

“The Last Old Testament Hero” Matthew 11:7-19

Hebrews 11. Living by Faith. And not seeing (or experiencing the things promised). John not only didn't see them, he didn't understand them.

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.

¹⁶ “But to what shall I compare this generation? It is like children sitting in the marketplaces and calling to their playmates,

*¹⁷ “We played the flute for you, and you did not dance;
we sang a dirge, and you did not mourn.”*

¹⁸ For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, ‘He has a demon.’ ¹⁹ The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, ‘Look at him! A glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!’ Yet wisdom is justified by her deeds.”

Verse 11. *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.* John is a transitional figure who has prepared the way for the Coming One, but Jesus implies that John will not live to see the full arrival of the kingdom. The complex series of events that will inaugurate the kingdom, including the cross, resurrection, ascension, and sending of the Spirit at Pentecost, would happen after John was executed. John was on the threshold of getting into the kingdom, but never got to go through the door himself while he was on earth. John is the greatest born in the Old Testament era because of his close connection to Jesus, and his crucial role in preparing the way for the Messiah and His kingdom. His mission was great because of the greatness of the One he introduced. Compare to Moses introducing the Law.

But those in the kingdom are greater because of their privilege to have entered it.

Verses 7-11 John rigorously personalized his message of repentance. The ascetic lifestyle. Yet those who rejected his rugged appearance and ascetic desert habits as proof that he was demon-possessed.

Verse 12. *¹² From the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven has suffered violence, and the violent take it by force.*

This is a verse that has been widely debated as to its meaning, the controversy coming from the meaning of the verb *biazo* and the noun *biastes*, which are related. These words can have both a positive and a negative connotation, depending on the context. But in every other usage of *biastes* in Scripture, if not always, rendered in a negative way to designate “violent men.”

In light of the negative circumstances surrounding John the Baptist’s imprisonment, and the rising opposition to his own ministry, it seems likely that Jesus is referring to the ongoing opposition to that the kingdom has encountered since the days of John the Baptist. Opposition from the religious establishment in general, and men like Herod in particular. This may also be a prophetic reference to his own violent death, which would be the means of establishing his kingdom.

Again, this was not what was expected by the Jews as to how the kingdom would be established. They thought it would be easy. Piece of cake... they would be on God’s side.

Verses 13-15. *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.*

John is the culmination of a long history of prophecy that looked forward to the arrival of the messianic kingdom. That prophetic hope has been realized in John’s preparation for Jesus’ inauguration of the kingdom.

“He is the Elijah.” Malachi prophesied that Elijah would prepare the way for Messiah (Mal. 3:1; 4:5). Malachi, contrary to what some believe, does not imply a reincarnation of Elijah. For those who receive John’s ministry, he is the fulfillment of Malachi’s prophecy (Matt. 17:10-13). *¹⁰ And the disciples asked him, “Then why do the scribes say that first Elijah must come?” ¹¹ He answered, “Elijah does come, and he will restore all things. ¹² But I tell you that Elijah has already come, and they did not recognize him, but did to him whatever they pleased. So also the Son of Man will certainly suffer at their hands.” ¹³ Then the disciples understood that he was speaking to them of John the Baptist.*

Jesus is summoning the crowd to exercise faith in both John’s preparatory message and Jesus identity as the Messiah.

Verse 16-19. *¹⁶ “But to what shall I compare this generation? It is like children sitting in the marketplaces and calling to their playmates,*

¹⁷ “ ‘We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we sang a dirge, and you did not mourn.’

¹⁸ For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, ‘He has a demon.’ ¹⁹ The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, ‘Look at him! A glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!’ Yet wisdom is justified by her deeds.”

Jesus taps into the current cultural setting by drawing on the games children played in the marketplace, which was the regular playground for the children while their parents shopped and exchanged local news. Jesus compares the innocence of child’s play with the deviousness of this generation of adults who are playing an evil game. Childishness, which is essentially selfish, petty, and insistent on having one’s own way.

When children invite other children to join them in playing games, childish children insist on having their own way. This generation is like pouting, petulant children who criticize other children because they won’t play by their rules. When they announce to other children that the game they want to play is “Wedding,” they become upset when other children don’t immediately fall in line by

dancing. Then when they change the game and announce a funeral game by singing a dirge, they are upset when other children don't immediately put on a face of mourning.

This generation rejects the invitation to the kingdom of heaven because John and Jesus don't play the game they want. They rejected John because he didn't dance when they wanted to be merry, and they are rejecting Jesus because he does not mourn when they want to fast.

This hardhearted generation expected Jesus and John to conform to their expectations and they refused to allow God's agenda to alter their own.

"John came neither eating nor drinking," contrasts everyday carefree indulgence with John's rigorous personalization of his message of repentance. The ascetic lifestyle. Yet those who rejected his rugged appearance and ascetic desert habits as proof that he was demon-possessed (like the demoniacs who lived in tombs or the desert).

Falsely accusing the messenger is the way those with hardened hearts rationalize their rejection of the message.

When Jesus came eating and drinking, they accused Him of being a party animal.

God's wisdom will be proved right (or vindicated) by her actions in the ministries and lifestyles of John and Jesus. If this generation had taken John and Jesus for who they said they were, the knowledge of them as forerunner and Messiah would have been proved right by their actions, as seemingly opposite as were their lifestyles.

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Main Idea: T

Jesus' Tribute to John the Baptist (7-11)

His Identity (7-10)

Unwavering conviction (7)

Uncompromising congruency (8)

Unparalleled call (9-10)

Israel's first prophet in 400 years (9)

A prophet who himself fulfilled prophecy (10)

His Greatness (11)

Greater than all who have had a natural birth

Lesser than all who have had a supernatural birth

Violence and the Kingdom (12)

John is the Anticipated "Elijah" (13-15)

An Unresponsive Generation (16-19)