While still in the Upper Room with the disciples,

John 17:1 (ESV) When Jesus had spoken these words, he lifted up his eyes to heaven, and said, “Father, the hour has come; glorify your Son that the Son may glorify you...

The whole of chapter 17 is Jesus’ prayer to God the Father as all his disciples listened. It is the longest prayer of Jesus recorded in Scripture. Knowing he was about to die, Jesus prayed in public. He also prayed in private.

Luke 22:39-42 (ESV) ³⁹ And he came out and went, as was his custom, to the Mount of Olives, and the disciples followed him. ⁴⁰ And when he came to the place, he said to them, “Pray that you may not enter into temptation.” ⁴¹ And he withdrew from them about a stone’s throw, and knelt down and prayed, ⁴² saying, “Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me. Nevertheless, not my will, but yours, be done.”

He we see the aim of Jesus’ withdrawal from his disciples was so that he could draw near to his Father in prayer. Jesus withdrew from men so that he could draw near to the Father in prayer. Jesus went the distance of “about a stone’s throw” from them and then knelt down and prayed to his Father. Jesus knew what was about to happen to him, and yet still he prayed. He knew his death was necessary, and yet he prayed. He knew he had come to Jerusalem to die, and yet still he prayed. Even while on the cross, of the seven times Jesus spoke, three of them were

¹⁴ Deuteronomy 34:8; 2 Samuel 19:1; Esther 4:3; Isaiah 22:12; Joel 2:12; Luke 8:52; Revelation 18:15.

directed to the Father (Lk 23:34; Mt 27:46; Lk 23:46). When Jesus faced death, he prayed to his Father in heaven.

4. He Defeated Death

Finally, when Jesus faced death, he **defeated** death. The last thing Jesus did as he faced death, was to conquer it. Jesus' final words before dying on the cross were, "*It is finished*" (Jn 19:30). He then "gave up," i.e. he "*yielded*"¹⁵ up his spirit. He chose to die. No one took his life from him (Jn 10:18). He willingly chose "to lay his life down" (Jn 10:11, 17-18). But because he willingly laid his life down, he could also take it up again. Peter said,

Acts 2:22-24 (ESV) ²² "Men of Israel, hear these words: Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with mighty works and wonders and signs that God did through him in your midst, as you yourselves know— ²³ this Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men. ²⁴ God raised him up, loosing the pangs of death, because it was not possible for him to be held by it.

Jesus faced death, and conquered death. He was resurrected from the dead. His holy life triumphed over death.

Romans 6:9 (ESV) We know that Christ, being raised from the dead, will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him.

Jesus has dominion over death. Jesus has power over death. The apostle John in the Revelation heard Jesus say,

Revelation 1:17-18 (ESV) "Fear not, I am the first and the last, and the living one. I died, and behold I am alive forevermore, and I have the keys of Death and Hades."

If you're wondering what happens after death, then Jesus can tell you. He's been there and come back again. He alone has authority over death. Jesus faced death and he defeated death.

How should Christians Respond to Death?

Therefore, how should we Christians respond to death. Let us follow the example of Jesus.

1) Withdraw - take a step back from the busyness of life. Stop. Separate from the regular routine. "*Be still and know that He is God*" (Ps 46:10). Pause long enough to ponder the brevity of our lives. Our days are few.¹⁶ James writes that our lives are like a vapor, like the

¹⁵ Matthew 27:49.

¹⁶ Job 10:20; 14:1.

morning mist that appears for a little while, and then quickly disappears (Jam 4:14). Withdraw to consider these things so you may gain a heart of wisdom (Ps 90:12). When a Christian faces death, it's ok to withdraw.

2) Weep - it's ok to mourn. It's ok to weep at the death of a loved one. Jesus wept at the death of Lazarus and the death that came to Jerusalem because they failed to receive Jesus. Weeping is not a sign of weakness, but rather a sign of the depth of love. Grieving is a very natural process of adjusting to life in the absence of someone close to us whom we love. When a Christian faces death, it is ok to weep.

3) Pray - go to the Father in prayer. Christians ought to pray at all times, but we especially ought to pray when we find ourselves facing death. When Jesus faced death, he prayed. When Jesus faced the death of Lazarus, he prayed. When he faced his own death, Jesus prayed. Christian, when you face death, pray to your Father in heaven. Run **to** the Father in prayer, not away from him.

4) Have Faith - have faith in Jesus. Jesus has conquered death. When a Christian faces death, we need no fear, but rather have faith in him who defeated death. Through the victory of Christ, death will NOT separate us from our Father and Creator. Actually, it will be the means of uniting us with him in a permanent way.

John 16:33 (ESV) "I have said these things to you, that in me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world."

Conclusion

We must all face death. It is unavoidable. However, we do not have to face death in fear, but rather in faith. Jesus is our example. When Jesus faced death, he withdrew from the crowds, he wept, he prayed, and he won. Jesus defeated death. He defeated the most powerful enemy. And death's days are now numbered. Therefore, face death in faith and peace, knowing that Jesus has been there and come back again.

Discussion Questions

1. Do you think your church experience has adequately prepared you for how to think about death? Why or why not?
2. If you have had to face death, describe what happened? What help you through that experience?
3. What does Jesus' response to hearing the news of John's death teach you about Jesus?
4. Why do think Jesus withdrew from the crowds after hearing the news of John's death?
5. What does the text say was the perceived reason behind Jesus' tears at Lazarus' tomb?
(See John 11:36)
6. Why do you think Jesus prayed as he did on the night before his crucifixion, both with the disciples and in the Garden?
7. What encourages you most about what you've heard today?
8. What questions do you have as a result of today's text?