



## Chapter 14

One dictionary defines *dystopian* (dis'tōpēən) as “relating to or denoting an imagined place or state in which everything is unpleasant or bad.” Dystopian storylines are dark and unsettling. Like waking from a bad dream, they bring a sense of relief that the “imagined place or state” was not real.

### Icebreaker:

1. Have you ever watched a movie or read a book that left you relieved that it wasn't true because of how “everything [was] unpleasant or bad”? If so, share it with your group so you can all be glad it's not true!

Tragically, we all know that real life can appear dystopian. The Bible doesn't ignore this. In fact, if anything, it underscores it! The Bible—more than any other source—tells the truth about those aspects of life that we would rather wish were not true. This chapter begins with an event that is as real and about as “unpleasant” as it gets.

### Verses 1-12

Not surprisingly, Herod (the Jewish ruler/“king” Antipas, a son of *Herod the Great* from the birth narrative) hears about Jesus's ministry yet he too fails to understand His true identity. We learn that Herod suspects Jesus is a resurrected form of John the Baptist. Why? We haven't heard anything about John since chapter 11, so Matthew fills in the gaps about the end of John's life. Cover your eyes—it's a gruesome flashback.

As you read, you'll see how John confronted Herod over the ruler's immoral, law-violating behavior. John spoke truth to power and paid for it. Herod isn't the most stable of rulers. He first wants to kill John but feels pressure to keep him alive (v. 4), and then wants to keep him alive but feels pressure to kill him (v. 9). In a grotesque and tragic scene, John's life abruptly ends. Life is cheap for Herod. Maybe the real world *is* a tragic dystopian mess?

2. Events like this can make us wonder who's really in charge. Have you ever experienced a turn of events that felt like a death blow to your hope? Consider sharing your story.
3. John's faithfulness resulted in what we might think of as a premature death. This is a recurring theme, but *what are your expectations for how a “life of faithfulness to Jesus” should look?* Put differently, faithfulness may not lead to your death, but how could/has it cost you in other ways?

All along, John has been a forerunner for Jesus as, “The voice of one crying in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord’” (Matt 3:3). John preceded Jesus in being arrested. It turns out that John also preceded Jesus in death.

### Verses 13-21

Praise God that this flashback to John's senseless execution is followed up by lapel-grabbing reminders of God's sovereignty! Remember that the whole point of verses 1-12 was that Herod

speculated about who Jesus is. Now, these verses erase any mystery. They also offer spectacular insight into God's heart, God's mission, and our role in the Kingdom Community.

God's heart is one of compassion (v. 14) for the crowds. Recall Matt. 9:36 as well. Jesus knows the true state of the people and longs to bring them help and healing, like a good shepherd. God's mission is to bring this help and healing. At times, we sit back and watch the Shepherd with awe. At other times, we are called to actively engage...in spite of our inadequacies.

4. Have you felt inadequate to carry out a role God has asked you to take on? Was it too few resources, not enough ability, not enough time, too little energy, or some other limitation? How did the Lord come through in that situation?

Sometimes we do need more resources. We may need more training. We might need to give away one responsibility to make room for another. The key observation of these verses, though, is that God is doing what only He can do and He's doing it through His people.

5. What is an area where you feel compassion for people yet are hesitant to take action because you also feel inadequate for the task? Talk about this with your group and then ask God to do what only He can do...and through you!

### **Verses 22-33**

It's fitting that we see Jesus committing Himself to prayer. He's off in a lonely place (Matt. 6:5-6) and is choosing to do it above anything else. It's a model for us to follow. Another miracle is setting up even while Jesus prays, and commentators point out how it serves to reinforce the same themes as the feeding of the 5,000. God is absolutely sovereign and He calls us to exercise faith (to take action) so that He can accomplish through us what only He can accomplish! Pastor John Ortberg writes, "Let water walking be a picture of doing with God's help what I could never do on my own." In this story, Peter takes the bait.

6. Peter displays incredible faith by stepping out onto the water. Talk together about whether you've ever had a moment like this where you felt like you were defying logic to follow Jesus. What was the result?

7. We can admire Peter's faith, but we can also see—and relate to—the weakness of his faith. How has your faith been "buffeted" by the difficulties of life? We'll take time to pray about this at the end of this study.

Fear permeates this encounter, as it can our lives. The disciples feared at the sight of the "ghost" on the water. Peter feared at the sight of the wind. Now, fear is replaced by the realization or reinforcement of Jesus's true identity.

8. What are you fearful about? What would it look like for you to step out in faith, trusting in Jesus's power, in spite of that fear?

### **Verses 34-36**

These final verses demonstrate the incredible healing power of Jesus and set up the confrontation that's coming next. All that's needed for healing is a touch of Jesus's clothing!

### **Tying the Bow**

We're mid-way through Matthew's 28 chapters and see that, while sin and its effects can lead us to feel like we live in a dystopian world, Jesus reorients us to the good news of a world being invaded by a new and glorious Kingdom. It's a place where sickness is healed,

dysfunction is cured, the lost are found, and where the King's supernatural power flows in and through His Kingdom Community. To experience it, though, we, like Peter, need to step out onto the rolling waves.

9. With question 7 in mind, pray for each other, that you would have the kind of faith that trusts Jesus enough to face your fears and participate in God's supernatural work.