



## Lessons - John The Baptist

*"And from the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven suffereth violence, and the violent take it by force" (Matt 11:12)*

During our last Bible Study we studied John the Baptist. We discovered that he became offended at the Messiah because of the Lord's manifestation of the Kingdom of God! If you have not yet read that study you will find the *Rivkah Ministries*, Bible Study entitled, "**Offense**," <http://www.rivkah.org/PDFs/031002.pdf> on the Internet. Please access the address: <http://www.Rivkah.org>.

In that Bible Study we learned that John held tightly to the widespread prophetic expectations of his time. John fully embraced those prophetic beliefs based upon what he and others understood concerning the Messiah. Their eschatological (*prophetic*) beliefs were not unfounded; their beliefs came directly out of the Old Testament. We will look at several of those specific passages a little later. What we really learned from the last Bible Study was that John's expectations of the Messiah and Jesus' actual manifestation of the Kingdom of God were clearly two unrelated things!

The point is that there can be great danger in wholeheartedly embracing any preconceived notions concerning prophetic events and the Messiah. Our Christian community of the early 21<sup>st</sup> Century, like the Jewish society of the time of John the Baptist, needs to be cautious about any preconceived notions.

We can learn a great deal about prophetic beliefs when we consider how Jesus answered a question specifically regarding prophecy, "his disciples asked him, saying, Why then say the scribes that Elias (*Elijah the Prophet*) must first come? 11 And Jesus answered and said unto them, ***Elias truly shall first come, and restore all things.*** (*This first portion of Jesus' answer was specifically placed in the future tense; therefore Jesus essentially prophesied that a future "Elijah to come" would come and restore all things. The implication significant to our understanding is that another "Elijah to come," will appear just prior to Jesus' 2<sup>nd</sup> coming.*) 12 But I say unto you, That Elias is come already" (Matt 17:10-12) (*This second portion of Jesus' answer discarded the future and instead focused on their recent past; specifically Jesus focused upon the person of John the Baptist. Therefore, if John came in "the spirit of Elijah," then the future "Elijah to come" can likewise be a person or people who operate in the same "spirit of Elijah."*)

We discovered that John began to entertain doubts about whether or not Jesus was indeed the Messiah! Why did John begin to entertain such strong doubts? His skepticism



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concerning the ministry of Jesus was clearly rooted in his preconceived Jewish messianic expectations. That Jewish society had a whole different understanding of the messianic mission. John, along with most others during that period anticipated the coming of a deliverer in much the same mold as Moses. No body expected the Messiah to be like what Jesus turned out to be. They fully expected the anointed one to be a powerful leader like Moses or King David. Instead, they got a humble, teaching, ministering servant.

The people of that time probably most expected that the Messiah would break the cruel yoke of foreign oppression. Rome and her puppet heads of state had placed unbearable burdens upon the Jewish people. Notice Jesus' statement reflecting the common practice of Roman soldiers recruiting people to carry their belongings for short distances, "whosoever **shall compel thee to go a mile**, go with him twain" (Matt 5:41). Practically everyone from that Hebrew society expected that the Messiah would bring freedom from the oppressive political environment that they experienced with Rome. John the Baptist anticipated such a messianic figure. The people felt that Israel had been so corrupted by Rome's political oversight that total reform was the only solution. They believed that only supernatural intervention directly from God could solve their problems. The Hebrew prophets predicted that the Messiah would foster a great revival along with great social, political, and economic reforms. We must understand that the Jewish people naturally tended toward prophetic revelation; after all, they had earlier experienced the leadership of Moses. These people expected total transformation. John the Baptist expected the "end times" to come suddenly with the appearance of the "coming one" who like Moses would be fit for the task, "There cometh one **mightier than I** after me" (Mark 1:7). John explained that this "coming one," possesses a greater mission than his own. John understood that he was merely the forerunner who would make the announcement of "the coming one." He understood that his job was to prepare the way for "the coming one." According to the Jewish perspective a person's shoes represent their authority, "the latchet **of whose shoes I am not worthy to stoop down and unloose**" (Mark 1:7). John baptized the people unto repentance, "I indeed have baptized you with water: but **he shall baptize you with the Holy Ghost**" (Mark 1:8).

We find through three different gospel passages that Jesus' messiahship came into question: (1) Caiaphas asked Jesus, "**Art thou the Christ?** tell us. And he said unto them, If I tell you, ye will not believe" (Luke 22:67); (2) Jesus asked Peter, "But **whom say ye that I am?**" (Lk. 9:20); and finally we come across the third incident where John the Baptist sent his disciples to ask of Jesus, "**Art thou he that should come, or do we look for another?**" (Matt 11:3). That same question reverberates down to our very day!

From these three examples alone we can conclude that Jesus clearly was not the Messiah that the people had been expecting! The people were looking for a military general type of leader who could re-establish the political kingdom of King David. Instead, they got a meek individual who focused His attention on teaching and healing. They truly could not anticipate the servant of the Lord as described by the Prophet Isaiah, "he hath no form nor comeliness; and when we shall see him, **there is no beauty (obvious leadership traits) that**



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**we should desire him.** 3 He is despised and rejected of men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief: and we hid as it were our faces from him; he was despised, and we esteemed him not. 4 Surely he hath borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows: yet we did esteem him stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted. 5 But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon him" (Isa 53:2-5).

When we think about it we begin to realize that John and the Jewish people were essentially victims of their own theology. John viewed Jesus as, "the coming one;" therefore, he probably expected the "coming one" to manifest in the same that Daniel had envisioned. Daniel saw that the coming one would "receive all authority and power." Daniel gives a vivid description, "I saw in the night visions, and, behold, one like the Son of man came with the clouds of heaven, and came to the Ancient of days, and they brought him near before him. 14 And there was given him dominion, and glory, and a kingdom . . ." (Dan 7:13-14). In his visions, Daniel saw an imperial takeover!

Apparently, John developed serious skepticism concerning Jesus and His mission while he was imprisoned in the fortress of Machaerus. That prison fortress was about forty miles from Jerusalem on the eastern bank of the Jordan River. It happened to be not far from where John had earlier been baptizing. John well understood that his own fate hung in the balance of such an unjust political/judicial system. He must have longed to see Daniel's vision fulfilled, "I beheld, and the same horn (*Rome, in the eyes of John*) made war with the saints, (*Israel, in the eyes of John*) and prevailed against them; 22 **Until** the Ancient of days came, and judgment was given to the saints of the most High" (Dan 7:21-22). (*If the Ancient of Days and the Messiah were one and the same person, John certainly expected that judgment to take place very soon in his life!*). Since most of the Hebrew prophets who had looked for the "coming one" described similar circumstances, everyone began to ask, "Who is he?" "When will he appear?" John believed that the promised "coming one" should immediately move ahead with that important mission. Instead, John feared that his time on this earth was getting very short. Jesus was not performing according to what John expected. Like many others of his countrymen John expected a different type of messiah to show up! Jesus' answer to John's disciples was incompatible with what John hoped to hear. Obviously Jesus' view of "the coming one" and John's expectations of the Messiah were far from the same thing. We must begin to realize that John embraced a theology that hindered him from participating in Jesus' kingdom movement.

On the other hand, Jesus elevated and associated John's ministry with the Prophet Elijah. Jesus clearly referred to John the Baptist as the prophet Elijah who was identified in the Book of Malachi, "***Elias truly shall first come***, and restore all things" (Matt 17:11). Jesus went on to reveal this one called "Elias (*Elijah*)," "12 But I say unto you, That ***Elias is come already***, and they knew him not, (*John the Baptist – see verse 13 "Then the disciples understood that he spake unto them of John the Baptist"*) (Matt 17:13)). After identifying the "Elijah" Jesus began to identify His own destiny, "Likewise shall also the Son of man suffer of them" (Matt 17:12).



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Both Elijah and the Messiah were a part of the popular Jewish theology. Both of these prophetic figures were well anticipated. The first one was supposed to be like Elijah who would lead a noteworthy spiritual revival among the people, “then went out to him Jerusalem, and all *Judaea*, and all *the region* round about Jordan” (Matt 3:5). John’s baptism unto repentance was a new concept and it prepared the way for the coming of the Messiah himself. Notice these two characters in the following passage: *“The breaker is come up before them: they have broken up, and have passed through the gate, and are gone out by it: and their king shall pass before them, and the LORD on the head of them”* (Mic 2:13). There are two different individuals: (1) a breaker; and (2) a king!

Jesus said, *“all the prophets and the law prophesied until John”* (Matt 11:13). Jesus pointed out that the prophets envisioned a special time well beyond their own days. Then Jesus told them, “And if ye will receive it, *this is Elias, which was for to come*” (Matt 11:14). Like the “breaker” identified by Micah, Jesus was essentially telling them that from the time of John the Baptist until now, the kingdom of heaven is “breaking forth,” and if those that heard could understand it properly, John fulfilled the role of “Elijah to come!” He was the one who would prepare the way before the coming of the anointed one. Baptism unto repentance was a whole new concept to that Jewish society!

The prophet Malachi mentioned Elijah by name, “Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the LORD” (Mal 4:5). And the Old Testament ends with the words, “And he shall turn the heart of the fathers to the children, and the heart of the children to their fathers, lest I come and smite the earth with a curse” (Mal 4:6). So we find the prophet, Elijah portrayed at the very close of the Old Testament writings. But Jesus quoted the passage from Malachi “Behold, I will send *my messenger*, and he shall prepare the way before me: and the *Lord*, whom ye seek, shall suddenly come to this temple, even the messenger of the covenant” (Mal 3:1). Again, two separate individuals appear in this passage: (1) my messenger and (2) the Lord who is the messenger of the covenant. We will remember that two important characters also emerge from the reading of Micah 2:13, *“The breaker is come up before them: they have broken up, and have passed through the gate, and are gone out by it: and their king shall pass before them, and the LORD on the head of them”* (Mic 2:13). Once again we observe the motif of two who are coming: (1) the breaker who opens the breach; and (2) their king. These two personages were interpreted as referring to Elijah and the Messiah in popular Jewish thought. It was clear to Jesus that the Elijah to come would first open the breach. Jesus knew that the passage from Micah says that those who “broke through” with their king (*the Messiah,*) would follow the breaker.

In the midst of all of their suffering over Palestine, the West Bank, and the Gaza Strip, many of the Jewish people still have messianic hopes even today. They expect that the one true God will send the Messiah to help in their time of need. They still expect someone like Moses. They hope for a deliver to come to Israel since only a miracle can save them from the torments of terrorism. Moses was called to deliver during his time; the religious Jesus expect a Messianic deliverer once again!



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On the other hand, Jesus experienced the kingdom of heaven as a powerful force that was manifest through Him and into this world. Essentially, our Lord was energized from within by God's power, "If I do not the works of my Father, believe me not. 38 But if I do, though ye believe not me, ***believe the works: that ye may know, and believe, that the Father is in me, and I in him***" (John 10:37-38). Jesus claimed that the source of His personal power came from the Father and ***resided within!*** Jesus was constantly and wholeheartedly aware of God's divine presence at work in His everyday life, "But if ***I with the finger of God*** cast out devils, no doubt ***the kingdom of God is come upon you,***" (Luke 11:20). Jesus understood that His very presence caused manifestations of the Kingdom of God; He did not have to observe a change in governments in order to believe that He represented the Kingdom of God! Jesus' ministry was clearly supernatural; He cast out demons, ministered to the sick and taught His disciples a message that focused on the Kingdom of God.

One day Jesus hinted at those enigmatic mysteries connected with the powerful reigning force of the Kingdom of God. This happened during His discussion about John the Baptist, "And from the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven ***suffereth violence, and the violent take it by force***" (Matt 11:12). If you think about it, this passage is rather difficult to grasp; at first glance you might think that the kingdom of heaven is actually languishing under the brutal opposition of violent forces! The initial concept that tumbles out of that passage is that the Kingdom of Heaven is somehow under attack!

In order to fully comprehend that passage we must gain a clearer understanding of the Kingdom of Heaven! How can the kingdom of heaven suffer violence? Is heaven in some kind of disarray? This does not make sense based upon what we already know about God, "***God is not the author of confusion, but of peace***" (1 Cor 14:33). That verse concerning John the Baptist simply does not make any sense when read in the King James Version.

Ever since Jesus said those words, "the kingdom of heaven ***suffereth violence, and the violent take it by force***" (Matt 11:12) that passage has influenced the world of Christianity; clearly, it has been imperfectly understood and most of the time it has been separated from its original context. In most instances the passage has been given one of two interpretations. First it was thought to describe how that the kingdom was under attack by the violent. Second, and perhaps even more unfortunate, some scholars have suggested that Jesus advocated violence as a part of His kingdom message. However, this concept is utterly ridiculous, "Then came they, and laid hands on Jesus, and took him. 51 And, behold, one of them which were with Jesus stretched out his hand, and drew his sword, and struck a servant of the high priest's, and smote off his ear. 52 Then said Jesus unto him, Put up again thy sword into his place: ***for all they that take the sword shall perish with the sword.*** 53 Thinkest thou that I cannot now pray to my Father, and he shall presently give me more than twelve legions of angels?" (Matt 26:50-53). Jesus said, "Behold, ***I send you forth as sheep in the midst of wolves:*** (Clearly Jesus sent forth His disciples on a peaceful mission!) be ye therefore wise as serpents, and harmless as doves" (Matt 10:16). Doesn't it



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seem a little confusing for the disciples to be characterized as “violent” on the one hand and “peacemakers” on the other? In order to gain understanding we need to **press in!**

What does the phrase “*suffereth* violence” really mean? The Old English expression in the King James Authorized Version of the Bible leaves us with a lot to be desired. You may recall from last week’s study that we observed a hesitancy on the part of John the Baptist to baptize Jesus, “John forbad him, saying, I have need to be baptized of thee, and comest thou to me? 15 And Jesus answering said unto him, *Suffer* it to be so now: for thus it becometh us to fulfil all righteousness. Then he *suffered* him” (Matt 3:14-15). In both of the last few instances the word “suffer” can appropriately be replaced with the word, “allow.” Likewise, if we will at least insert the concept of “allow” in the passage, “the kingdom of heaven *suffereth* (*allows*) *violence*, and *the violent take it by force*” (Matt 11:12), then the passage begins to take a new perspective.

Those of you who know me pretty well understand that I am not generally a fan of the New International Version (NIV) of the bible. Nevertheless, I believe that the NIV best translates Matt 11:12 as follows: “From the days of John the Baptist until now, the kingdom of heaven has been *forcefully advancing*, and *forceful* men lay hold of it” (Matt 11:12) NIV. Probably the NIV has most properly captured the meaning of the passage. According to many scholars, the idea of the kingdom of heaven forcefully advancing as portrayed in the NIV is closest to the meaning of the original Hebrew text. The only thing that I would add to the NIV is the concept of “allow.” If you will allow Larry’s Amended NIV, notice what happens as follows, “From the days of John the Baptist until now, the kingdom of heaven has (*“allowed” instead of “been”*) *forcefully advancing*, and *forceful* men lay hold of it” (Matt 11:12) NIV. With this perspective the passage takes on a new life.

Scripture records 54 occurrences of the phrase “Kingdom of God” or “Kingdom of Heaven.” Since the “kingdom” concept so dominates Jesus’ teachings our passage is essential if we wish to obtain a complete understanding. The Amplified Bible has an interesting interpretation, “And from the days of John the Baptist until the present time, the kingdom of heaven has *endured violent assault*, and violent men seize it by force [as a precious prize — a share in the heavenly kingdom is sought with most ardent zeal and intense exertion]” (Matt 11:12) AMP. With the NIV as background, this Amplified rendition begins to solve many of our previous questions.

Most Christians are left confused about even greater Biblical issues than Matt 11:12. For example, many believe that God needs to give us more power; our problem is not that we are without the power of God operating in our lives. Christians are not experiencing a shortage of power; instead, we are experiencing a lack of information! The scripture does not say, “My people are destroyed for a lack of *power*;” rather, it says, “My people are destroyed for lack of *knowledge*” (Hos 4:6). So how are we supposed to find out about that knowledge that leads to God’s power being manifest?



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We must gain a better understanding of the Kingdom of Heaven! The Pharisees asked Jesus about the Kingdom of heaven, "And when he was demanded of the Pharisees, when the kingdom of God should come, he answered them and said, ***The kingdom of God cometh not with observation:***" (Luke 17:20). "Observation" means "to look." This means that it is not possible to locate the kingdom by going out and looking for it! We will not be able to point out the Kingdom of Heaven, "21 Neither shall they say, ***Lo here!*** or, ***lo there!*** for, behold, ***the kingdom of God is within you***" (Luke 17:21). The kingdom is not some geographic location; rather, ***"the kingdom of God is within you!"*** Now let's stop for a minute as we put together what we now know. If the violent are taking over the kingdom of heaven and the kingdom of heaven is within you, then we need to answer the question. "Where do the violent exert their force as they overtake the kingdom?"

It is very likely that the entire passage that we have been focused upon was directly connected to the words of the prophet Micah. He describes a future prophetic period when the Lord assembles His remnant flock together, "I will surely gather the remnant of Israel; I will put them together as the sheep of Bozrah, as the flock in the midst of their fold" (Mic 2:12). After the assembling of these people Micah describes, "The breaker is come up before them: they have broken up, and have passed through the gate, and are gone out by it: and their king shall pass before them, and the LORD on the head of them" (Micah 2:13). The mental image formed by Micah portrays a sheepfold full of sheep as they are huddled behind a makeshift fence. Shepherds often gather stones and build temporary holding pens for protection of the sheep during the night. The shepherd then literally lies down in the only entranceway to the holding pen (*sheepfold*). This obviously forms a small door as Jesus said, "I am the door of the sheep" (John 10:7). In the morning, the sheep are anxious to break out so they can go feed while the dew is still on the grass. As a result, the shepherd normally knocked down a section from the piled up stones to enlarge the door where he had been lying. The shepherd breaks open the wall of the penned up the sheep. Since they are anxious to be released from their temporary holding pen that they may eat. This picture was one of sheep breaking forth from the sheepfold!

Who are those "breaking through" today? Those "breaking forth" pursue the principles of God's reign with all their might. They possess intensity for the work of the Lord. They seek the rule (*kingdom*) of God in every part of their lives. They become subjects of the King, accepting the yoke of the kingdom.

The Messiah's work has been entrusted to His anointed community of faith (*the Church*). As a messianic community, the Church is anointed to fulfill the task of the messiah until he returns, "A certain nobleman went into a far country to receive for himself a kingdom, and to return. 13 And he called his ten servants, and delivered them ten pounds, and said unto them, ***Occupy till I come***" (Luke 19:12-13). Christians are called to model love, forgiveness and acceptance by following the example of Jesus. From the time of John, the preparation had begun. Now the kingdom of heaven breaks forth and all are breaking out with it. The kingdom of God challenges each new generation with the dynamic message of Jesus.



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Jesus never advocated violence or political domination to achieve the goals of the divine rule. In this saying of Jesus, his disciples are not being attacked. Jesus' disciples do not suffer violence, neither can they properly be described as violent people. He was not teaching violence or force as an acceptable method of operation. Jesus emphasized love, forgiveness and acceptance.

The kingdom breaks forth as men and women experience God's redemptive power in their individual lives. They share what God has done for them as they help others. How are you and I breaking forth?

Now let's compile some of the concepts that we have already learned:

- preconceived theological notions can prove to be problematic;
- the violent are taking over the kingdom of heaven by force;
- the kingdom of heaven is within us;
- the source of Jesus' personal power came from the Father and resided within!

Jesus' words are still true today, "Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet ***before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the LORD***" (Mal 4:5). However, we must be cautious about preconceived notions!

Who is "the Elijah to come" in our time? Who will break through? The Elijah to come is bound up in those who are violent and have learned to control their own emotions! They have learned how to rule their own spirit! They have violently taken themselves over! Before we can possess great things we must first possess our own spirit! Scripture teaches that "he that ruleth his spirit (*is better*) than he that taketh a city" (Prov 16:32). Why is this true? Because we cannot takeover and rule over a city until we have completely learned to rule our own spirit! You wonder how can all of this relate to us, notice the rewards which will be passed out by the master at His coming, "And he said unto him, Well, thou good servant: because thou hast been faithful in a very little, ***have thou authority over ten cities.*** 18 And the second came . . . 19 And he said likewise to him, ***Be thou also over five cities***" (Luke 19:17-19). These new rulers had earlier learned how to rule over their own spirits; therefore, they understood how to rule cities! Without the same ability to control our thinking and feelings we cannot rule over large groups of people!

We must understand that the violent are taking the kingdom by force! These violent individuals are extreme about controlling their own spirit; they are severe about controlling their emotions; they are intense about not letting anything evil which has been done unto them take away their love! They bless when cursed; they do good to those who spitefully use them. They are not being weak or stupid; instead, they are being **violent in their own spirit!** Out of their spirit they even possess their body and their health!

The Kingdom of God is where and when God takes dominion over an individual. Rule is the manifested dominion of the Kingdom. It is not when you hear about the kingdom but when you incarnate the dominion of God into in your body! You essentially become part of the realm of the Kingdom of God! When the territory of God's rule is expanding



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because you are growing into the kingdom of God! When you violently surrender your opinion to God; He has just expanded his territory! Does God rule your thoughts, emotions, and money? When you are violent to ensure that God controls all of you, then He will bless and expand your territory because that territory belongs to Him!

The violent understand the Biblical information concerning the force that causes the dominion of God to manifest; they cause the territory of God to expand; and the God quality of life to come into the earth. They live in and understand the God quality of life as they expand His territory. Who are the violent that are taking the kingdom of God by force? Notice: (1) they have learned how to manifest His dominion; (2) expand His territory in themselves; and (3) release His quality of life into the earth!

Now the final question is, "How do they do this?" In other words, "What is the force that enables a human to do all of things?" Notice from the Book of Proverbs Chapter Four, "**Keep thy heart with all diligence**" (Prov 4:23). What is the "force" in us that takes over the kingdom? Remember that the kingdom of heaven is "within you!" The Bible says to, "**Keep thy heart (spirit) with all diligence;**" this means to guard your own heart, your own spirit! Be more concerned about the condition of your own heart and spirit than you are about all of the evil that has been done to you! Be more concerned about the condition of your own attitude. Why? Notice, "for out of it (*your heart / your spirit*) are (*flow*) the issues of life" (Prov 4:23). The word "issues" means "the forces!" Out of your heart flow the forces **of life!** Out of your heart flows your strength! When we are offended and upset in our spirit we feel powerless; we feel like that because our strength has been robbed!

We should have realized by now that Christians have power over the devil but more importantly, they must obtain power over themselves! When manifestation takes longer than we think it should, we begin to plug up our own forces! This is why offense and anger and all of the other negative issues of the spirit cause us to falter!