

UPWARD CALL

Brethren, I do not regard myself as having laid hold of it yet; but this is my one aim: to forget everything that's behind, and to strain every nerve to go after what lies ahead. I press on toward the finish line, where the prize waiting for me is the upward call of God
IN KING JESUS.

(Philippians 3:13-14)

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by – Stuart H. Pouliot

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Kingdom of the Heavens Suffered Violence

It is not uncommon to hear Christians say that we have to be violent with our flesh if we are to enter the kingdom of the heavens, as if, for a Christian, violence and the kingdom of God go hand-in-hand. To this, some add that John the Baptist was a violent man. To make this point, most generally quote the following verse, presented from several translations. Take note that there are two concepts in this verse. First, the kingdom (from an earthly perspective in Jesus' day) suffered violence. History tells us that this is a fact. Second, violent men must take or seize the kingdom by force to enter it. But what does this mean? Does this actually apply to us today? This is what is explored in the following, for this goes along with the kingdom suffering violence.

"From the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven suffers violence, and violent men take it by force." (Matthew 11:12 NASB)

From the time of John the Baptist until now, violent people have been trying to take over the kingdom of heaven by force. (Matthew 11:12 CEV)

But from the time of John the Baptist till now, the Kingdom of the Heavens has been suffering violent assault, and the violent have been seizing it by force. (Matthew 11:12 WNT)

Was John the Baptist truly violent? He definitely had an aura of strangeness or "not of this world" about him, and he spoke rather bluntly to the Jewish religious leaders, but did this make him a violent man? Does the record indicate that John ever took up a physical sword? No!

As a young believer, I never embraced this verse even as more mature saints continually referred to it as they sought to "die to self." This phrase is a topic unto itself, but I thought we were crucified with Christ. Or, was this only Paul's experience?

I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by [the] faith in [of] the Son of God, who loved [loves] me and gave Himself up for me. (Galatians 2:20 NASB [DNT, YTL, CV])

I am not implying that we do not have things that must be dealt with in our lives, even to "die to," for, most assuredly, there are. Laying down our lives for one another, or taking up our cross, or losing our soul life for the Lord's sake in order to find it are all vital principles that often involve radical change in our lives. However, I believe it is more about reckoning what the Lord has done for us, walking by faith, abiding in Him, and hearing and obeying His voice, than it is about us trying to change ourselves, peacefully or violently.

However, is this what the Lord Jesus was telling His disciples in relation to John the Baptist?

Undoubtedly, there is flesh involved in the violence cited by Jesus, but nowhere in Matthew 11:12 did He state nor imply that John the Baptist was or believers must be violent with "self" in order to force their way into the kingdom of the heavens. Besides, isn't the kingdom about righteousness and peace and joy in the holy spirit (Romans 14:17)?

Jesus was not advocating violence as many seem to think. On the contrary, consider what Jesus told Pilate as He was headed toward the cross. Keep in mind that shortly before this Jesus had also chided Peter for using a physical sword against a high priest's slave (John 18:10, 11).

Jesus answered, "My kingdom is not of this world. If My kingdom were of this world, then My servants would be fighting so that I would not be handed over to the Jews; but as it is, My kingdom is not of this realm."
(John 18:36 NASB)

No; Jesus was not calling for violence or for His disciples to be violent with themselves or with others, nor was He advocating that His followers violently seize His kingdom that was of another realm. So, what did He mean?

Jesus spoke these words in reference to John the Baptist being imprisoned by King Herod. John was about to be beheaded (violence), and then He (Jesus), as the very King of kings, was about to be crucified (violence), and later most of His disciples would be martyred (violence), along with many saints that followed down through the centuries (violence) [Revelation 6:9-11; 20:4]. Why? Since the days of John, violent men have been trying to seize the kingdom of God through violence, even trying to seat themselves on the throne in place of Christ (i.e., antichrist).

In other words, many have been trying to force their way into God's kingdom by the arm of the flesh not by the sword of the spirit, which is the word of God. No doubt this very same arm of the flesh was in the disciples, and Jesus knew it.

And when his disciples James and John saw it, they said, "Lord, do you want us to tell fire to come down from heaven and consume them?" But he turned and rebuked them. (Luke 9:54-55 ESV)

We need to understand that, in Jesus' day, the Jews wanted to break away from Roman rule by force if necessary and establish the kingdom of God (the heavens) on earth, making them the head and all other nations subservient to them. Their rebellion culminated with the Lord sending His Roman army to destroy Jerusalem (Matthew 22:7). Many wanted Jesus to lead the charge to fight the Romans and take control of Jerusalem and Judea. When He refused to do so, they rejected Him as the rightful heir of the throne and demanded His crucifixion (John 19:15). Jesus is the king of peace not of violence. His kingdom is the kingdom of peace and righteousness.

The Jews in Judea were under the judgment of God, for they were under a **wooden yoke** (Jeremiah 27:11; 28:13) of Roman rule, meaning they were on their land but being governed by foreigners. Previously, when Judah was taken captive and removed to the land of the Babylonians, they had been under an **iron yoke** (Deuteronomy 28:36, 47-48; Jeremiah 28:13-14). In order for the king of the Jews to take the scepter of His kingdom as Jacob-Israel prophesied to his son Judah (Genesis 49:10), Judah had to be back on the land, and so they were, but they were still under judgment.

Unfortunately, the Jewish leaders rejected this judgment, refusing to repent as John had commanded (Matthew 3:2), and believed they had a right to fight to take control and establish the kingdom of God, usurping the throne from God's Son. Ultimately, this led to the total destruction of Jerusalem and the scattering of the remaining Jews about 40 years later. Jeremiah had prophesied of Judah being made up of both good figs and bad or evil figs (Jeremiah 24-30). The good ones peaceably submitted to the judgment of God; the evil figs were more interested in fighting to the death, if necessary, in order to break the very yoke of judgment that had been placed upon them by the Lord.

But the history of Christendom is not much different, for it is strewn with Christians (in name) who have declared the sovereignty of God while trying to seize or advance the kingdom by their own violence and force. If this is hard to accept, then study the history of the Roman church. How many Christians, Jews, and Moslems have been killed down through the centuries in the name of Christ? Thousands, if not millions!

Peace I leave with you; My peace I give to you; not as the world gives do I give to you. (John 14:27)