

I was reading in Matthew tonight and came across 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." Can you shed any light on what this means?

As a beginning point in answering your question, first consider these comments from the NASB Study Bible regarding "suffers violence," as translated in Matthew 11:12: "The Greek here is taken in a passive sense. In this context its passive meaning is, 'suffers violent attacks.' The verse emphasizes the ongoing persecution of the people of the kingdom."

The statement by Jesus in Matthew 11:12 reflects the violence of persecution against representatives of the Kingdom of God. Specifically, those in the forefront of proclaiming the future establishment of God's Kingdom on the earth are targets of mortal violence.

In the account of the ministry and message of John, we find this record: "In those days John the Baptist came preaching in the wilderness of Judea, and saying, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!'" (Matthew 3:1-2). John also foretold the Christ (compare verses 11-12)-note what He proclaimed: "From that time Jesus began to preach and to say, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand [margin: "has drawn near"]'" (Matthew 4:17).

Subsequently, we find this statement from Jesus about both John the Baptist and Himself: "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" (Matthew 17:12-13).

John the Baptist, who came in the "spirit and power of Elijah" (Luke 1:17), was murdered at the order of Herod. The grisly account of the beheading of John is found in Matthew 14, verses 1-12.

Jesus Christ, who is the Son of God (compare John 3:16), was murdered at the hands of the Roman governor, Pilate, along with the demands of His own people! While even Pilate tried to avoid ordering the death of Jesus, those Jews who had assembled to accuse Jesus made the proceedings personal in their hatred when they responded to Pilate: "And all the people answered and said, 'His blood be on us and on our children'" (Matthew 27:25).

Following the Day of Pentecost and the establishment of the New Testament Church of God, the followers of Christ suffered persecution: Peter and the apostles were beaten (Acts 5:40); Stephen was martyred (compare Acts 7); Herod killed the apostle James (compare Acts 12:1-2); and Paul suffered terrible violence once he was converted to Christianity (compare 2 Corinthians 11:22-33).

Jesus warned His followers to be prepared to be treated unjustly. Notice the following three passages:

"Remember the word that I said to you, 'A servant is not greater than his master.' If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you. If they kept My word, they will keep yours also'" (John 15:20).

"These things I have spoken to you, that in Me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world" (John 16:33).

"Then they will deliver you up to tribulation and kill you, and you will be hated by all nations for My name's sake" (Matthew 24:9).

Christians are representatives of the Kingdom of God-they are called "ambassadors for Christ" (2 Corinthians 5:20). As such, those who are the citizens of this world and of this age in which Satan

is the ruler-even its god-will reject us (compare John 12:31; 2 Corinthians 4:4; 1 John 5:19). Jesus said in Matthew 10:34-39:

"Do not think that I came to bring peace on earth. I did not come to bring peace but a sword. For I have come to 'set a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law'; and 'a man's enemies will be those of his own household.' He who loves father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me. And he who loves son or daughter more than Me is not worthy of Me. And he who does not take his cross and follow after Me is not worthy of Me. He who finds his life will lose it, and he who loses his life for My sake will find it."

Notice that Jesus confronted those who rejected Him and His message: "You are of your father the devil, and the desires of your father you want to do. He was a murderer from the beginning, and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he speaks a lie, he speaks from his own resources, for he is a liar and the father of it" (John 8:44).

No one who follows the lead of Satan, who is the father of all violence, can or will have access to the Kingdom of God, which is presently in heaven, but which will come to and be established on earth. The record of the Bible is that Satan has tried to take over the realm of heaven, and he utterly failed in his rebellion (compare Isaiah 14:12-15; Ezekiel 28:11-17). Jesus spoke of this angelic rebellion when He said, "...I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven" (Luke 10:18).

Satan has continued to foment violence against those who repent, who turn to God and to the promise of His Kingdom. He will also again seek to fight God, and, as prophecy shows, he will again fail:

"And war broke out in heaven: Michael and his angels fought with the dragon; and the dragon and his angels fought, but they did not prevail, nor was a place found for them in heaven any longer. So the great dragon was cast out, that serpent of old, called the Devil and Satan, who deceives the whole world; he was cast to the earth, and his angels were

cast out with him" (Revelation 12:7-9).

Even after Jesus Christ returns to the earth and establishes God's Kingdom for a period of 1,000 years, Satan, once he is released, will make a final violent attempt to deceive and motivate humans and to lead them in an attack on God's ruling government (compare Revelation 20:7-9). Following these events, as Revelation 20:10 shows, Satan the devil will never again have access to God or the realm of God.

In addition, Jesus' statement in Matthew 11:12 also emphasizes the fact that God's disciples must STRIVE with all their might to enter the Kingdom of God (compare Luke 13:24).

Scofield Reference Notes point out: "It has been much disputed whether the 'violence' here is external, as against the kingdom in the persons of John the Baptist and Jesus; or that, considering the opposition of the scribes and Pharisees, only the violently resolute would press into it. Both things are true. The King and His herald suffered violence, and this is the primary and greater meaning, but also, some were resolutely becoming disciples."

The Ryrie Study Bible adds: "Since the time John began preaching, the response has been violent, whether by vicious opponents or enthusiastic supporters."

John 6:15 even reports that some of Christ's overly zealous supporters "were about to come and take Him by force to make Him king," and that Jesus "departed again to a mountain by Himself alone."

Christ also refers to the fact in Matthew 11:12 that some would try to "press into" the Kingdom of heaven in the wrong way--thinking that they do not have to keep God's law anymore (compare Luke 16:16-17). In addition, "violent people" killed Christ so that they did not have to give up their authority and power (compare John 11:48-50). They refused to enter the Kingdom of God and tried to take it forcefully away from others. Jesus said about the scribes and Pharisees in Matthew 23:13: "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you shut up the kingdom of heaven

against men; for you neither go in yourselves, nor do you allow those who are entering to go in."

Because the faithful people of God continue to proclaim the Gospel of the Kingdom of God, this very activity brings about violent reactions, arguments and persecutions. As the Nelson Study Bible writes: "... violent people forcibly oppose the kingdom with their hostility... As Christ's kingdom advances, so do the attacks against it." This is Satan's world in terms of government, and he is inspiring violence in defense of his position. Even at the present time and on into the near future, Christians do and will suffer violent attacks on behalf of the kingdom of heaven!

For more information, please read our free booklet, "The Gospel of the Kingdom of God".

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