

## Now Is The Time

Kingdom Taken by Force

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It seems that I have a proclivity for starting out the things I speak on or write about with illustrations from books that I have read or movies I have seen. I think this is because as I am doing either one of them, I see them in terms of analogies to what is, hopefully, the more important thing in our lives, which is the relevance to the Kingdom of God and our part in it. Unfortunately, for those of you who may find this a little bit boring, today is not going to be any exception.

Among my favorite movies is the film from 1946 entitled *The Best Years of Our Lives*. The film deals with the problems faced by the men returning from the greatest worldwide conflict that the world had seen, World War II. The film gives us the view of this difficult time of readjustment as typified in the lives of three returning ex-servicemen. One was a sailor who had lost both his hands as his ship went down with most of his shipmates. The other was an army air corps captain who was a bombardier on a B-17 and had seen many of his fellow flyers killed in anti-aircraft fire. The third was a sergeant who had been in the midst of the terror of hand-to-hand combat while fighting from island to island in the Pacific.

They had all been right in the thick of action in bringing the axis of evil to defeat and had been involved with death face-to-face almost every day for three or four years. Each had a very clear vision of what needed to be done because they were up to their eyes in it, and they saw that the only way the enemy would, or could, be beaten was by a consummate force of arms or the world as they knew it would be destroyed. As brothers in arms with the same obvious goal, they would stand shoulder to shoulder with others of like mind to preserve the way of life they had been given, even if it caused some of them to lose their lives in the process. This effort required a determined force of mind, character, and will to physically carry through until the end.

When the war was over there was a change in the business of life. No longer were they faced with violent death daily as they battled an evil but obvious enemy. Now they faced a new and perhaps more difficult responsibility and challenge. They now needed to rebuild and live individual lives for the next 30, 40, or 50 years that would require more strength of character and courage to maintain the blessings that many of them had given life and limb to make possible in the first place. Their new challenge was to stay focused and to be of good courage in a seemingly ordinary life that could wipe out everything they had fought for because of tedium, apathy, self-doubt, and self-

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centeredness fed by lonely self-pity.

Toward the beginning of the film as the three veterans of the world's most fierce struggle were hitching an overnight flight on a B-17 home there was a line which puts the rest of the film's message into perspective as one of these men asked the other, "Remember what it felt like when you went overseas?" The other fellow responded, "As well as I know my own name." Then the first man replied, "I feel the same way now." Those words express to me the truth of the rest of the film. Though they may have fought and won the war, the bigger war yet lay before them.

By the end of the film, we see the battles were still being waged and overcome little by little, although no longer on a physical battlefield with an obvious enemy, but on the battlefield of life where each one faced their own life's struggles, which still demanded strength of character and force of will commensurate with that daily battle of open warfare. Though still a part of one nation, it no longer seemed to be a daily shoulder-to-shoulder fight for life, but a daily battle nonetheless to overcome and grow to maintain the way of life together, and yet apart that they had fought to preserve.

Perhaps you are wondering what this has to do with the Feast of Tabernacles and learning to fear God in our temporary journey through this life. It has everything to do with us fighting the battle together, although mostly from within our scattered, God-ordained, circumstances of this temporary pilgrimage in a world that hates God and those He has called to be separate from it. Please turn to Matthew 11:12.

**Matthew 11:12** And from the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven suffers violence, and the violent take it by force.

This verse is a bit enigmatic, but very important to those God has called who are now dealing with our own eternal, life-building circumstances. In a world that is diametrically opposed to the way of life that we live, we must violently battle to maintain while continually moving forward. To grasp the full impact of this verse, we need to see it within the context of the whole chapter. However, before we examine the chapter, I want to break the verse itself down a bit. As I read through a number of different commentaries on this scripture, they were divided about its meaning. For instance, *Barnes Notes* says this about Matthew 11:12:

Our Savior here simply states a fact. He says there was a great rush of a crowd pressing to hear John. Multitudes went out to hear him as if they were about to take the kingdom of heaven by force. So Jesus Christ says since

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the kingdom of heaven, or the gospel, had been preached there had been a rush to it. People have been earnest about it. They have come pressing to obtain the blessings as if they could take it by violence. There is an allusion here to the manner in which cities are taken. These seizures pressed upon them with violence and demolished the walls. With such earnestness and violence He says people had pressed around Him and John since they began to preach. There is no allusion here to the manner in which the individual sinner seeks salvation, but it is a simple record of the fact that multitudes had thronged around Him and John to hear the gospel.

In the *Jewish New Testament Commentary*, they write this about the same verse:

The Greek is difficult. As rendered it means that violent ones, demons with human vehicles, are trying to keep God from carrying out His plan through Jesus through Herod's having put John in prison. An alternative understanding that the kingdom of heaven has been advancing forcefully and forceful people are seizing hold of it seems inconsistent with verses 25-30 in Matthew 11.

This commentary is interesting because there is quite a bit of controversy as to what the Greek text is actually saying, but is it really inconsistent with verses 25-30? We will come back to this point at the end of this message.

We will take a quick look at a couple of the words in the verse that make it a difficult scripture to grasp. The very first word I want you to look at is the word "from," because I want you to keep clear in your mind that even though Jesus is giving us a particular point in time, He is not limiting it to that time. The word used here is "apo" and it means away from something near and various senses of place/time relation. Here it seems to indicate the certain period of time from the days of John the Baptist until now, the time of Christ. I want to make sure that you understand, and this is important, that Jesus is not limiting what He says here to a particular period of time. To give you a sense of what I mean, this same type of time-period is used by the apostle Paul in places like Romans 5:14 where he writes that death reigned from Adam to Moses.

Of course, death was not limited to the time-period between Adam and Moses but still carries its sting today. Then in Philippians 1:5, Paul writes to the brethren in Phillipi that he always thanks God for their fellowship in the gospel from the first day until now, followed in the very next verse by the declaration of his confidence that God had started

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a good work in them and will finish what He starts. His point is that their fellowship in the gospel started when they first responded to the truth of the gospel message that Paul preached of the Kingdom and continues on. The point is that the first part of Matthew 11:12 does not necessarily limit the violence discussed to one particular time.

The next phrase we need to look at is the term “suffers violence.” Here is where the controversy really begins. The word “violence” is Strong’s #971 and is transliterated “biazo” reflexively; to crowd oneself into, or passively; to be seized. For the sake of time I am not going to address all the different lexicons, dictionaries, and commentaries I looked into concerning the violence Jesus talks about here, but I am going to quote from just one that gives you a sense of how clouded their thinking is concerning what Jesus is saying. In the *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* by Louw and Nida, here is what they say about this word translated from Strong’s #971 as well as the associated word 973, which is the word “violent” at the end of the verse. Under the words translated ‘violence’ in subsection 20.09-20.11, starting in 20.09 about 971 it says:

a) to experience a violent attack, to be attacked with violence, to suffer violent attacks. The kingdom of heaven suffers violent attacks, Matthew 11:12. In many languages it may be difficult if not impossible to speak of the kingdom of heaven suffering violent attacks, but generally some active form may be employed. For example, “and violently attacked the kingdom of heaven or the rule of God.” See comment 20.10.

20.10 - regarding 971:

b) to employ violence in doing harm to someone or something. To use violence. Everyone uses violence in entering it, referring to the Kingdom of God in Luke 16:16. Since there are a number of different interpretations of the expressions in Luke 16:16 as well as a parallel verse in Matthew 11:12, it is important to consult various commentaries before undertaking a translation. Probably the most widely held interpretation of these difficult expressions is based on the fact that many people do not hesitate to employ violence or military force in order to establish what they regarded as the rule of God on earth.

20:11 - regarding 973:

a person who employs violence in order to accomplish his purpose. A violent

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person. Violent men take it by force, Matthew 11:12, [and their conclusion in this subsection is:] see the comment on 20:10 for a discussion of some of the problems involved with the interpretation of this type of expression.

The instruction given that there are a number of different interpretations of this expression and that it is important to consult various commentaries before undertaking the translation may be a good enough explanation for the world, but it is vital for us to understand this important verse and the marching orders Jesus Christ is giving those who would follow after Him in successfully doing the will of the Father no matter what the circumstances individually. As I said, it is very important that we understand this verse in the context of the whole chapter of Matthew 11 in which it was given, because it is here that Jesus Christ clearly shows the difference that the Father expects between those whom He has called and those He has not.

We will begin reading from the beginning of Matthew 11. I think it will not only help us to understand verse 12 more clearly but also our part in it and the hope the Father has given us all through John the Baptist and His Son Jesus Christ.

**Matthew 11:1-6** Now it came to pass, when Jesus finished commanding His twelve disciples, that He departed from there to teach and to preach in their cities. And when John had heard in prison about the works of Christ, he sent two of his disciples and said to Him, "Are You the Coming One, or do we look for another?" Jesus answered and said to them, "Go and tell John the things which you hear and see: The blind see and the lame walk; the lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear; the dead are raised up and the poor have the gospel preached to them. And blessed is he who is not offended because of Me."

Now we will turn to a companion verse in Luke 7. The background here is that Jesus had raised from the dead a young man, the only son of his widowed mother. He did this during the funeral procession in front of a whole bunch of people. Because of this and the miracles He had been doing, stories of Him went about throughout all Judea and the surrounding region and John the Baptist in prison had heard them himself. Starting in verse 18:

**Luke 7:18-23** Then the disciples of John reported to him concerning all these things. And John, calling two of his disciples to him, sent them to Jesus, saying, "Are You the Coming One, or do we look for another?" When

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the men had come to Him, they said, "John the Baptist has sent us to You, saying, 'Are You the Coming One, or do we look for another?'" And that very hour He cured many of infirmities, afflictions, and evil spirits; and to many blind He gave sight. Jesus answered and said to them, "Go and tell John the things you have seen and heard: that the blind see, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have the gospel preached to them. And blessed is he who is not offended because of Me."

This passage adds that Jesus immediately, and in the presence of the disciples John had sent, did the exact things that John had always known from the Scriptures that the Messiah would be doing when He came. This was not just hearsay. Two witnesses saw it done before their eyes. Thus, in order to strengthen John in his severe time of need, Jesus reminded him of the truth he had already known through the testimony of the Scriptures by the hands of two more witnesses. This is what God does for us every week on the Sabbath at services and especially at the Feast of Tabernacles. He specifically takes us aside to remind us through the ministry about the truth of His Word so that we can continue on in the faith, and go out and fight the battle that is being waged in this world.

You might want to consider John's circumstances at the time. I am not certain how long John had been in prison or how much longer he would be there before he died a violent and ignominious death at the hand of Herod to satisfy his wife's bloodlust. Here was a man who had from the earliest years of his life known his mission and had worked hard to fulfill it. Also, even though John knew and proclaimed that Jesus would come after him and would rise up as John diminished, he had still been doing a work simultaneously with Christ until recently as you can read in John 3:22-23.

Now this vital and driven man had found himself in circumstances of tedious monotony and drudgery of prison. We know it must have been for a while that he was there because Herod feared him and was probably perfectly happy just letting him rot in prison to keep him out of sight and out of mind until his wife forced his hand and had John beheaded. His job at the time that he sent his disciples to Christ was now just to sit and wait it out in the dungeon.

How difficult that must have been for him just waiting for God's next move. How difficult sometimes it is for us just waiting for God's next move in our circumstances.

In Matthew 11:6 and Luke 7:23, Jesus also reminds John of something John already knew from the Old Testament prophecies of Christ, as recorded in Isaiah 8:13-15, and

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later reaffirmed by the apostle Peter in I Peter 2.

**Isaiah 8:13-15** The Lord of hosts, Him you shall hallow; let Him be your fear, and let Him be your dread. He will be as a sanctuary, but a stone of stumbling and a rock of offense to both the houses of Israel, as a trap and a snare to the inhabitants of Jerusalem. And many among them shall stumble; they shall fall and be broken, be snared and taken."

Now going back to Matthew 11:7-15:

**Matthew 11:7-15** As they departed, Jesus began to say to the multitudes concerning John: "What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed shaken by the wind? But what did you go out to see? A man clothed in soft garments? Indeed, those who wear soft clothing are in kings' houses. But what did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I say to you, and more than a prophet. For this is he of whom it is written: 'Behold, I send My messenger before Your face, who will prepare Your way before You.' "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. For all the prophets and the law prophesied until John. And if you are willing to receive it, he is Elijah who is to come. He who has ears to hear, let him hear!

After John's disciples had left, Jesus makes both a solid affirmation of the faith and strength of His beloved servant John, but He also tells all those among them who had ears to hear that John was the Elijah they were waiting for before the Messiah was to come and by extension, He was telling them He was the Messiah. John was not a reed blown whatever way the wind blew, nor someone who regaled himself in things of this world, but he was the clarion voice of the Elijah that they had been waiting for who would start to turn the hearts of the fathers to their children and the children to their fathers and heralding the only One who could actually make that happen by circumcising their hearts.

**Matthew 11:16-24** But to what shall I liken this generation? It is like children sitting in the marketplaces and calling to their companions, and saying: 'We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we mourned to you, and you did not lament.' For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, 'He

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has a demon.' The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, 'Look, a glutton and a winebibber, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!' But wisdom is justified by her children." Then He began to rebuke the cities in which most of His mighty works had been done, because they did not repent: "Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the mighty works which were done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes. But I say to you, it will be more tolerable for Tyre and Sidon in the day of judgment than for you. And you, Capernaum, who are exalted to heaven, will be brought down to Hades; for if the mighty works which were done in you had been done in Sodom, it would have remained until this day. But I say to you that it shall be more tolerable for the land of Sodom in the day of judgment than for you."

In verses 16-19 we read something that looks totally incongruous with the first 14 verses of the chapter. But, if we have ears, or in this case are the called of God, and have the eyes to see, we will not only see that it fits with the first 14 verses but it is a veiled extension of Jesus' declaration in verse 14 that John the Baptist is the Elijah to come. Regarding these verses 16-24, *Matthew Henry's Commentary* said:

The similitude is taken from some common custom [this is when He talks about them being children] among the Jewish children at their play who, as usual with children, imitated the fashions of the grown people at their marriages and funerals, rejoicing and lamenting but being all a jest, it made no impression. No more did the ministry either of John the Baptist or of Christ upon that generation. He especially reflects on the scribes and Pharisees who had a proud conceit of themselves. Therefore, to humble them He compares them to children and their behavior to child's play.

This is a very interesting observation by Matthew Henry, but I think he and the other commentators missed the main point our Lord and Savior was making to those who have ears to hear. Turn back to Malachi 3 where it refers to Jesus Christ's coming and John the Baptist:

**Malachi 3:1-7** "Behold, I send My messenger, and he will prepare the way before Me. And the Lord, whom you seek, will suddenly come to His temple, even the Messenger of the covenant, in whom you delight. Behold, He is coming," says the Lord of hosts. "But who can endure the day of His coming? And who can stand when He appears? For He is like a refiner's fire

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and like launderer's soap. He will sit as a refiner and a purifier of silver; He will purify the sons of Levi, and purge them as gold and silver, that they may offer to the Lord an offering in righteousness. Then the offering of Judah and Jerusalem will be pleasant to the Lord, as in the days of old, as in former years. And I will come near you for judgment; I will be a swift witness against sorcerers, against adulterers, against perjurers, against those who exploit wage earners and widows and orphans, and against those who turn away an alien—Because they do not fear Me," Says the Lord of hosts. "For I am the Lord, I do not change; therefore you are not consumed, O sons of Jacob. Yet from the days of your fathers you have gone away from My ordinances and have not kept them. Return to Me, and I will return to you," Says the Lord of hosts. "But you said, 'In what way shall we return?'"

**Malachi 3:16-18** Then those who feared the Lord spoke to one another, and the Lord listened and heard them; so a book of remembrance was written before Him for those who fear the Lord and who meditate on His name. "They shall be Mine," says the Lord of hosts, "on the day that I make them My jewels. And I will spare them as a man spares his own son who serves him." Then you shall again discern between the righteous and the wicked, between one who serves God and one who does not serve Him.

**Malachi 4:2** But to you who fear My name The Sun of Righteousness shall arise with healing in His wings; and you shall go out and grow fat like stall-fed calves.

**Malachi 4:5-6** Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the Lord. And he will turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers, lest I come and strike the earth with a curse."

This is happening with us now. It is going to happen later with those who come after us, but right now, as Jesus confirmed, He will send us Elijah the prophet in the presence of John the Baptist before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the Lord, and he shall turn the hearts of the fathers to the children and the hearts of the children to their fathers lest He smite the earth with a curse. This judgment and heart turning has already begun from the days of John the Baptist until now, this day. As the apostle Peter

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writes in I Peter 4:

**I Peter 4:17** For the time has come for judgment to begin at the house of God; and if it begins with us first, what will be the end of those who do not obey the gospel of God?

From those days, God has been circumcising the hearts of the called, and each generation since so that they can look to the law and prophets under the grace of Jesus Christ and learn to really and truly live as God the Father and the Son live. With it all put together with circumcised hearts the fathers will be striving to set the proper examples for the children, and the children will be imitating the fathers, not in jest, but with the mind of God being impressed upon their hearts.

Through this process each generation of those elect have been layered into the body of Christ and are part of the pearls of great price. Each generation of those whose hearts have been changed are being layered into the body of Christ through much violence of perfecting to become part of the gates of the city of God through which all the rest of God's children will pass in their order.

Turn back now to Matthew 11. With what we have arrived at in mind, I am going to read Matthew 11:12 from the *New English Translation*:

**Matthew 11:12 (NET)** From the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven has suffered violence, and forceful people lay hold of it.

True repentance and a change of heart were then, and are now, in the process of being made possible through Jesus Christ. But this change must take a great deal of violent effort for most of our lives; an all-out effort against opposing forces, both from within and without, to fulfill our responsibilities before God to overcome. Those of us with the privilege of being part of God's Kingdom are enduring the violent pressure of change as God is in the process of turning our hearts now within a world that has yet to have their hearts; the hearts of the fathers turned to the children and the children to the fathers. This process creates terrible tension and tremendous friction. The violent friction will manifest itself externally as Jesus warned us in places like Matthew 10:16-22 where He tells us we will be hated of all men and even violently delivered up by the hands of our own families. Probably more often and more importantly, the violence will manifest itself in the battles that take place within each and every one of us who struggle to have our hearts completely changed and turned.

The instructions that Jesus Christ gives all those who are called in His words, in Matthew 5, 6, and 7, take no less than a violent effort to do what Christ expects from us in the process of being built into the very temple of God. As Martin [Collins] told us yesterday, this is the ultimate attainment in our intimate relationship with Jesus Christ and each other in holiness.

In the movie *The Best Years of Our Lives*, which I mentioned at the beginning of the message, there had been a very visible, common enemy that caused the allies to fight as one force against the obvious evil that warred against them, but when the war was over each was faced with a new and more difficult enemy. That enemy was overcoming their own struggles to be faithful citizens and contributing members of the society they had fought together to preserve.

Today, you and I are faced with the same kind of struggles except of a much more vital nature. We are spread out all over the world; here, down in Australia, over in South Africa, up in France. Throughout the world God's people are assembled, but in these places we are in the exact spots where God has set us in the body of Christ as it pleases Him. Within these places God is developing us as holy unto Him in order to be faithful and contributing members of the body of Christ.

Just as with John, He continually gives us encouragement so that we will push on in the violent struggle to overcome by reminding us constantly of what He is, who we are, and that His Word is absolutely sure.

I told you earlier in the message that we would come back to what the *Jewish New Testament Commentary* had to say about verse 12 when they wrote:

An alternative understanding that the kingdom of heaven has been advancing forcefully and forceful people are seizing hold of it seems inconsistent with verses 25-30 in Matthew 11.

This is not the case because verses 25-30 are Christ's solution for His people who have ears to hear and eyes to see how to handle the violent difficulties we will need to face forcefully every day for the rest of our preparation period. Turn back to Matthew 11:25-30. Before we start I want to point out in verse 25 that the word "answered" is Strong's #611 transliterated "apokrinomai," and it means "began to speak," but it is translated in the KJV as "answered" because something always has preceded this word, either in a statement or acts to which the following remarks refer. Therefore, these last five verses are Christ's reference back to the whole chapter.

**Matthew 11:25-30** At that time Jesus answered and said, "I thank You, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that You have hidden these things from the wise and prudent and have revealed them to babes. Even so, Father, for so it seemed good in Your sight. All things have been delivered to Me by My Father, and no one knows the Son except the Father. Nor does anyone know the Father except the Son, and the one to whom the Son wills to reveal Him. Come to Me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy and My burden is light."

Those few who have been entrusted by the Father to the Son are learning to fear God now in going through the transformation process to holiness. The refreshment we receive at the Feast of Tabernacles is part of it, just as Christ's reminder of His Messiahship was to John. This is a violent process away from the mind of Satan so we can be of service to all those who will follow after us, and it can only be accomplished by obediently submitting to the Father and Son in everything. The more we submit to Him in every aspect of our lives, the easier our burden becomes. As we learn to trust God in everything our burden becomes easier and Christ's yoke is light. The battle is raging and we must take the Kingdom of God by force, but these truly must be the best years of our lives.