What Can the Righteous Do?

Matthew 14:1–14

February 8, 2026
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Introduction

When was the last time you received really bad news? What did you do? Our passage today is about Jesus receiving terrible news: John the Baptizer has been killed. What Jesus does in response to that news shows us what faith looks like when evil seems to win.

The Story Behind the Story: Jesus and John

Our passage begins with Jesus receiving word that John the Baptizer has been executed. Before we turn to that moment, it is worth tracing the relationship between these two men as Scripture records it — because the weight of what Jesus feels when he hears the news cannot be understood apart from the history they share.

Their first encounter takes place before either of them has drawn a breath outside the womb. When Mary, already carrying Jesus, comes to visit her cousin Elizabeth, John leaps in Elizabeth's womb at the sound of Mary's voice (Luke 1:44). The next recorded meeting comes years later, when Jesus arrives at the Jordan River to be baptized. Around 28 AD, John has been preaching in the wilderness, calling people to repent, *"for the kingdom of heaven is at hand"* (Matthew 3:2), and offering a baptism of repentance to those preparing for the coming Messiah. And then one day he sees Jesus and cries out:

> *"Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world! … For this purpose I came baptizing with water, that he might be revealed to Israel." (John 1:29, 31)*

When John baptizes Jesus, he bears witness that the Spirit of God descended upon him, and the Father declared from heaven: *"This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased"* (Matthew 3:16–17).

We meet John again roughly a year later, but now the scene has changed entirely. He is in prison, and from that prison he sends his disciples to Jesus with a single, searching question:

"Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?" (Matthew 11:3). Some interpreters suggest that John, knowing his days are numbered, sends his disciples to Jesus so that they might become Jesus' disciples — a kind of final pastoral act. Perhaps. But based on the question itself and the way Jesus responds, I am inclined to take the question at face value. John, unjustly imprisoned, is struggling. He has doubts. And given what he had proclaimed about Jesus — that the Messiah would come with a winnowing fork in hand, ready to clear the threshing floor and burn the chaff with unquenchable fire (Matthew 3:12) — the doubt is not hard to understand. If that is who you are, John is essentially asking, why am I still sitting in this cell?

John clearly understood the coming Messiah as the one who would bring God's justice and judgment to bear upon evil — not in some distant future age, but now, in his own day. When that justice seems delayed and a righteous man languishes behind prison walls, the question *"Are you the one?"* is not a failure of faith. It is faith crying out under pressure.

Jesus responds not with rebuke but with evidence. He points to Isaiah's prophecies being fulfilled in his ministry — the blind see, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, the dead are raised, the poor hear good news (Matthew 11:4–5). And then he adds this word: *"Blessed is the one who is not offended by me"* (Matthew 11:6). Which is another way of saying: when it seems like evil is winning, do not conclude that I am absent or inactive. Trust me. He closes his response to John's disciples with a remarkable line: *"Yet wisdom is justified by her deeds"* (Matthew 11:19). Do not judge me by a single moment in the middle of the story. Wait until the work is finished. His completed work will vindicate everything he has done.

That exchange between Jesus and John's disciples is the backdrop to everything that follows.

The Herod Family: A Study in Concentrated Evil

How long John remained in prison after that exchange, we cannot say with certainty. My best estimate, based on the movement of the narrative from Matthew 4:12 to Matthew 14:1, is somewhere in the range of a year and a half — possibly longer. Then comes this:

> *At that time Herod the tetrarch heard about the fame of Jesus, 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." For Herod had seized John and bound him and put him in prison for the sake of Herodias, his brother Philip's wife, because John had been saying to him, "It is not lawful for you to have her." And though he wanted to put him to death, he feared the people, because they held him to be a prophet. But when Herod's birthday came, the daughter of Herodias danced before the company and pleased Herod, so that he promised with an oath to give her whatever she might ask. Prompted by her mother, she said, "Give me the head of John the Baptist here on a platter." And the king was sorry, but because of his oaths and his guests he commanded it to be given. He sent and had John beheaded in the prison, and his head was brought on a platter and given to the girl, and she brought it to her mother. (Matthew 14:1–11)*

That parenthetical remark of Herod's — that Jesus must be John raised from the dead — strikes me as a confession wrapped in superstition. It is the sound of a guilty conscience.

To feel the full weight of what has happened here, we need to spend a moment with this family, because the Herods are not incidental to the story of the New Testament. They are woven through it as a recurring portrait of what unchecked power and moral corruption produce across generations.

We have already met Herod the Great in Matthew 2 — the man who slaughtered the infant boys of Bethlehem in his attempt to destroy the infant Jesus. Rome declared Herod the Great king of the Jews in 40 BC. To secure that throne, he first killed off the last three Jewish kings of the Hasmonean dynasty. He accumulated ten wives — eight named, two unnamed — and was married to as many as six or eight of them simultaneously. He fathered sixteen recorded children, four of whom died in infancy. Of the sons who survived to adulthood, he executed the three oldest and disinherited the fourth, a man known as Herod Philip, who moved to Rome, married his own niece Herodias, and fathered a daughter named Salome, born around 15 AD.

The remaining kingdom was divided among three of Herod the Great's other sons. The richest territory — Judea and Samaria — went to Archelaus, but Rome had its own designs on that land and removed him in 6 AD, installing their own prefect. In the days of Jesus, that prefect was Pontius Pilate. Philip the Tetrarch received the territory east and northeast of Galilee. And Herod Antipas was given the region west of Galilee and east of the Jordan River — the very territory in which both John's and Jesus' ministries were primarily conducted.

All three brothers were somewhere between twenty and twenty-three years old when they came into their inheritances at the death of Herod the Great, around 1 BC.

Fast forward to 28 AD. Herod Antipas travels to Rome and pays a visit to his disinherited brother, Herod Philip. There he falls in love with Herodias, his brother's wife. Both Herod

Antipas and Herodias divorce their respective spouses and marry each other. It is worth noting that the wife Herod Antipas discarded was the daughter of the Nabatean king — a slight her father would eventually avenge by raising an army and destroying Antipas' forces in battle. Herod Antipas and Herodias were both around forty-eight years old at this time. When they returned to his kingdom, John the Baptizer publicly condemned what they had done. That condemnation cost him his freedom.

Then, roughly a year later, Herod Antipas throws a birthday party for himself and fills it with the nobility of his kingdom. At that party, Salome — who was perhaps fourteen or fifteen years old — dances before the assembled guests. The text tells us she pleased Herod and the company, and Herod, in a reckless display of drunken generosity, swore to give her anything she asked, up to half his kingdom. Coached by her mother, she asked for the head of John the Baptist on a platter.

It is worth noting that Philip the Tetrarch, the other brother — Herod Philip, Salome's father — married Salome that same year. Given that detail, I suspect he was also at the party. The whole scene has the feel of one depraved gathering of a deeply corrupted family.

And lest we think this is an isolated chapter of wickedness, consider the broader arc of this dynasty. Herod the Great killed the last three Hasmonean Jewish kings, murdered a wife and three of his own sons, and slaughtered the infants of Bethlehem. His grandson Agrippa would later execute James the son of Zebedee and imprison Peter. His great-granddaughter Drusilla, married to the governor Antonius Felix, would be present when Paul was left to rot in prison. If there is one family in the New Testament that embodies concentrated, generational evil, it is this one.

But here, in our passage, the evil that demands our full attention belongs to Herod Antipas, to Herodias, and to Salome: the beheading of John the Baptizer. John — the forerunner of the Messiah, the last of the prophets, the voice crying in the wilderness, the one who leaped in the womb at the sound of Mary's voice — executed at a birthday party because a teenager made a request her mother whispered in her ear. He died for the crime of saying what everyone already knew to be true: that what Herod Antipas and Herodias had done was wrong.

This disgusts me. And I suspect it should disgust all of us.

When I read this passage, I find myself thinking of the headlines that make us feel the same way — stories that expose the abuse of power, the exploitation of the vulnerable, the trafficking of children for the pleasure of the wealthy. The details change, but the structure of evil is recognizable: the powerful protect themselves, the innocent suffer, truth-tellers are silenced, and those who mock God receive praise and promotions. We live in a world where a good man's head can be served on a platter at a birthday party while the guilty go on feasting.

And sometimes — perhaps this morning — you find yourself in the same place as John in that prison cell, asking Jesus: *"Are you really the one? Because if you are, why does evil seem to*

win? Why do the wicked prosper? Why hasn't justice come? Why do I still suffer? Why does injustice still reign?"

John's severed head on a platter represents every unanswered prayer, every unchecked evil, every moment when the righteous suffer while the wicked feast. It represents the sick child who doesn't get healed. The honest man who loses his job while the dishonest keep theirs. The faithful spouse whose marriage still falls apart. Every moment when it seems — it genuinely seems — that evil has the upper hand.

The Psalmist captures this sense precisely. In Psalm 11, he describes the wicked shooting arrows in the dark at the upright in heart, and he asks: *"If the foundations are destroyed, what can the righteous do?"* (Psalm 11:3).

That is our question this morning. And our passage gives us an answer — not a theological abstraction, but a lived demonstration. We see what the righteous do by watching what the Righteous One does.

What Jesus Does

> *And his disciples came and took the body and buried it, and they went and told Jesus. Now when Jesus heard this, he withdrew from there in a boat to a desolate place by himself. But when the crowds heard it, they followed him on foot from the towns. When he went ashore he saw a great crowd, and he had compassion on them and healed their sick. (Matthew 14:12–14)*

What do you do when you receive devastating news? When a loved one dies without warning. When a hope you have carried for years collapses. When a doctor's words change everything. When you watch someone you love suffer and find yourself utterly unable to fix it. Most people, in such moments, either shut down — withdrawing into a quiet depression — or harden themselves, fighting back with anger and bitterness. Some go numb, escaping into entertainment or noise or endless distraction. Others paste on a smile and mouth the right phrases while they are dying inside. And some simply give up on God altogether, concluding that prayer makes no difference and faith is a fantasy.

But the question Psalm 11 asks is not what most people do. It asks what the *righteous* do. And here, in these three verses, Jesus — the Righteous One — gives us the pattern. He laments. He prays. And he re-engages with compassion.

He Laments

When John's disciples come to tell Jesus what has happened — verse 12 tells us they came and buried the body and then went to tell Jesus — the first thing Jesus does is withdraw. *"He with drew from there in a boat to a desolate place by himself."* We are not told explicitly that he wept, as he will weep at Lazarus's tomb. But this act of withdrawal is itself a form of grief. Something in him has to be alone with this news.

Jesus is fully God, and so in one sense he knew what was coming. But he is also fully human, and so when the news arrives, it lands with full human weight. He feels it. He does not perform composure. He does not immediately pivot to the next thing on the itinerary. He withdraws.

It is worth noting that if you compare this moment with the parallel account in John's Gospel, this is precisely the time when the crowd, electrified by his miracles, wants to seize him and make him king (John 6:15). The political moment is ripe. The population is outraged. A revolution is within reach. If there was ever a time to swing the winnowing fork, this is it.

Jesus does not take it. Instead, he withdraws to lament.

I want to say something about lament that I do not think the church says often enough: *lament is a biblical spiritual discipline.* Roughly one-third of the Psalms — more than sixty of them — are psalms of lament. We have an entire book of the Bible called *Lamentations*. God did not include all of that material in Scripture by accident. He gave us that much space for grief because lament serves a crucial function in the life of faith.

Lament is the soul being honest. It is the refusal to live the lie that all is well when it is not. It is bringing our pain and confusion and heartache — unfiltered, unedited — into the presence of God. In doing so, lament refuses to minimize either our suffering or God's goodness. It holds both realities in tension: *this is real pain*, and *God is still real*. It is the biblical pathway between denial — pretending everything is fine — and despair — concluding that nothing will ever get better. To lament is to say: *This is not right. This is not how it should be. And I will cry out to the God who sees and hears.*

Jesus laments. And then, I believe, he prays.

He Prays

The text does not tell us explicitly that Jesus prayed in that desolate place. But withdrawal to a solitary place is the consistent pattern of his ministry whenever the pressure intensifies. He did not go out on the water to stare at the horizon. He went to pray. He needed — as fully human — time to think, to grieve, to press his heart against the Father's will, and to receive the strength that comes only from communion with God.

And if Jesus — God in the flesh, possessing perfect knowledge and perfect union with the Father — if Jesus needed this kind of prayerful withdrawal, how much more do we? We cannot

sustain faithful engagement with the evil and suffering of this world on our own reserves. If we try, we will either burn out or harden. But in that desolate place, God meets us. He replenishes what has been depleted. He reorients what has been knocked sideways. He reminds us who he is, who we are, and what he has called us to do.

Faithful perseverance is rooted in prayerful communion with God. There is no shortcut around the desolate place.

He Re-Engages with Compassion

And then — this is where the passage takes my breath away — Jesus comes ashore.

> *When he went ashore he saw a great crowd, and he had compassion on them and healed their sick. (Matthew 14:14)*

Think about what has just happened. His cousin — the forerunner, the greatest prophet ever born of a woman, by Jesus' own testimony — has been murdered. Beheaded at a birthday party. Killed for telling the truth. And Jesus has gone out on the water to grieve and to pray, his heart heavy, his soul burdened. He had every human reason to say: *Not today. I cannot do this right now. I need more time.*

He doesn't say that.

The text says he had *compassion* on them. The Greek word behind that translation — *splanch nizomai* — is not a polite, surface-level sympathy. It describes a gut-wrenching, visceral love that moves a person to action. It is the same word used for the father in the parable of the prodigal son, when he sees his wayward child still a long way off and runs to meet him. It is love that cannot stay still.

Jesus, in grief, looks at the crowd and loves them. His personal loss does not close his heart to their need. His compassion is not performance; it is the revelation of who God actually is. Even in grief. Even in loss. Even when evil seems to have won the day. His love, his compassion, his purposes — they do not change.

This is what the faithfulness of God looks like in practice. God's steadfast love is not a fair-weather commitment that holds only when circumstances are favorable. It is the kind of love that endures through the valley of the shadow of death — and not merely endures, but acts. Herod's wickedness does not have veto power over God's purposes. The unjust death of John does not stop the coming of the kingdom. The story is not over simply because evil has scored a point.

Jesus' compassion on that crowd reveals something crucial: the heart of God is so faithful, so committed to his redemptive purpose, so steadied by his own love, that even personal grief

does not dam the flow of divine mercy to a broken world. Evil never gets to write the ending. God's steadfast love endures forever.

What Can the Righteous Do?

So let us bring this home. Where are you this morning?

Perhaps you are in the early, raw stages of grief. You have just received devastating news. Your world has been shaken to its foundations. If that is where you are, let me say this plainly: it is right to lament. It is not weakness. It is not faithlessness. It is the honest, biblical response to living in a broken world. Cry out to the God who hears. And do not isolate yourself entirely — tell someone you trust what you are carrying. Let them sit with you in it.

Or perhaps you have been in that desolate place for a long time. You have been lamenting for months, maybe years. The grief has curdled into bitterness. The disappointment has calcified into a low-grade despair. You have named your pain — and that was right and necessary — but you have stayed there. If that describes you, I believe the Spirit of God is saying this morning: it is time to pray. Not to perform prayer, not to rush through it, but to genuinely spend time in the Father's presence — reading Scripture, listening, allowing him to minister to the wounded places in you. Let him realign your heart with his.

Or maybe you have done your lamenting and your praying, but you are hesitating to step back into the life and the mission God has called you to. You see the crowds. You know what you are being called back to. But you are afraid — afraid of being hurt again, afraid it will not matter, afraid that evil will just win again anyway. If that is you, Jesus' response to his own grief is your answer. He did not wait until the pain was gone. He came ashore and loved the people in front of him. Take one step. Serve in one place. Show compassion to one hurting soul. You do not need to feel ready. You need to trust that as you move forward in obedience, God will meet you there with the strength you need.

Because here is the truth we must hold onto: God's redemptive work has not stopped. The story is not over. Jesus is still healing the sick, feeding the hungry, seeking the lost, and building his church — and he invites you, yes, wounded and grieving you, disappointed and doubting you, to be part of that ongoing work. The steadfast love of the Lord endures forever.

Gospel Invitation

Before we close, I want to speak directly to anyone here who does not yet know Jesus as Sa vior.

Everything we have talked about this morning — John's death, evil seeming to win, Jesus' grief and compassion — all of it points forward to the cross. Because just a few years after John's beheading, Jesus himself would be arrested, tried unjustly, and crucified. And on that day, it looked, by any reasonable measure, like evil had won. The Righteous One suffered. The Innocent One died. Darkness seemed to triumph.

But three days later, Jesus rose from the dead. And in that resurrection, God declared that evil does not get the final word. Death does not win. Sin does not have ultimate power. And his resurrection is not only his victory — he extends it to us. In him, we too live.

He died the death we deserved so that we could have the life he deserves. And now he offers that life to you — not because you are good enough, not because you have figured everything out, but because his steadfast love extends even to you. Even in your sin. Even in your doubt. Even in your hurt and your disappointment with God.

If you have never trusted Jesus as your Savior, today is the day. Come to him as you are. Confess your sin. Believe that he died for you and rose again. Receive the forgiveness and the life he freely offers.

If you want to make that decision today, I invite you to come and speak with me or one of our pastors after the service. Do not leave this place without settling the most important question of your soul.