

EXPOSITORY THOUGHTS
ON THE GOSPELS.

FOR FAMILY AND PRIVATE USE.

WITH THE TEXT COMPLETE.

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MATTHEW XIV. 1–12.

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| 1 At that time Herod the Tetrarch heard of the fame of Jesus, | pleased Herod. |
| 2 And said unto his servants, This is John the Baptist; he is risen from the dead; and therefore mighty works do show forth themselves in him. | 7 Whereupon he promised with an oath to give her whatsoever she would ask. |
| 3 For Herod had laid hold on John, and bound him, and put <i>him</i> in prison for Herodias' sake, his brother Philip's wife. | 8 And she, being before instructed of her mother, said, Give me here John Baptist's head in a charger. |
| 4 For John said unto him, It is not lawful for thee to have her. | 9 And the king was sorry: nevertheless for the oath's sake, and them which sat with him at meat, he commanded <i>it</i> to be given <i>her</i> . |
| 5 And when he would have put him to death, he feared the multitude, because they counted him as a prophet. | 10 And he sent, and beheaded John in the prison. |
| 6 But when Herod's birthday was kept, the daughter of Herodias danced before them, and | 11 And his head was brought in a charger, and given to the damsel: and she brought <i>it</i> to her mother. |
| | 12 And his disciples came, and took up the body, and buried it, and went and told Jesus. |

WE have in this passage a page out of God's book of martyrs: the history of the death of John the Baptist. The wickedness of king Herod, the bold reproof which John gave him, the consequent imprisonment of the faithful reprovee, and the disgraceful circumstances of his death, are all written for our learning. "Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of His saints." (Psalm cxvi. 15.)

The story of John the Baptist's death is told more fully by St. Mark than by St. Matthew. For the present it seems sufficient to draw two general lessons from St. Matthew's narrative, and to fasten our attention exclusively upon them.

Let us learn, in the first place, from these verses, *the great power of conscience*.

King Herod hears of "the fame of Jesus," and says to his servants, "This is John the Baptist: he is risen from the dead." He remembered his own wicked dealings with that holy man, and his heart failed within him. His heart told him that he had despised his godly counsel, and committed a foul and abominable murder; and his heart told him, that though he had killed John, there would yet be a reckoning day. He and John the Baptist would yet meet again. Well says Bishop Hall, "A wicked man needs no other tormentor, especially for sins of blood, than his own heart."

There is a conscience in all men by nature. Let this never be forgotten. Fallen, lost, desperately wicked as we are all born into the world, God has taken care to leave Himself a witness in our bosoms. It is a poor blind guide, without the Holy Ghost: it can save no one; it leads no one to Christ: it may be "seared" and trampled under foot. But there is such a thing as conscience in every man,

accusing or excusing him; and Scripture and experience alike declare it. (Rom. ii. 15.)

Conscience can make even kings miserable, when they have wilfully rejected its advice. It can fill the princes of this world with fear and trembling, as it did Felix, when Paul preached. They find it easier to imprison and behead the preacher, than to bind his sermon, and silence the voice of his reproof in their own hearts. God's witnesses may be put out of the way, but their testimony often lives and works on long after they are dead. God's prophets live not for ever, but their words often survive them. (2 Tim. ii. 9; Zech. i. 5.)

Let the thoughtless and ungodly remember this, and not sin against their consciences. Let them know that their sins will "surely find them out." They may laugh, and jest, and mock at religion for a little time. They may cry, "Who is afraid? Where is the mighty harm of our ways?" They may depend upon it, they are sowing misery for themselves, and will reap a bitter crop sooner or later. Their wickedness will overtake them one day. They will find, like Herod, that it is "an evil thing and bitter to sin against God." (Jerem. ii. 19.)

Let ministers and teachers remember that there is a conscience in men, and let them work on boldly. Instruction is not always thrown away, because it seems to bear no fruit at the time it is given; teaching is not always in vain, though we fancy that it is unheeded, wasted and forgotten. There is a conscience in the hearers of sermons. There is a conscience in the children at our schools. Many a sermon and lesson will yet rise again, when he who preached or taught it is lying, like John the Baptist, in the grave. Thousands know that we are right, and, like Herod, dare not confess it.

Let us learn, in the second place, *God's children must not look for their reward in this world.*

If ever there was a case of godliness unrewarded in this life it was that of John the Baptist. Let us think for a moment what a remarkable man he was during his short career and then think to what end he came. Behold him that was the "Prophet of the Highest," and "greater than any born of woman," imprisoned like a malefactor! Behold him cut off by a violent death, before the age of thirty-four: the "burning light" quenched, the faithful preacher murdered for doing his duty,—and this to gratify the hatred of an adulterous woman, and at the command of a capricious tyrant! Truly there was an event here, if there ever was one in the world, which might make an ignorant man say, "What profit is it to serve God?"

But these are the sort of things which show us that there will one day be a judgment. The God of the spirits of all flesh shall at last set up an assize, and reward everyone according to his works. The blood of John the Baptist, and

James the Apostle, and Stephen, the blood of Polycarp, and Huss, and Ridley, and Latimer, shall yet be required. It is all written in God's book. "The earth also shall disclose her blood, and shall no more cover her slain." (Isaiah xxvi. 21.) The world shall yet know that there is a God that judgeth the earth. "If thou seest the oppression of the poor, and violent perverting of judgment and justice in a province, marvel not at the matter, for He that is higher than the highest regardeth: and there be higher than they." (Eccl. v. 8.)

Let all true Christians remember that their best things are yet to come. Let us count it no strange thing if we have sufferings in this present time. It is a season of probation. We are yet at school. We are learning patience, longsuffering, gentleness and meekness, which we could hardly learn if we had our good things now. But there is an eternal holiday yet to begin; for this let us wait quietly. It will make amends for all. "Our light affliction, which is but for a moment, worketh for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory." (2 Cor. iv. 17.)

MATTHEW XIV. 13–21.

13 When Jesus heard *of it*, he departed thence by ship into a desert place apart: and when the people had heard *thereof*, they followed him on foot out of the cities.

14 And Jesus went forth, and saw a great multitude, and was moved with compassion toward them, and he healed their sick.

15 And when it was evening, his disciples came to him, saying, This is a desert place, and the time is now past; send the multitude away, that they may go into the villages, and buy themselves victuals.

16 But Jesus said unto them, They need not depart: give ye them to eat.

17 And they say unto him, We have here but five loaves and two fishes.

18 He said, Bring them hither to me.

19 And he commanded the multitude to sit down on the grass, and took the five loaves, and the two fishes, and looking up to heaven, he blessed, and brake, and gave the loaves to *his* disciples, and the disciples to the multitude.

20 And they did all eat, and were filled: and they took up of the fragments that remained twelve baskets full.

21 And they that had eaten were about five thousand men, beside women and children.

THESE verses contain one of our Lord Jesus Christ's greatest miracles: the feeding of "five thousand men, beside women and children," with five loaves and two fishes. Of all the miracles worked by our Lord, not one is so often mentioned in the New Testament as this. Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, all dwell upon it. It is plain that this event in our Lord's history is intended to receive special attention. Let us give it that attention, and see what we may learn.

In the first place, this miracle is *an unanswerable proof of our Lord's divine power*.

To satisfy the hunger of more than five thousand people with so small a portion of food as five loaves and two fishes, would be manifestly impossible without a supernatural multiplication of the food. It was a thing that no magician, impostor, or false prophet would ever have attempted. Such a person might possibly pretend to cure a single sick person, or to raise a single dead body, and by jugglery and trickery might persuade weak people that he succeeded, but such a person would never attempt such a mighty work as that which is here recorded. He would know well that he could not persuade ten thousand men, women, and children that they were full when they were hungry. He would be exposed as a cheat and impostor on the spot.

Yet this is the mighty work which our Lord actually performed, and by performing it gave a conclusive proof that He was God. He called that into being which did not before exist. He provided visible, tangible, material food for more than five thousand people, out of a supply which in itself would not have satisfied fifty. Surely we must be blind if we do not see in this the hand of Him who "giveth food to all flesh" (Psalm cxxxvi. 25), and made the world and all that therein is. To *create* is the peculiar prerogative of God.

We ought to lay firm hold on such passages as this. We should treasure up in our minds every evidence of our Lord's divine power. The cold, orthodox, unconverted man may see little in the story. The true believer should store it in his memory. Let him think of the world, the devil, and his own heart, and learn to thank God that his Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ, is almighty.

In the second place, this miracle is a *striking example of our Lord's compassion toward men*.

Jesus "saw a great multitude" in a desert place, ready to faint for hunger. He knew that many in that multitude had no true faith and love towards Himself. They followed Him for fashion's sake, or from curiosity, or some equally low motive. (John vi. 26.) But our Lord had pity upon all. All were relieved. All partook of the food miraculously provided. All were "filled," and none went away hungry.

Let us see in this the heart of our Lord Jesus Christ towards sinners. He is ever the same. He is now as He was of old, "the Lord, the Lord God, merciful and gracious, longsuffering, and abundant in goodness and truth." (Exod. xxxiv. 6.) He does not deal with men according to their sins, or reward them according to their iniquities. He loads even His enemies with benefits. None will be so excuseless as those who are found impenitent at last. The Lord's goodness leads them to repentance. (Rom. ii. 4.) In all His dealings with men on earth, He showed Himself One that "delighteth in mercy." (Micah vii. 18.) Let us strive to be like Him. "We ought," says an old writer, "to have abundance of pity and compassion on diseased souls."

In the last place, this miracle is a *lively emblem of the sufficiency of the Gospel to meet the soul-wants of all mankind*.

There can be little doubt that all our Lord's miracles have a deep figurative meaning, and teach great spiritual truths. They must be handled reverently and discreetly. Care must be taken that we do not, like many of the Fathers, see allegories where the Holy Spirit meant none to be seen. But, perhaps, if there is any miracle worked by Christ which has a manifest figurative meaning, in addition to the plain lessons which may be drawn from its surface, it is that which is now before us.

What does this hungry multitude in a desert place represent to us? It is an emblem of *all mankind*. The children of men are a large assembly of perishing sinners, famishing in the midst of a wilderness world,—helpless, hopeless, and on the way to ruin. We have all gone astray like lost sheep. (Isaiah liii. 6.) We are by nature far away from God. Our eyes may not be opened to the full extent of our danger, but in reality we are "wretched, and miserable, and poor, and

blind, and naked.” (Rev. iii. 17.) There is but a step between us and everlasting death.

What do these loaves and fishes represent, apparently so inadequate to meet the necessities of the case, but by miracle made sufficient to feed ten thousand people? They are an emblem of *the doctrine of Christ crucified for sinners*, as their vicarious Substitute, and making atonement by His death for the sin of the world. That doctrine seems to the natural man weakness itself. Christ crucified was “to the Jews a stumbling-block, and to the Greeks foolishness.” (1 Cor. i. 23.) And yet Christ crucified has proved the “bread of God which cometh down from heaven, and giveth life to the world.” (John vi. 33.) The story of the cross has amply met the spiritual wants of mankind wherever it has been preached. Thousands of every rank, age and nation, are witnesses that it is “the wisdom of God, and the power of God.” They have eaten of it and been “filled.” They have found it “meat indeed and drink indeed.”

Let us ponder these things well. There are great depths in all our Lord Jesus Christ’s recorded dealings upon earth, which no one has ever fully fathomed. There are mines of rich instruction in all His words and ways, which no one has thoroughly explored. Many a passage of the Gospels is like the cloud which Elijah’s servant saw. (1 Kings xviii. 44.) The more we look at it the greater it will appear. There is an inexhaustible fulness in Scripture. Other writings seem comparatively poor and threadbare, when we become familiar with them; but the more we read the Bible the richer we shall find it.

MATTHEW XIV. 22–36.

22 And straightway Jesus constrained his disciples to get into a ship, and to go before him unto the other side, while he sent the multitudes away.

23 And when he had sent the multitudes away, he went up into a mountain apart to pray: and when the evening was come, he was there alone.

24 But the ship was now in the midst of the sea, tossed with waves; for the wind was contrary.

25 And in the fourth watch of the night Jesus went unto them, walking on the sea.

26 And when the disciples saw him walking on the sea, they were troubled, saying, It is a spirit; and they cried out for fear.

27 But straightway Jesus spake unto them, saying, Be of good cheer; it is I; be not afraid.

28 And Peter answered him and said, Lord, if it be thou, bid me come unto thee on the water.

29 And he said, Come. And when Peter was come down out of the ship, he walked on the water, to go to Jesus.

30 And when he saw the wind boisterous, he was afraid; and beginning to sink, he cried, saying, Lord, save me.

31 And immediately Jesus stretched forth *his* hand, and caught him, and said unto him, O thou of little faith, wherefore didst thou doubt?

32 And when they were come into the ship the wind ceased.

33 Then they that were in the ship came and worshipped him, saying, Of a truth thou art the Son of God.

34 And when they were gone over, they came into the land of Gennesaret.

35 And when the men of that place had knowledge of him, they sent out into all that country round about, and brought unto him all that were diseased;

36 And besought him that they might only touch the hem of his garment: and as many as touched were made perfectly whole.

THE history contained in these verses is one of singular interest. The miracle here recorded brings out in strong light the character both of Christ and His people. The power and mercy of the Lord Jesus, and the mixture of faith and unbelief in His best disciples, are beautifully illustrated.

We learn, in the first place, from this miracle, *what absolute dominion our Saviour has over all created things*. We see Him “walking on the sea,” as if it was dry land. Those angry waves which tossed the ship of His disciples to and fro, obey the Son of God, and become a solid floor under His feet. That liquid surface, which was agitated by the least breath of wind, bears up the feet of our Redeemer, like a rock. To our poor, weak, minds, the whole event is utterly incomprehensible. The picture of two feet walking on the sea, is said by Doddridge to have been the Egyptian emblem of an impossible thing. The man of science will tell us, that for material flesh and blood to walk on water is a physical impossibility. It is enough for us to know that it was done. Enough for us to remember, that to Him who created the seas at the beginning, it must have been perfectly easy to walk over their waves when He pleased.

There is encouragement here for all true Christians. Let them know that there is nothing created which is not under Christ’s control: “All things serve Him.” He may allow His people to be tried for a season, and to be tossed to and fro by storms of trouble. He may be later than they wish in coming to their aid, and

not draw near till the “fourth watch of the night,” but never let them forget that winds, and waves, and storms are all Christ’s servants. They cannot move without Christ’s permission. “The Lord on high is mightier than the voice of many waters, yea, than the mighty waves of the sea.” (Psalm xciii. 4.) Are we ever tempted to cry with Jonah, “The floods compass me about: all thy billows and thy waves pass over me”? (Jonah ii. 3.) Let us remember they are “His” billows. Let us wait patiently. We may yet see Jesus coming to us, and “walking on the sea.”

We learn, in the second place, from this miracle, *what power Jesus can bestow on them that believe on Him*. We see Simon Peter coming down out of the ship and walking on the water, like His Lord. What a wonderful proof was this of our Lord’s divinity! To walk on the sea Himself was a mighty miracle, but to enable a poor weak disciple to do the same, was a mightier miracle still.

There is a deep meaning in this part of the history. It shows us what great things our Lord can do for those that hear His voice, and follow Him. He can enable them to do things which at one time they would have thought impossible. He can carry them through difficulties and trials, which, without Him, they would never have dared to face. He can give them strength to walk through fire and water unharmed, and to get the better of every foe. Moses in Egypt, Daniel in Babylon, the saints in Nero’s household, are all examples of His mighty power. Let us fear nothing, if we are in the path of duty. The waters may seem deep, but if Jesus says, “Come,” we have no cause to be afraid. “He that believeth on Me, the works that I do shall he do also, and greater works than these shall he do.” (John xiv. 12.)

Let us learn, in the third place, from this miracle, *how much trouble disciples bring upon themselves by unbelief*. We see Peter walking boldly on the water for a little way, but by and by, when he sees “the wind boisterous,” he is afraid, and begins to sink. The weak flesh gets the better of the willing spirit. He forgets the wonderful proofs of his Lord’s goodness and power, which he had just received. He considered not that the same Saviour who had enabled him to walk one step, must be able to hold him up for ever. He did not reflect that he was nearer to Christ when once on the water, than he was when he first left the ship. Fear took away his memory: alarm confused his reason. He thought of nothing but the winds and waves, and his immediate danger, and his faith gave way. “Lord,” he cried, “save me.”

What a lively picture we have here of the experience of many a believer! How many there are who have faith enough to take the first step in following Christ, but not faith enough to go on as they began. They take fright at the trials and dangers which seem to be in their way. They look at the enemies that sur-

round them, and the difficulties that seem likely to beset their path. They look at them more than at Jesus, and at once their feet begin to sink. Their hearts faint within them. Their hope vanishes away. Their comforts disappear.—And why is all this? Christ is not altered. Their enemies are not greater than they were.—It is just because, like Peter, they have ceased to look to Jesus, and have given way to unbelief. They are taken up with thinking about their enemies, instead of thinking about Christ. May we lay this to heart, and learn wisdom!

Let us learn, in the last place, from this miracle, *how merciful our Lord Jesus Christ is to weak believers*. We see Him stretching forth His hand immediately to save Peter, as soon as Peter cried to Him. He does not leave him to reap the fruit of his own unbelief, and to sink in the deep waters. He only seems to consider his trouble, and to think of nothing so much as delivering him from it. The only word He utters is the gentle reproof, “O thou of little faith, wherefore didst thou doubt?”

We should mark, in this concluding part of the miracle, the exceeding “gentleness of Christ.” He can bear with much, and forgive much, when He sees true grace in a man’s heart. As a mother deals gently with her infant, and does not cast it away because of its waywardness and frowardness, so does the Lord Jesus deal gently with His people. He loved and pitied them before conversion, and after conversion He loves and pities them still more. He knows their feebleness, and bears long with them. He would have us know that doubting does not prove that a man has no faith, but only that his faith is small; and even when our faith is small, the Lord is ready to help us. ”When I said, My foot slippeth; thy mercy, O Lord, held me up.” (Psalm xciv. 18.)

How much there is in all this to encourage men to serve Christ! Where is the man that ought to be afraid to begin running the Christian race, with such a Saviour as Jesus? If we fall, He will raise us again. If we err, He will bring us back. But His mercy shall never be altogether taken from us. He has said, “I will never leave thee, nor forsake thee,” and He will keep His word. (Heb. xiii. 5.) May we only remember that while we do not despise little faith we must not sit down content with it. Our prayer must ever be, “Lord, increase our faith.”