

John and Elijah

Call to Worship: Psalm 90

1st Scripture: Luke 16:14-18

2nd Scripture: Matthew 11:1-15

Introduction

Following our Lord's response to John the Baptist's doubting inquiry, last time, we considered our Lord's comments to the multitudes, which unveiled both the greatness and the weakness of John the Baptist. As the forerunner of the Christ, John was, by way of privilege and position, the greatest of the Old Testament prophets. And yet, because of the pre-New Covenant limitation of light that he had, being the last of the Old Covenant prophets, John was less than the least, who was in the Kingdom of Heaven.

This morning, we continue onward, examining some additional comments that the Lord makes about John, especially concerning his connection to, and identification with, the prophet Elijah.

I. The Kingdom of Heaven Suffers Violence

“Assuredly, I say to you, among those born of women there has not risen one greater than John the Baptist; but he who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he. *And from the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven suffers violence, and the violent take it by force*” (vs. 11-12).

Moving into verse 12 here, we come to a text that can be very difficult to grasp, especially when approaching it with our natural understanding of the English words “violence” and “violent.” The word “violent” here is simply the noun form of the other word “violence,” and this is the only place it is used in the entire New Testament. And the word “violence” (the verb form) is only used in one other place in the New Testament, namely, in our first Scripture reading (which happens to be a parallel text). And so, we don't have a lot to work with, within the scope of the New Testament, to help us pin down the meaning of this term. That said, our

context here, along with its use in our first Scripture reading, can definitely aid in helping us to unlock the meaning.

There are generally two ways, in which, verse 11 is interpreted. First, from the negative standpoint, some think Jesus is speaking about the opposition and violence which comes against the Kingdom of Heaven, from the enemies of God. In this sense, the increasing tension between the religious leaders and Jesus, which will ultimately lead to the crucifixion of the Lord and the ongoing persecution of the Apostles (and the early church), could be in mind. And furthermore (and perhaps more relevant to the immediate context), John himself, having been put in prison by Herod (which will ultimately lead to his beheading) could support this interpretation.

But then, secondly, from a positive standpoint, this could be understood as relating to the great number of people who had responded well to John the Baptist's ministry, and then the Lord's ministry (following John), who were flocking toward and pressing forcefully into the kingdom of heaven, or taking it by storm, as it were.

In my opinion, the context, and Luke's parallel account (where the same Greek term interpreted "violence" here, is used) both support the second view. Regarding the first interpretation, contextually, it would be hard to justify the Lord's use of the word "violence" to describe what has been coming against the Kingdom of Heaven, *from the time of John up to the present*. Yes, John was in prison, and yes, the Pharisees were contending with Jesus, but up to this point, one could hardly view the entire work of the Kingdom as being opposed "violently." All in all, with the exception of John himself (who was imprisoned, not for preaching the kingdom of God, so much as he was, for calling King Herod out for his adultery), the Kingdom was spreading pretty freely (and with little to no persecution/violence at all) at this point. It is not until the Lord actually inaugurates the New Covenant in its fullness (at the Lord's Supper), that the violence begins, first in our Lord's crucifixion, and then in the persecution of the Apostles and the early church. And furthermore, it would just seem awkward, in this context, where our Lord is responding to John's question of doubt, highlighting his greatness and limitation, that he would bring up the matter of violence coming from opposition. What precedes and what follows verse 12, would seem to make such a statement superfluous and meaningless to the overall context, which is well-connected otherwise.

That said, the second view, seeing it from the positive standpoint, regarding those pushing into the kingdom, makes good contextual sense. Let me explain why I say this.

1) In our immediate context, Jesus is both commending John as the greatest (the most privileged) of all prophets, because of his ministry as the forerunner of the Christ, while highlighting John's weakness, as to the level of understanding he had (which led him to question Jesus) because of his limitation to Old Covenant light. Those in the Kingdom of Heaven, particularly following the inauguration of the New Covenant (after the cross), would have much greater light than John had, being the last of the Old Covenant prophets.

That said, the Lord is still continuing with these thoughts, as he moves into verses 12 and 13. To this end, here, the Lord is highlighting the success of John's ministry, particularly in his faithfulness to prepare the way. John had faithfully accomplished what he was ordained by God to do, in accordance with the Old Testament prophecies that were given about him. Next time, Lord willing, we will see how our Lord builds on this, to expose a critical problem with the Jews (vs. 16-19).

And so, by highlighting the success of John's ministry, in fulfilling his calling as the "forerunner" and "way-preparer" of the Christ, the Lord then states, "And from the days of John the Baptist (that is to say, from the days when John the Baptist was ministering, unto the revealing of the Christ at His baptism, when John had pointed his followers to Christ, and was now imprisoned) until now (up to the present ministry of Christ, where large multitudes of people were following and flocking to Him), the Kingdom of Heaven suffers violence, and the violent take it by force." What then does our Lord mean when He speaks of the Kingdom of Heaven "suffering violence, and the violent taking it by force?" He is talking about the success of John's ministry, as everyone was flocking to John out in the wilderness, seeking his baptism and expressing the desire to enter into the Kingdom of Heaven. Remember, John was calling everyone to be baptized and to repent of their sins, in preparation for the coming Messiah. And that is exactly what was happening. Large multitudes of people were pressing in, to see and hear John, and to receive his baptism. They were dissatisfied and left empty with the religious Judaism of the day. The spiritual climate was dead. A prophet had not come to Israel for over four hundred years! They were looking for hope, and John (the unshaken reed, the faithful and

committed prophet, who wore not soft clothing— who had no ulterior motives as the Pharisees and the religious leaders did), provided that hope for them. And to this end, he faithfully fulfilled his mission. He had successfully prepared the way for the Christ, such that, by the time the Christ had arrived, the people were ready to receive Him.

And when the Christ was revealed to John, John exhorted his followers to now follow the Christ. He (the friend of the Bridegroom) decreased, so that Christ (the Bridegroom) might increase. And now, right up to the present day, people were still forcefully pushing their way into the Kingdom of Heaven. They were flocking to Jesus, listening to His Words, hungry for the hope which the Kingdom had provided. Now, while there were large groups of Jews who were not truly converted, and who had ultimately come to reject the Christ, there were also many true believers, who were pressing into the Kingdom. And because Jesus was healing the sick and casting out demons; because He was binding the strong-man (satan) with His authority, those who were once themselves bound by satan, were not only freed from that bondage, but they were further, rushing into the Kingdom, taking the plunder, as Christ continued to usher in His Kingdom, which would ultimately take full root at the cross, followed by the laying of the foundation by His Apostles. And so, the word “violence” here is not meant to convey the ideas of bloodshed or harm, but rather, it is meant to convey the ideas of “pressure” and “force.” Once the gates were opened up by the preaching and ministry of John, and then continuing on with the preaching and healing ministry of Christ, the people were taking the Kingdom of Heaven by storm! And the Greek word used here does allow for this type of meaning.

In fact, look with me at a text, which parallels this idea, and where the Greek word for violence, finds its only other New Testament usage. Let’s look again at our first Scripture reading, found in Luke 16:14-18 [Read now].

Notice, the Pharisees who were self-righteous and lovers of money (they boasted in their mere outward obedience to the law, and they were committed to the goods of this world) had completely missed the wave that was sweeping through the nation. The Kingdom of Heaven swept right passed them, and right under their noses. And in very similar language to our text, Jesus states, “The law and the prophets were until John (we will get to this in a few moments, back in Matthew 11). Since that time the kingdom of God has been preached, and everyone is

pressing into it.” The word “pressing” here (“Biazetai”), is the same exact Greek word that is translated “suffering violence” in our main text. Again, this is the only other time the word is used in the New Testament, and you can see the similar ideas being spoken of by Jesus here, as He is speaking of back in Matthew 11. This is not harmful and bloody opposition from God’s enemies, coming against the Kingdom of God. This is a forceful pressing into the Kingdom of God by believers. And in spite of this great movement that was taking place, the allegedly most religious of the Jews, completely missed it, being blinded by their own self-righteousness and materialism.

Before we move on, let’s just take a quick peak at the direct, *historical*, parallel account in Luke’s Gospel to our main text in Matthew 11. There is something that Luke adds there, which further affirms our understanding of all that we have gone over thus far. [Read Luke 7:24-30; emphasizing verses 29-30]. Notice, Luke adds that little bit of additional narrative in verses 29-30, which gives us additional insight into the meaning of our main text, which interestingly enough is not actually stated here, even though, we know this is exactly where our Lord spoke those words, because of the historical context. What did the people do, when Jesus commented about the ministry of John, declaring him to be the greatest prophet among those born of women? They justified God; they all (even the tax collectors) agreed with Jesus, having themselves been baptized by John. They were part of the rush; they were among those pressing into the kingdom by force, as it were. However, the Pharisees and the lawyers, we are told, rejected the will of God for themselves, not having been baptized by John. They missed the wave. It passed right over them, and they themselves never pressed into the glorious Kingdom of God!” Now friends, this will become very important to us, when we take application from this shortly. All of that said, for now, let us then get back to our main text in Matthew 11.

II. John and Elijah

In verse 13, Jesus adds, “For all the prophets and the law prophesied until John.” That is to say that, all of the Old Testament Scriptures had prophesied and spoken about these very things until John. Every portion of Old Covenant revelation, ultimately pointed to that which hit its high point (and culminated) in the ministry of John, as the Kingdom of Heaven had now

arrived, in the revealing of the Christ, for whom, John had prepared the way. In other words, this is that most critical juncture, which all of God's Old Covenant revelation had ultimately pointed to; John brings in the crescendo of all prophesy, beginning right from the time in Genesis 3, when God had declared the victory which the Seed of the Woman would have over the seed of the serpent, and right up to the last prophecy, spoken by Malachi, concerning the future coming of Elijah the prophet... all of that culminates right here, at the arrival of the Christ; John being the last of the Old Covenant prophets... and in fact, "if you can handle it," Jesus adds, "By the way, John is Elijah, spoken of in that final prophecy!" Notice verse 14, "And if you are willing to receive it (if your heart is not hardened, but rather softened unto receiving the truth), he (John) is Elijah who is to come."

Now, at first glance, this seems to be contradictory to what John himself had stated in John 1:21. When the religious leaders had sent priests and Levites to John, to find out who he was, John responded "No," when they asked him if he was Elijah. The reason for this was simple. Misunderstanding Malachi's prophecy, the Jews thought that Elijah himself, literally was going to come again. And so, John was simply stating that he was not literally Elijah. John was John. However, in keeping with our present text, in Matthew 17:10-13, we are told that Jesus's disciples had asked him, "Why then do the scribes say that Elijah must come first?" And "Jesus answered and said to them, 'Indeed, Elijah is coming first and will restore all things. But I say to you that Elijah has come already, and they did not know him but did to him whatever they wished. Likewise the Son of Man is also about to suffer at their hands.' Then the disciples understood that *He spoke to them of John the Baptist.*" And then again, in Luke 1:16-17, we unlock the mystery to the quandary, when we consider these words from the angel, who had first approached Zacharias (John's father), to tell him that his wife would have a son: "And he (John) will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God. He will also go before Him *in the spirit and power of Elijah*, 'to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children,' and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord." And so, here we find that while John would not literally be Elijah, he would come in the *power and spirit* of Elijah. And so, John, in his day, would resemble Elijah, from his day, in very significant ways. Some of you may recall, that when Elisha (Elijah's protege) was asked what he wanted from the Lord, his

answer was that he wanted a double portion of the spirit of Elijah. Now, this was not Elisha asking God to literally clone two of Elijah, and to insert them into Elisha. No, he so loved his master, that he wanted God not simply to grant him the same character of faithfulness and power, but even a double portion of it! It were, as if, he were saying, “Please take what that godly man has been given by you, and double that in me, so that, I could increase the great use of all that is good in that faithful man of God.” And so, all in all, John was the fulfillment of that final prophecy given by Malachi. Let’s then read Malachi 4, to see exactly how John was to fulfill this prophecy [Read Malachi 4 now].

Here, God is speaking to Israel, who, once again, has corrupted herself, not having learned from her former exile. And once again, the priesthood was grossly defiled as well. And so, in Chapter 4, God speaks of a “Day” which is coming, where He will bring ultimate and final judgment upon the nation. He will no longer tolerate their rebellion and their turning away from Him. To this end, this “Day of the Lord,” speaks of what will take place in AD70, when God, by use of the Romans, destroys the temple, and brings severe and total judgment upon the nation. At that point, the Old Covenant will have come to its end, and God’s dealings with Israel as a separate nation; as His own special people, will come to an end. However, before that “Day of the Lord,” God will do something beyond marvelous and gracious to the nation. He will send the “Sun of Righteousness, with healing in His wings,” who will redeem those who repent and turn from their wicked ways. This Sun of Righteousness is, of course, the Lord Jesus Christ, who would usher in the Kingdom of Heaven, and redeem all of His true people, before bringing judgment upon the nation. And the sign of the Christ’s coming, would be the coming of Elijah, who would prepare the way for the Christ, by preaching a baptism of repentance to the nation, calling the Israelites to do, what they had done to those Gentiles who wanted to become proselytized. They would be washed by baptism (signifying the washing away of their sins in repentance) and prepare themselves to receive the Messiah, who would redeem them from their sins. And so, God would provide full atonement and grace to the nation, for any and all who would believe in His Christ. And of course, as we had seen, the religious leaders, by and large missed this opportunity, when many others were pressing their way into the Kingdom.

To this end, John (in the spirit and power of Elijah) would turn the hearts of the fathers to the children and the children to their fathers, in that, he would bring the people back to the truth, which was abandoned as the nation had gone astray. John would be a proclaimer of the truth, leading the people back onto the right path, and into God's Kingdom through the Christ, who would soon follow.

And so, in what sense did John come in the spirit and power of Elijah? Obviously, not by miraculous signs, which Elijah had done. John did no miraculous signs. But, in fact, in a greater and more powerful way. Like Elijah, John would expose the defiled and utterly lost condition of the Jews, leading them back to the One true God. Remember, Elijah's entire ministry culminated in a major event, which exposed the wicked and deceptive path of Baal, while revealing that YHWH alone was the only True and Living God. After proclaiming the 3 1/2 year drought, Elijah was again sent to the dying nation of Israel, which was fading away in starvation. It was virtually lifeless. And just before he prayed for the rain to come, what happened? Elijah had the great showdown at Mount Carmel with the prophets of Baal, who were brought into Israel through Jezebel the wicked Sidonian, whom Ahab had married. And it was at that showdown when God had proven Himself to be the Only True and Living God, by consuming Elijah's sacrifice, that the 450 prophets of Baal were slain by the people. And the once wavering people were now shouting, "The Lord (YHWH), He is God! The Lord, He is God!" And then, following this, Elijah brought Ahab to see the little cloud that would begin to pour rain on the utterly barren and arid nation. And so, it was at that showdown that Elijah had exposed the lie of Baal, and revealed YHWH to be God alone.

Well, in that spirit and power, John would turn the people away from their wicked ways and the corrupt Judaism of the religious leaders, so that, through the Christ, they would return to God, once again, proclaiming YHWH to be the True and Living God! And to this end, John had succeeded, as many came out to be baptized by him, and then were delivered over to Jesus, once He was revealed as the Messiah. And so, the Lord then says to the multitudes, "He who has ears to hear, let him hear." Elijah has come, and he has prepared the way. If God has given you ears to hear the truth, then hear it, and enter into the Kingdom of Heaven. Now brethren, before we conclude with a few important closing thoughts, let's recall the opening scene of our main text.

What brought Jesus to say all of these things? Wasn't it John beginning to question the very thing that he himself had borne witness to before, and which Jesus was affirming (ironically, through John) now? "Are you the Christ, or should we look for someone else?" And so, here Jesus reaffirms the answer to that very question, by what has been evidenced from the time of John up to the present. [Jesus was healing the sick, and the poor were hearing the Gospel...] People were pressing in! The Kingdom did indeed come. But, John lost sight of the obvious even, because of failed expectations, and covenantal limitations, which made all of the Old Covenant prophets "less" than even the least in the New Covenant Kingdom. And here is the profound irony. Didn't Elijah lose hope, after Jezebel and Ahab still failed to respond to all that had happened on Mount Carmel, and the coming of the rain? Elijah wanted God to take his life, seeing himself as a failed prophet, because his expectations got ahead of God. He doubted. Even the greatest of God's prophets struggled with doubts and fears, as they lacked the understanding that we have in the New Covenant, and as intense trials brought those limitations and weaknesses to the foreground.

III. Closing Thoughts

Friends, it is important to recognize that what has happened to Israel, at the local level, is also a foreshadowing of what is happening at the universal level with the whole world. The Kingdom of God has been pressing forward from the time of Christ up to the present. And while it began at Jerusalem, it has moved out into Judea, and then Samaria, and ultimately into the whole world. And there is a wave of people, who are still pressing into that Kingdom, as they embrace Christ and His Gospel, by faith.

That said, not all are entering in, and in fact, most are not entering in. Let me exhort you this morning, if you have not responded to the Gospel call; if you have not repented of your sins, and embraced Christ by faith, submitting to His sovereign rule, then know that you are on dangerous ground. You are on a sinking ship. Seek Christ now, while the gateway to His Kingdom is still open,. Enter the ark before the flood comes, and God shuts the door! And do so, forcefully! That is, don't be casual about it. Don't be casual about the condition and destiny of your never-dying soul! Plead with God; pray with all fervency; wrestle with God like Jacob

did, and don't let go until you are sure that God has blessed you with salvation. Friends, the house is on fire, and it is burning down! Flee to the safety that is Christ, now, before it is too late. What if everyone treated the Kingdom of God, like they treat Walmart or Target on Black Friday! What if they came before God in prayer with such urgency! Oh friends, don't invest all of your energy and life into the material world, which is passing away! Seek Christ; seek first His Kingdom, before it is too late.

You see, even as Israel was judged in AD70, worldwide judgment is coming our way! The utter breakdown of our nation, and every other great nation of the past, is evidence of that. Press into the Kingdom; rush into it, like you would, to get the spoils from a conquered city! Seek the Lord while He can be found; call upon Him while He is near... for your end draws near, and you will soon stand before God in the final judgment. And you will give an account. And your eternal destiny will be set, incapable of being changed, once that happens. Enter... enter by the narrow gate and be saved! Jesus Christ died to reconcile sinners to God. And He rose again unto their justification. Seek Him now, with the utmost urgency! You will never regret it! Don't, and you will eternally regret it!

AMEN!!!

Benediction: Jude 1:24-25