

INTRODUCTION

In one of the most famous scenes from “I Love Lucy,” Lucy and Ethel get jobs at a candy making company. They are supposed to take chocolates off a conveyor belt and wrap them. At first they are able to keep up, but the belt starts moving faster and faster. Eventually, the line is moving so fast that they are stuffing candy in their mouths, their hats, their clothes – everywhere they can.

Life seems like that much of the time. There really aren’t very many things that we couldn’t handle, if only they came slowly and one at a time. But often the trials and tribulations of life rush at us so fast that we are overwhelmed.

In our passage today, Jesus continues to speak about John the Baptist – and it’s all very interesting and helpful – and He also gives us some insight into our own lives today. Let’s read the Scripture and then dive in:

Matthew 11:7–15 (2016 ESV) — 7 As they went away, Jesus began to speak to the crowds concerning John: “What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed shaken by the wind? **8** What then did you go out to see? A man dressed in soft clothing? Behold, those who wear soft clothing are in kings’ houses. **9** What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. **10** This is he of whom it is written, “ ‘Behold, I send my messenger before your face, who will prepare your way before you.’ **11** Truly, I say to you, among those born of women there has arisen no one greater than John the Baptist. Yet the one who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he. **12** From the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven has suffered violence, and the violent take it by force. **13** For all the Prophets and the Law prophesied until John, **14** and if you are willing to accept it, he is Elijah who is to come. **15** He who has ears to hear, let him hear.

JESUS SPOKE CONCERNING JOHN

Matthew 11:7 (2016 ESV) — 7a As they went away, Jesus began to speak to the crowds concerning John:

You'll remember that John the Baptist, languishing in Herod's prison east of the Dead Sea, sent some of his disciples to Jesus to ask whether Jesus was the One who was to come, or whether John and the rest of Israel should look for another Messiah. Jesus responded by pointing to His teaching and works, which were prophesied in the Scriptures. John's disciples left, and Jesus took advantage of the moment to speak to the crowds about John the Baptist.

John was a bold, courageous prophet of God. He announced the arrival of the Kingdom of God, and called everyone to repentance, Jew and Gentile alike, rich and poor, sophisticated and unrefined. John had a single objective: to prepare the hearts of the people for the Messiah. The people believed that John was a prophet. Herod and the leadership believed John was a nuisance. John publicly rebuked Herod Antipas and his lover, Herodias, because Antipas had seduced her away from his brother, Philip. Herod wanted to put John to death, but the people believed that John was a prophet, and Herod was afraid of them, and of John himself. Later on Jesus would ask the religious leaders whether they thought John's baptism was from God or not. They talked it out amongst themselves. "If we say John's baptism was from heaven, then Jesus will ask us why we did not believe him. But we can't say that John's baptism was a human tradition, because the people believe that he was a prophet." (Mark 11:31-32).

Here in Matthew 11 Jesus isn't interested in what Herod or the religious leaders thought of John. He wants to make a point to the crowds.

NONE ARE GREATER THAN JOHN

Matthew 11:7–11 (2016 ESV) — 7b "What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed shaken by the wind? **8** What then did you go out to see? A man dressed in soft clothing? Behold, those who wear soft clothing are in kings' houses. **9** What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. **10** This is he of whom it is written, " 'Behold, I send my messenger before your face, who will prepare your way before you.' **11a**

Truly, I say to you, among those born of women there has arisen no one greater than John the Baptist.

So Jesus asks the people the same question three times: “What did you go out into the wilderness to see?”

“What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed shaken by the wind?” Jesus offers as an answer the first time. A clacking, meaningless noise. A rattling, clattering clamor. Noise without words. Sound without meaning. Is that what the people went out to see? No, of course not. John was loud, but John’s words were full of meaning. He was the last Old Testament prophet; he had a lot to say. The Word of the Lord filled his mouth, and he poured that message out loud and clear.

“What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A man dressed in soft clothes, perhaps?” Soft clothes are smooth, silky, feminine, fashionable, comfortable. Is that what the people went out into the Judean wilderness to see? A man dressed like a fashion model, standing in the mud of the Jordan river? John wore a garment of camel’s hair, and a leather belt around his waist, and he ate what the Lord provided immediately at hand: insects and wild honey. John’s appearance and behavior reminded the people of the old prophets, who sometimes dressed and behaved very strangely indeed.

“What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A prophet?” Ah, yes, a prophet! But more than a prophet. The forerunner of the Messiah. John was the last Old Testament prophet; the last one to foretell the coming of the Savior. And more than that, John alone, of all the Old Testament prophets, could point to the Messiah and say, “There He is - the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!”

The Old Testament prophets longed to know when the Christ would come; Peter writes that they “searched and inquired carefully, inquiring what person or time the Spirit of Christ in them was indicated when He predicted the sufferings of Christ and the subsequent glories.”

John knew that the Christ *had* come. What a position John had! “Among those born of women,” Jesus said, “there has arisen no one greater than John.” John got to see what the other prophets could only speak about. John got to experience the fulfillment of so many Messianic prophecies – but not all; after all, John died before Jesus’ cross and resurrection. Nevertheless, John the Baptist was the pinnacle of the Old Testament prophets; they reached their apex in John. His message was the message that every Old Testament prophet would have wanted to speak, from Moses to Malachi, from Amos to Zechariah.

ALL ARE GREATER THAN JOHN

Matthew 11:11–12 (2016 ESV) — 11b Yet the one who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he. **12** From the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven has suffered violence, and the violent take it by force.

“Yet,” Jesus says, “the one who is *least* in the Kingdom of Heaven is greater than” John the Baptist. None were greater than John. Yet all are greater than John. What did Jesus mean?

I believe the clearest meaning has to do with the message John preached as compared to the Gospel. John preached the greatest message of any of the Old Testament prophets, but it was nothing compared to the Gospel. Only John could announce the arrival of the Messiah, but every Christian can proclaim the Gospel of Jesus Christ. John could announce “Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world,” but he could not say *how* Jesus would take away the sin of the world. He did not announce the substitutionary atonement. He did not announce the resurrection. He did not speak of salvation by grace alone through faith alone. He didn’t comprehend the creation of one new man in Jesus Christ, comprised of Jews and Gentiles being made brothers and sisters in the Lord. People are saved all the time without knowing or understanding John’s message about the Messiah, but no one – *no one* – is saved apart from the Gospel.

So whatever you and I think of ourselves as Christians, we are privileged to speak a message that is infinitely better than that preached by John the Baptist.

TAKE IT

Now, Jesus makes an interesting statement. “From the days of John the Baptist until now,” He says, “the Kingdom of Heaven has suffered violence, and the violent take it by force.”

There was no question that the Kingdom of Heaven suffered from violent men. So many opposed the Kingdom, even in those early, early days. The priests and Levites opposed it; the scribes and Pharisees opposed it; the Romans and their lackeys opposed it. They used insults, verbal attacks, and threats of violence. The Jews accused Jesus of blasphemy – a violent accusation, which often led to a violent death – after He forgave the sins of the paralyzed man.

What does Jesus mean by “the violent take [the Kingdom of Heaven] by force”? The word “violent” would be better understood as forceful; that’s how Luke 16:16 is usually translated:

Luke 16:16 (2016 ESV) — 16 “The Law and the Prophets were until John; since then the good news of the kingdom of God is preached, and everyone forces his way into it [or *is pressing into it or strives to go in*].

Jesus is is not speaking of physical violence; that has nothing to do with His Kingdom. He told Pontius Pilate, “My Kingdom is not of this world; if it were, My servants would have been fighting to keep Me from being handed over to the Jews.”

Instead, Jesus describes the reality of salvation. Those who followed Jesus were passionate to do so. The Kingdom of Heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which is worth giving up everything to possess. The Kingdom of God is like a pearl worth more than every other treasure we possess.

The New Testament is filled with this truth: Christians are to run hard after Christ. We are to *work out* our salvation (not *work for* our salvation). We are to *press on* to attain that to which God has called us. We are *not to grow weary* of doing good. We are to *strive* to enter God’s rest. We are to *lay aside* every weight, and sin which clings to us, and *run this race* with endurance, all the while

looking to Jesus, who is the author and finisher of our faith. We are to *be all the more diligent* to confirm our calling and election, which means *making every effort* to add virtue to our faith, and knowledge to our virtue, and self-control to our knowledge, and steadfastness to our knowledge, and godliness to our steadfastness, and brotherly affection to our godliness, and love to our godliness.

Salvation is not a “set it and forget it” kind of thing. It is not “once saved, always saved,” but “once saved, forever growing.” New life in Jesus Christ is the good work of God within us, a work that the Father will continue until we stand complete on the day of Jesus Christ (Philippians 1:6).

None of these statements describes *how* we get saved in the first place; all of them describe what happens in the life of a Christ *after* salvation. It is the work of the Spirit, and the result of being born again.

ELIJAH HAS COME

Matthew 11:13–15 (2016 ESV) — 13 For all the Prophets and the Law prophesied until John, **14** and if you are willing to accept it, he is Elijah who is to come. **15** He who has ears to hear, let him hear.

Jesus brings His comments about John to a close by telling us that John is, in a sense, Elijah. He who has ears to hear, let him hear. That is, you must listen carefully, and think carefully. “Are you listening?” Jesus asks. “Do you understand?”

We are told in Second Kings 2 that Elijah was taken up into heaven by a whirlwind, as his protege Elisha saw chariots of fire and horses of fire. Elijah did not suffer an earthly death. Even before the birth of Jesus, the Jews had concluded that since Elijah had not died, he would return to announce the arrival of the Messiah. Even today, when many Jews celebrate Passover, an empty chair is left at the table for Elijah, and a cup of wine is poured for Elijah. Perhaps Elijah will come and announce the Messiah! Jesus says that Elijah did come, not personally, but represented in the ministry of John the Baptist. The Jews were so busy looking for Elijah that

they completely missed him. They were so busy looking for the Messiah as they defined Him, that they utterly missed the Messiah who came.

BRINGING IT HOME

As we bring the message to a close, I want to take you back to Jesus' words in Matthew 11:12: the Kingdom of Heaven suffers violence, and the forceful take it by force.

It seems like such a long wait between the beginning of salvation and the perfection of it. The beginning comes with such wonder and joy and hope. The end will bring such glory and peace. The middle is often hard, full of struggles and trials, full of pain and confusion. Every child on a long car ride has asked, "Are we there yet?" I suspect there were eight-year-olds on the Oregon Trail who asked, "are we there yet?" Moses probably heard those words daily as he led Israel in the wilderness for 40 years: "are we there yet?"

Beloved, we aren't there yet. The trip continues day by day. I know that some of you still live within just a few miles of where you were born. But if you are in Christ, you are already far beyond where you were born. Every day the Lord leads you by His Word and His Spirit. Every day brings progress and growth. Some days are full of warmth and light and joy and peace, and you think, "This is ok; I can do this." Other days bring cold winds and darkness and pain, and you think to yourself, "are we there yet?"

Press on, beloved. Run the race with endurance; it's a marathon, not a sprint. You can work out your salvation because God is powerful working in you. Be diligent; make every effort. If you need to rest, then rest; then get up and continue on. Let others help you on your way, and you be faithful to help others on their way. If you do these things, the Scripture says, you will *never* fail; instead, you will enter the Kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ through the wide, rich, abundant entrance He gives to us.

Let's pray!