

Kingdom Suffers Violence

This is the third study (Matthew 11:12-19; Luke 7:29-35) in our series about John the Baptist. The series began when the forerunner of the Messiah, John the Baptist, sent two of his disciples to ask Jesus if He was the Expected One or the Messiah. In a sense, John and Jesus were team members. God had commissioned John to announce the coming of the Messiah (Malachi 3:1; Luke 1:16-17) and Jesus was the Messiah (Matt. 1:1). John had been in prison for about twelve to eighteen months when he sent the two disciples to Jesus. It appears from the question that was asked in Matthew 11:2-3 that John had started to have doubts that Jesus was the Messiah. So Jesus performed many miracles to demonstrate that he was the Messiah, and the two men returned to John to report what they saw. John may have lost focus. Certainly his situation blurred his understanding of what he thought was to occur. Jesus' miracles were reminders that He was the Expected One.

The Setting. There were five groups of people present when John's two disciples asked their significant question. The first team included Jesus and His twelve disciples. John the Baptist and his disciples were the second team. Some in the third team - Jesus' faithful followers - may have been critical of John for doubting Jesus and some may have wondered what was happening. Those who were curious, the fourth group, would have been clueless as to what was occurring. The last group would have been the Jewish religious leaders who probably rejoiced that John's disciples had asked the question. It appears that Jesus praised John so that everyone could understand who he was. Jesus explained why John was in jail, and what was occurring in the kingdom of heaven.

We saw in our last study that first Jesus reminded the

crowds that they did not come out into the desert to see a reed blowing in the wind or a man dressed in soft clothing. They had come looking for a prophet, the forerunner of the Messiah.

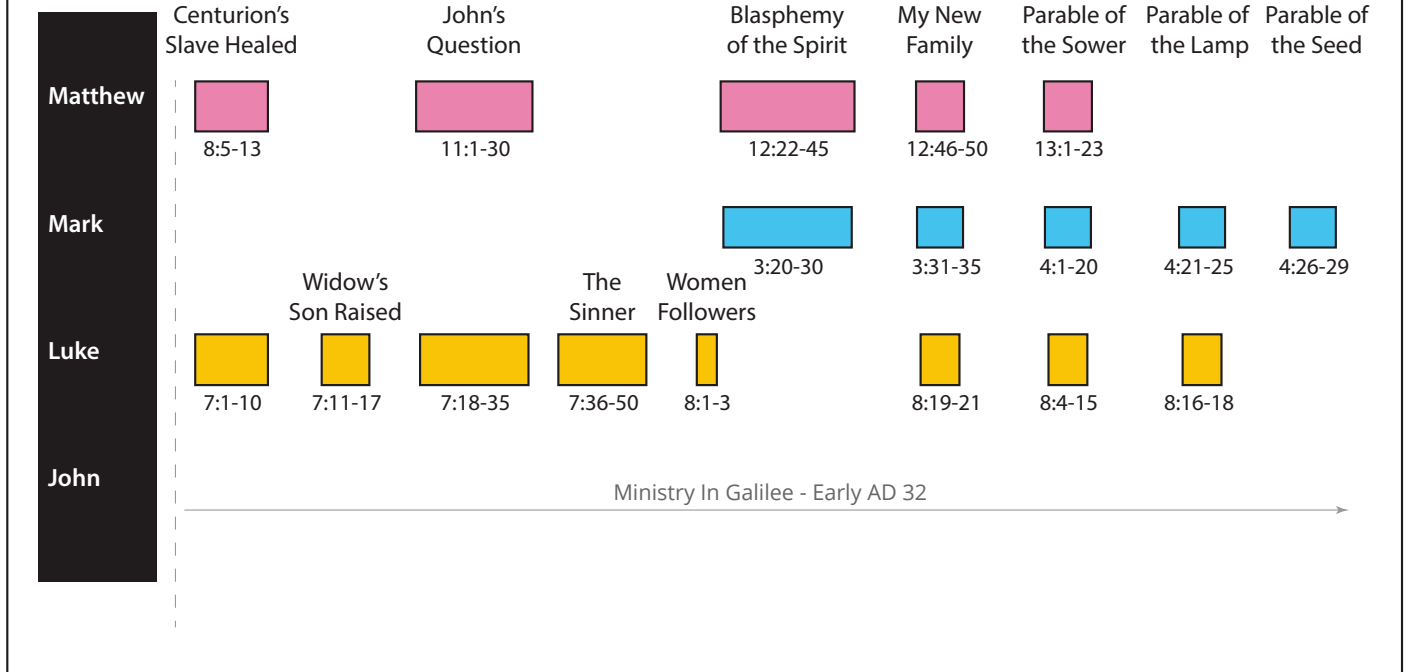


But what did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and one who is more than a prophet. This is the one about whom it is written, "Behold, I send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you." Matthew 11:9-10 (NASB)

Jesus also told the crowds that John was the greatest of all the prophets since the creation. He was greater than Moses. Matthew 11:8-10 is about John the Baptist. Matthew 11:11 described John's importance. In verse 11 Jesus told the

Life and Heart of Jesus

Ministry In Galilee



people that John was not more important than those who were in the kingdom of heaven. It was better to be in the kingdom of heaven than here on earth.

The Kingdom Suffers. This study starts with a difficult statement Jesus made about the kingdom of heaven suffering violence,

From the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven suffers violence, and violent men take it by force. For all the prophets and the Law prophesied until John. Matthew 11:12-13 (NASB)

The meaning of this passage is not clear, since the phrase “suffers violence” is either a present passive or middle verb. Both Greek words are the same. Therefore, the meaning of the phrase could be that the kingdom of God suffers violence from an external source or the kingdom is aggressively pushing itself forward. In the first statement the kingdom of heaven is passively receiving the action. In the second statement the kingdom is acting upon itself. Both are true. Let’s

look at both closer.

External Violence. By saying that all the prophets had prophesied until the time of John, Jesus declared that the divine plan of the ages was coming together. God’s great plan for Israel was near completion. The Apostle Peter tells us that the prophets had prophesied about Jesus, and the angels of heaven desired to know more about when Jesus would appear and what would occur.

As to this salvation, the prophets who prophesied of the grace that would come to you made careful searches and inquiries, seeking to know what person or time the Spirit of Christ within them was indicating as He predicted the sufferings of Christ and the glories to follow. It was revealed to them that they were not serving themselves, but you, in these things which now have been announced to you through those who preached the gospel to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven—things into which angels long to look. 1 Peter 1:10-12 (NASB)

The time had arrived for the Messiah to come; therefore, the forerunner appeared. The long wait for the prophets and angels was over. The crowds were standing on the threshold of sacred history. John the Baptist and Jesus had been announcing that the kingdom of heaven, or the kingdom of God, was near, and it was. The phrase “kingdom of God” describes who controls it, and “the kingdom of heaven” tells us where God’s kingdom is. All the Law and the Prophets had pointed to the time of John. He was the forerunner of the Messiah.

But there were those who did not want the kingdom that Jesus offered. The Jewish populace had been looking for an earthly kingdom. They wanted to be liberated from the Roman Empire. The people had a different concept of the kingdom. They were looking for a king and kingdom, not one who would die for their sins. The Jewish leaders wanted liberation from the Romans whom they hated. They probably assumed that they would be leaders in the Messiah’s kingdom.

John the Baptist and Jesus were not offering the type of kingdom largely expected. King Herod, a Gentile, did not like John’s call to holiness (Matthew 17:12-13; John 5:33-35) and put him in prison. John eventually died because he stood for righteousness. He died before Jesus died on the cross (Matthew 14:1-12; Luke 6:14-21).

The Pharisees did not like Jesus’ popularity and His rejection of their religious teachings and practices (Luke 5:21). As a result, they wanted to murder Him (John 5:18). Eventually they succeeded.

Therefore when the people saw the sign which He had performed, they said, “This is truly the Prophet who is to come into the world.” So Jesus, perceiving that they were intending to come and take Him by force to make Him king, withdrew again to the mountain by Himself alone. John 6:14-15 (NASB)

Internal Violence. The other possible meaning of the phrase “suffers violence” is that the kingdom of heaven was pushing forward on its own. John and Jesus had arrived as the prophets had predicted. God was and is sovereign, and His will

was being accomplished on earth as it is in heaven. God was not a victim and the response on earth was expected. Men and women were responding to Jesus’ message. Jesus had twelve leaders with Him and many followers. Jesus was eliminating disease, resurrecting some of the dead, and casting out demons. Thousands of people were coming to hear Jesus teach and heal. It must have been an exciting time in the land for the people, and a time of restless nights for the Jewish leaders. The kingdom was pushing forward in spite of the hostility. The kingdom of heaven was suffering violence from within and from without. Both were true.

Violent Men. The mystery of the last part of the verse “violent men take it by force” becomes clear when we discover that the meaning of the English phrase “take it by force” in the Greek is one word and has the idea of “seizing by force with the purpose of removing and/or controlling.” That is, violent men were attempting to remove or control the kingdom. It is clear that the Pharisees did not like John, Jesus, or their kingdom. Repeatedly, they attempted to control it.

Luke 6:1-11 and John 4:1 reveal that the Jewish leaders were watching Jesus closely. John 5:10-17 indicates that the Jewish leaders wanted Jesus to change His teaching and practices. They objected to His claim that He was God and could forgive sins (Luke 5:21). Finally, it was clear to them that they could not control Jesus. He would not stop teaching contrary to their practices, and He was claiming to be God. So they decided to remove Him.

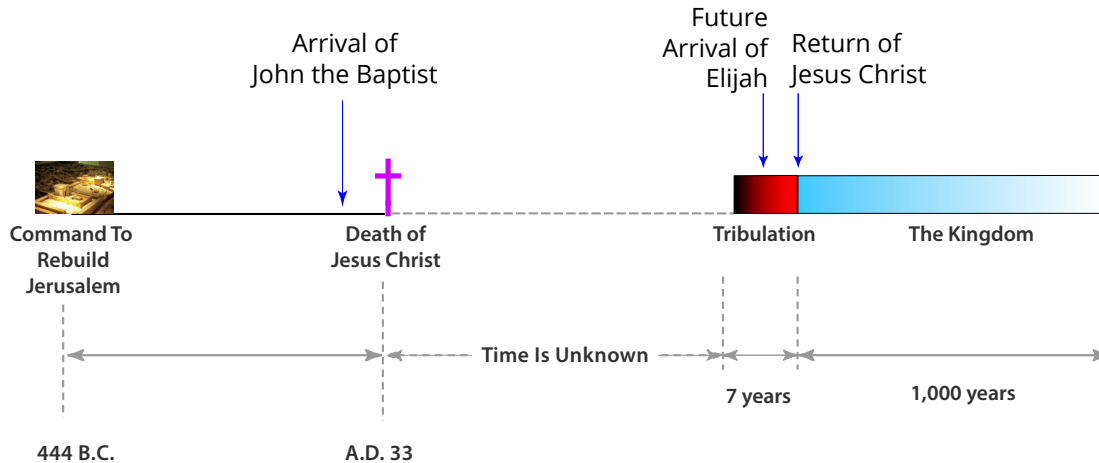
In Luke 16:16 Jesus repeated the statement, as teachers often do.

The Law and the Prophets were proclaimed until John; since that time the gospel of the kingdom of God has been preached, and everyone is forcing his way into it. Luke 16:16 (NASB)

This statement helps us understand Matthew 11:12. Since the gospel or good news of the kingdom was being preached (and it still is) by Jesus, it is clear that the kingdom was moving forward and it was being attacked by violent men who were attempting to control it and its messengers.

With this short statement Jesus told the crowds who John

Future: As Predicted by the Prophets



was and why he was in prison. The people did not know yet that even Jesus would be killed. The mission, the plan, the movement of God was being attacked. Their expectations, dreams, and hopes would soon end. They did not realize that Jesus did not come to give them a military or political kingdom. That would come in the future. Jesus came to give eternal life so that they could live with God in holiness and righteousness.

John Is Elijah. Then Jesus made a stunning statement to the crowd,

And if you are willing to accept it, John himself is Elijah who was to come. Matthew 11:14 (NASB)

During the Passover Meal, which celebrated their exodus out of Egypt under Moses, every Jewish family would leave a place at the table for Elijah. The place setting with plate, glass, and silverware would be set out just in case Elijah might come during the meal. It was a symbolic reminder of his future coming. They had hoped and dreamed that Elijah would come some day. So when Jesus said that He had already come, what do you think they thought? How did they feel?

John had been asked early in his ministry if he was Elijah

and he had answered, “No!” (John 1:21). So why did Jesus say that John the Baptist was Elijah and John said he was not? Discovery of the answer starts with Luke 1:16-17 where the angel Gabriel told his father, Zacharias, that John would come in the spirit and power of Elijah. He was not Elijah. He came in the spirit and power of Elijah. Then sometime later, Jesus and His disciples had this conversation,

And His disciples asked Him, “Why then do the scribes say that Elijah must come first?” And He answered and said, “Elijah is coming and will restore all things; but I say to you that Elijah already came, and they did not recognize him, but did to him whatever they wished. So also the Son of Man is going to suffer at their hands.” Then the disciples understood that He had spoken to them about John the Baptist. Matthew 17:10-13 (NASB)

Here Jesus is asked about Elijah’s coming. The disciples apparently were interested in the signs of the coming of the end and were trying to understand the future and the events that must come first before the kingdom. Jesus’ answer is wonderfully simple. Elijah is coming and will come. He spoke of the present AND the future. Then Jesus used the

past tense, “Elijah already came.” That is, Elijah “is,” “will come,” and “has already come.” He came. He is present. He will come! The end of the above passage reveals that His disciples understood He was talking about John the Baptist.

What was Jesus saying? His point was that John the Baptist was Elijah because Malachi 4:5 had predicted that Elijah would come before the Day of the Lord - before the coming of the Messiah. But John had been rejected and Jesus was being rejected and both would eventually die. This was part of God’s plan. It was in God’s plan for Jesus to die for our sins and then some day to return a second time to establish an earthly kingdom. The heavenly kingdom would come to earth and exist on the earth for 1,000 years. Jesus will return again some day to set up that kingdom; but before that occurs, the real Elijah will finally come. So John came in the power and spirit of Elijah the first time and Elijah will come at a future time.

[He who has ears to hear, let him hear. Matthew 11:14-15 \(NASB\)](#)

This Generation. The purpose of the king - Jesus Christ - was being accomplished. He had come to die first in order to save us from our sins and then to reign later as king in an earthly kingdom. The purpose, mission and goals of the king were being accomplished, and the hostile forces of this world were attacking the forerunner and the king (Matthew 27:11; John 18:36-37). It was all out spiritual war! Ephesians 6:12 reminds us that ultimately our real struggle is not with men but with the dark forces of the spiritual world,

[For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the powers, against the world forces of this darkness, against the spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places. Ephesians 6:12 \(NASB\)](#)

These forces have always used men and women in an attempt to win. When they are successful, spiritual tragedy and all kinds of evil occur.

Satan tried to stop Jesus by tempting Him to sin (Matt. 4:1-11), but he failed. Then the dark forces in the spiritual world found men, women, and Jewish leaders they could use. What was the result? Jesus described it to the crowds this way,

[But to what shall I compare this generation? It is like children sitting in the market places, who call out to the other children, and say, “We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we sang a dirge, and you did not mourn.” Matthew 11:16-17 \(NASB\)](#)

Jesus’ illustration is a picture of children who want others to play their game, to cooperate, and do as they desire, and He applies it to this generation. The word generation is *Genea* in the Greek. It means “race, descendants, progeny, and those who are living at the same time.” The Jewish leaders wanted others to play by their rules and adopt their religious practices and beliefs. Jesus’ illustration is great. It sounds like kids, “We played the flute for you, but you did not dance!” “We sang a dirge, a mournful song, and you did not mourn!” You can just imagine them saying with a critical tone in their voice, “Why do you not play with us?”

Neither John nor Jesus played the spiritual game of the religious leaders. So they criticized and found fault with John the Baptist and Jesus. Jesus illustrated their criticism like this,

[For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, “He has a demon!” The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, “Behold, a gluttonous man and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!” Yet wisdom is vindicated by her deeds. Matthew 11:18-19 \(NASB\)](#)

It did not matter what they did. They were criticized by the religious leaders and probably by some very devout Jewish men and women.

Conclusion. John the Baptist and Jesus Christ were not engaged in a struggle between different religious ideas or different religious leaders. The great conflict that they were

engaged in was a battle for the souls of men and women and they were winning! John had failed to understand that. John did not realize that he had to be rejected and die too! it was part of the plan of God. Jesus' death was part of the plan (Acts 2:22-23). During Jesus' ministry He said that we are either for Him or against Him. We either believe Him and commit ourselves to Him or we are against Him. Where are you?

For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish, but have eternal life. For God did not send the Son into the world to judge the world, but that the world should be saved through Him. He who believes in Him is not judged; he who does not believe has been judged already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God. John 3:16-18 (NASB)