

CITIZENS OF THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN

September 17, 2017

Matthew 11:1-30

“Verily I say unto you, among them that are born of women there hath not risen a greater than John the Baptist: notwithstanding he that is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.”

Matthew 11:11

In the same breath, Jesus Christ pronounced John the Baptist the greatest man born of woman, and affirmed that the least of heaven’s citizens is greater than him. What is His meaning?

John (3:2) and Christ (4:17) preached that the kingdom of heaven was “at hand,” and Jesus instructed His disciples to preach the same (10:7). Although future to them, its inauguration was very near. By parables, Jesus taught that it would begin very small, like a “grain of mustard seed” that it would grow immensely, attracting many who were not truly part of it (13:31-32; 47-48), and that the “enemy” would thereby seek to sabotage its effectiveness (13:24-30).

While teaching these parables, Jesus said to His disciples, “many prophets and righteous men have desired to see those things which ye see, and have not seen them; and to hear those things which ye hear, and have not heard them” (13:17). Later, Peter wrote that prophets “enquired and searched diligently, who prophesied of the grace that should come unto you . . . unto whom it was revealed, that not unto themselves, but unto us they did minister the things, which are now reported unto you by them that have preached the gospel” (I Peter 1:10-12).

“These all died in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them afar off, and were persuaded of them, and embraced them, and confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth” (Hebrews 11:13). By introducing Christ to the multitudes, John introduced the new era sought by these prophets. But John did not partake of that new era. From prison, he enquired whether Jesus was Messiah. Jesus’ answer enumerated His miraculous works (Matthew 11:1-3). Thereby John could know that Jesus was Messiah, and that a new era of divine favor—the kingdom of heaven—was underway.

John was the last prophet of the old spiritual economy. It was replaced by the kingdom that it foreshadowed. Prior to Christ’s coming, God’s grace was bestowed upon believers whose resulting faith was exhibited by obedience and many sacrifices.

The new economy had only one sacrifice: Christ. Rather than sacrificing a sin offering, believers confess to God in Jesus’ name, knowing that God accepts them on the basis of Christ’s sacrifice. The old economy included occasional visitations by the Spirit of God to aid God’s people. The new economy includes the descent of the Holy Spirit upon Christ at His baptism and upon believers at Pentecost, to dwell permanently among and within them (Acts 2; John 14:16-18; 15:26, 27; 16:7-16). The atoning work of Christ is now known by citizens of His kingdom in a way Old Testament believers could not know. And a completed Bible is ours. John and those before him had only part of the Scripture.

These blessings wrought by Christ’s death and resurrection enrich the spiritual assets of believers beyond any Old Testament provision. They comprise a standing with God that Old Testament saints yearned to know, but did not have. In many respects, John the Baptist stood in darkness,

like one awaiting sunrise, compared with the illumination enjoyed by New Testament believers. Herein, the greatest man in Christ's assessment lacked what the least citizen in God's kingdom possesses.