

~Other Speakers S-Z: David Servant:

Even though he had witnessed the Holy Spirit descend upon Jesus at His baptism, John the Baptist---a prophet and the greatest man who ever lived according to Jesus (11:11)---had some doubts as he sat in a prison cell contemplating his possible execution. That makes me feel better, as I've had similar doubts about Jesus, particularly when I've begun to question why He allows His people to suffer. Notice, however, that Jesus didn't explain to John why He didn't deliver him from prison. Rather, He reminded John of His miraculous credentials (11:4-5). The reasons to believe in Jesus are substantially greater than the reasons not to believe. One might keep his eyes continually focused downward in order to deny that there is a sun, moon or stars---but such a person would only be fooling himself---as are all unbelievers. Thus all who make excuses for their unbelief are rightfully condemned along with those who rejected Christ in Chorazin, Bethsaida and Capernaum (11:20-24). It was not that they could not believe, but that they would not believe.

Jesus' words about violent men taking the kingdom of heaven by force must be metaphorical, as they make no sense taken literally. Similar words of Jesus recorded by Luke help our understanding: "The Law and the Prophets were proclaimed until John; since that time the gospel of the kingdom of God has been preached, and everyone is forcing his way into it. But it is easier for heaven and earth to pass away than for one stroke of a letter of the Law to fail" (Luke 16:16-17).

Up until the time of John the Baptist, all preaching (in the synagogues, for example) had been based on the Law and Prophets, of which the major theme was holiness. John preached the good news that the kingdom of heaven was at hand, but he found that too few paid attention to his call to repentance (Matt. 3:7-12). They only went through the motions, "forcing their way into the kingdom" as it were, which certainly implies the idea of an illegitimate entrance. Thus Jesus reminded everyone that nothing in the Law or Prophets had been superseded by John's wonderful announcement of the soon-coming kingdom. Holiness was still required. As we read in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus declared that it is only those who do the will of God who will enter the kingdom of heaven (Matt. 7:21).

Similarly, many today suppose that they've gained their ticket to heaven because they've jumped on the born-again bandwagon, having prayed a quick prayer without ever truly repenting. In God's eyes these are violent people who attempt to force their way into heaven illegitimately. Those who have truly entered, however, have not come forcefully, but with humble repentance.

Jesus invites all who are weary from sin and heavy-laden with guilt to come to Him (11:28). But they must take His yoke---symbolic of submitting to His lordship---in order to receive "rest" for their souls. This underscores Jesus' consistent message of repentance and holiness, for there is no relationship with Him apart from them. When we do take His yoke upon ourselves, Jesus empowers us to live righteously so that His load is light. We can say with John, "His commandments are not burdensome" (1 John 5:3).

Do Jesus' words, "Nor does anyone know the Father, except the Son, and anyone to whom the Son wills to reveal Him" (11:27), prove the Calvinistic idea that God wills that only some be saved? In light of Jesus' very next words in which He invites all who are weary to come to Him (11:28), certainly not. God has not chosen certain individuals to be saved. Rather, He has chosen to save certain kinds of individuals, as made so clear by what we just read. God has willed to hide the saving truth from those who are "wise and intelligent," but to reveal it to "babes" (11:25). God resists the proud but gives grace to the humble (Jas. 4:6). Being proud or humble is the choice of every free moral agent. God has chosen to save all who will believe with a living faith---one that reveals itself through obedience.