

LIFE BIBLE STUDY

SESSION OBJECTIVE: MATTHEW 14:1-36

To discover the different Herods of the New Testament, and to understand Jesus' sovereign power.

The Worst Birthday Gift

Have you ever met a, "witness?" I don't mean a witness of a crime in a court setting, but rather, someone who follows the tenets of the heretical cult, "the Jehovah's Witnesses." Apart from the many (and there are *many*) theological problems found within their doctrinal statements, one thing you might have noticed that is rather



strange about them is that they do not celebrate birthdays. Their reasons are many and none of them make much sense historically or theologically, but there is one passage in the New Testament that will often be cited to "prove" why birthdays are a bad idea, and that is found in both Mark 6:21-29 and Matthew 14:3-12. Both Mark and Matthew describe the birthday of Herod the Tetrarch (also known as Herod Antipas), in which the daughter of Herodias danced before Herod and, "it pleased him," so much so that Herod vows to, "to give her whatever she asked" (Matt. 14:6-7). Her request? The head of John the Baptist. Because this birthday party of sorts is the only recorded one in the New Testament, Jehovah's Witnesses believe God is not pleased with birthdays.

While birthdays should never be carried further than intended, one can hardly make a case that God is displeased with such celebrations. As always, the matter is one of the heart, not a rule or law. We should

always seeks to put others before ourselves, and birthdays can set unreasonable, selfish expectations, and such expectations should be avoided. However, the point of this passage, as we will learn, has nothing to do with the birthday party at all. Remember, this text is a *narrative*. It's meant to be read *descriptively*, not *prescriptively*. With that in mind, what does this chapter describe? Let's take a closer look.

Herod Who?

To the newer Christian, the name Herod can be unknowingly confusing because the name appears many times both in the Gospels as well as Acts. This Herodian dynasty comes into direct contact with not only Jesus Himself, but John the Baptist and the Apostle Paul. They are responsible for the establishment of many well-known cities mentioned in the New Testament and play a significant role in the unfolding of redemptive history.

HEROD THE GREAT

Herod the Great was named procurator over Judea by Julius Caesar in B.C. 47. He was later named Tetrarch over Judea by Antony in B.C. 41, but was forced to abandon his position the following year. He fled to Rome and was then given the title, "King over Judea," a task that required much bloodshed and three years to complete. He is the one who commissions the wise men to go and see about the star rising over Bethlehem. He also issues the execution of the male babies ages 2 and under after he discovers that the wise men had deceived him (Matt. 2:16). He was a brutal and violent man, and his death would have been celebrated by many. Although a harsh man, he is credited for rebuilding the Temple in Jerusalem, an act which took 46 years to complete (Jn. 2:20).

HEROD ARCHELAUS

After his death, his son Herod Archelaus is appointed to rule in his place (Matt. 2:22). His son is also quite a brutal individual, so much so that he was quickly replaced Roman procurator not even a year after his installment. This is why Pontius Pilate is in charge over Jesus' crucifixion and not one of the Herods.

HEROD ANTIPAS

Herod Antipas was a significantly less threatening individual than his father. Antipas received a quarter of his father's land and ended up divorcing his first wife and marrying his brother's wife named Herodias, and is incidentally the Herod in our passage this morning. Jesus refers to him as, "the Fox" in Luke 13:32, which means something like, "someone who is sly or cunning." Perhaps because he married his brother's wife, he had earned a reputation of doing things sneakily behind people's backs. Pilate sends Jesus to Herod during Jesus' trial, and Pilate and Herod end up becoming friends from that point on (Lk. 23:12). One of the largest contributions of Antipas was the establishment of Tiberias, a city named in honor of the Emperor. Antipas was eventually exiled by Agrippa and died in exile.

HEROD PHILIP I

Herod Philip I was the son of Herod the Great and Mariamne, and the husband of Herodias prior to her marrying Antipas (Mk. 6:17). He fathered a daughter named Salome with Herodias. He was not granted any of his father's land and lived in a private district.

HEROD PHILIP II

Herod Philip II was the son of Herod the Great and Cleopatra, and the Tetrarch over Batanea Trachonitis, Auramtis, and some parts about Jamnia (Lk. 3:1). He married Salome, daughter of his brother Philip I and Herodias. He is known for establishing the city of Caesarea Philippi (Matt. 16:13).

HEROD AGRIPPA I

Herod Agrippa I was the great grandson of Herod the Great. He was raised in Rome and imprisoned by Tiberias, where he remained until the ascension of Caligula. Caligula then granted him the title of Tetrarch over an expanding territory that eventually included Judea. He was favored by the Jews because of his strict observation of the law. He had sought to harm some belonging to the church (Acts 12:1), but was eventually struck dead by God Himself and eaten by worms (Acts 12:21; 23).

HEROD AGRIPPA II

Herod Agrippa II was the son of Agrippa I. He was granted the tetrarches formerly held by Philip and Lysanias, with the title of king by the Emperor in A.D. 62. It is this Herod that interrogates Paul in Acts 26. He is nearly led to Christ by Paul (Acts 26:28).

It Was Quite the Meal!

Another well-known story from Matthew's Gospel is the account of Jesus feeding the five thousand. Of course, modern scholarship tells us that it would have been custom to only count the grown men during this time. The number in attendance was likely closer to twenty five thousand when you include the women and children. Of course, the text doesn't specify this, and is quite honestly irrelevant. Feeding five thousand is still a feat worthy of being called a miracle. This story is one that has come under attack from the so-called historical-critical movement. Also referred to, "higher criticism," this movement is often traced back to the biblical scholars of the Tübingen School in Germany spearheaded by Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768–1834). The movement essentially stripped away any supernatural phenomena from the biblical text and sought to understand the world from a more natural disposition. One of the interpretations of Jesus feeding the five thousand that was included by higher criticism proposes that Jesus did not actually multiply the loaves and fish, but rather, His kindness and generosity to share what little food they had sparked a domino effect of other people sharing their own food as well. This interpretation, while wrong, does have some room for argument (although not convincing). This miracle was one that was not described in detail, and apparently the people didn't notice it, because there is no description of their response to the miracle itself unlike many of the other miracles that Jesus had performed up to this point. This interpretation, of course, disregards some major details in the text. For example, the disciples were concerned that the people should be sent into the city to purchase food of their own, presumably because they did not have any (Matt. 14:15). It is also hard to not see some connection to the book of Exodus here. Verse 15 suggests that where they were was a, "desolate place," and the feeding is similar to the manna in the wilderness.

Study Questions

Day One

1. Read Matthew 14:1-2. Who did Herod the Tetrarch believe Jesus was, and why?
2. Read Matthew 14:3-12. This passage looks backwards in time to explain the death of John the Baptist. Why and how did John die? How did Herod feel about the request from Herodias' daughter? Which Herod, according to the above lesson, is this?

Day Two

1. Read Matthew 14:13-14. What was Jesus' response to the death of John the Baptist? Where was this secluded place according to the text (Hint: not on land)? Why did the people follow Him and what was His response to them?
2. Read Matthew 14:15-21. What is the disciples' concern? How does Jesus respond? How many people were likely there? In your opinion, why did Jesus perform this miracle?

Day Three

1. Read Matthew 14:22-27. While the disciples are getting into the boat, what is Jesus doing? What does Jesus do after that? What is the problem that the disciples are faced with in this passage, and how does Jesus respond to it?
2. Read Matthew 14:28-33. How is Peter able to come out onto the water (in other words, by whose power)? What goes wrong for Peter? What does Jesus say in response to this? Do you ever doubt what God says, as Peter did? How has that caused you to, "sink?"

Day Four

1. Read Matthew 14:34-36. Where did Jesus and the disciples arrive at? What kind of reputation had Jesus gained by this point, and how do you know based on this text?
2. In your opinion, what is the upside of Jesus developing a reputation for being a miraculous healer? In your opinion, what is the downside to it?

Week 18 Discussion: We've Lost Control!

In Matthew 14, Peter is, "commanded" by Jesus to come out onto the water. There is often a misunderstanding that it was merely Peter's faith that was responsible for his ability to walk on water, which is why he began sinking when he feared the wind, but that misses the key detail that Jesus *first* commands him to walk out. Faith works that way often. God is in control over the elements in our lives, and we respond to His control by faith and are used by Him as a result. Discuss with the group both the beauty and difficulty of this reality.

1. Icebreaker: What are some things in your job or home that you have been given authority or control over? What are some things in your job or home that you do not have control over? Who has control over those things?
2. Do you struggle with needing to be in control of the details of your life? Why or why not?
3. One of the takeaways from Peter walking on the water is that Jesus is in control, but Peter's experience with Jesus is shaped by his trust in Him. How does your trust in Jesus shape your Christian walk? Give specific examples.
4. "The only thing scarier than God being in control over evil and allowing it to occur would be a reality in which He isn't in control of it at all." Do you agree or disagree with this statement? Why?
5. How has your mistrust in Christ negatively affected you? What opportunities have you potentially missed?

Takeaways:

1. Herod Antipas, one of the Herodian rulers, kills John the Baptist because of a careless vow he makes.
2. Jesus' miracle of feeding the five thousand was a literal, supernatural miracle.

PRAYER REQUESTS: