

# Matthew 11:10-15

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*Jesus continues His affirmation of John the Baptizer and his role as the forerunner to the Messiah. By extension Jesus is also testifying that He is that Messiah.*

The parallel gospel account of this event is found in Luke 7:27-28.

As Jesus was speaking to the crowds about the prophetic role of *John the Baptist* and by extension His own identity as the Messiah, He showed them how *John* is the fulfillment of a prophecy.

*This is the one about whom it is written* in the third chapter of Malachi. Jesus then cites the first verse of that passage which describes John's role as a Messianic forerunner.

*Behold, I [God] send My messenger [John] ahead of You [Christ]. Who will prepare Your way before You.* But when we compare the words Matthew wrote of what Jesus said, we see that Jesus modified Malachi's language ever so slightly.

"Behold, I am sending My messenger, and he will clear a way before Me."  
(Malachi 3:1)

The main change is at the end of each statement. Jesus says "*You*." Malachi says "*Me*." What, if anything, are we to make of this difference? It would seem the OT quote says "I (God) am sending a messenger to prepare a way for me (God)" while Jesus says "I (God) am sending a messenger to prepare a way for you (the Christ)." So it seems Jesus is making an application of the passage. It is clear that Jesus is claiming that John is the messenger who fulfills this prophecy from Malachi 3:1. The question then would be "Who then is the Christ?"

Jesus does not quote the rest of Malachi 3, but He would not have to, for His Jewish audience would have been able to finish out Jesus's reference once they were given the first line. Malachi goes on to talk about the Messiah's fiery judgment.

"Behold, I am sending My messenger, and he will clear a way before Me. And the Lord, whom you are seeking, will suddenly come to His temple; and the messenger of the covenant, in whom you delight, behold, He is coming," says the Lord of armies. "But who can endure the day of His coming? And who can stand when He appears? For He is like a refiner's fire, and like launderer's soap. And He will sit as a smelter and purifier of silver, and He will purify the sons of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, so that they may present to the Lord offerings in righteousness."  
(Malachi 3:1-3)

By omitting the later part of Malachi's prophecy, Jesus was signaling a great mystery just beginning to be revealed. Namely, that Jesus was coming to earth in two advents. In the first

advent, Jesus came to serve. In the second He will come to rule. In the first advent He did not come to judge the world (John 3:17). But He will come to judge the world when He returns again (Revelation 19:11).

By applying this quote from Malachi 3:1 to John the Baptizer, Jesus is explicitly saying that *John* is this *messenger* sent *ahead of* the Messiah. If John is this messenger, and if John's disciples were sent to ask, "Are you the Messiah" and if Jesus answered, "Go tell him what you saw," then who is the Messiah? He is implicitly indicating that He is the Messiah that *John* prepared *the way* before. But Jesus was not making overt claims. Apparently, it was made sufficiently clear to those who want to see that Jesus is the Christ, while remaining sufficiently veiled so that those who desire not to see can remain blind. This seems to be a pattern God follows throughout human history (Romans 1:19-20).

This is the eleventh time Matthew has explicitly pointed out how Jesus fulfilled Old Testament prophecies concerning the Messiah. (The previous ten are found in Matthew 1:22-23, 2:5-6, 2:16-18, 2:23, 3:1-3, 4:4-6, 4:13-16, 8:17, 10:35-36. This does not include the three additional scriptures that Jesus alluded to in Matthew 11:5-6). And it is the second time Jesus claimed that He has fulfilled a particular Messianic passage as a way of revealing His identity. (Matthew 10:35-36 was the first.) As His ministry progresses, Jesus is becoming increasingly clear about Who He is.

Jesus continues speaking of *John*. He emphatically affirms the significance of His ministry. *Truly I say to you*, speaking from His own authority Jesus says, *among those born of women there has not arisen anyone greater than John the Baptist!* This is quite the endorsement! *No human being is greater than John the Baptist*. In what way was *John* so great? He was not the most powerful or the richest in earthly treasures, but *John* had the great privilege and role of preparing *the way* for the Divine King and coming Messiah. Jesus did not declare John was the "greatest." He only said that no one has *arisen* who is *greater than* he. No other's task—not David's, not Moses's, not Abraham's—was of greater honor in human history.

As the Messiah, Jesus *is greater than John the Baptist* (the Messiah's forerunner) in the same way as the Bridegroom is greater than the Bridegroom's best man. How then can Jesus say that He is not *greater than John the Baptist*? If we look closely at Jesus's words He doesn't say this. Jesus says no one has *arisen* who is greater—and because Jesus's identity as Messiah has not yet been revealed, perhaps He has not yet *arisen* to surpass John's greatness.

*And yet*, Jesus continues, *the one who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than John*. The key term in this sentence is *kingdom of heaven*. Jesus regularly refers to the *kingdom* and it is one of the themes of Matthew's gospel narrative. One of the pinnacles of Jesus's Sermon on the Mount is Matthew 6:33 which bids "seek first His kingdom and His righteousness." But throughout His teaching *kingdom of heaven* can within different occurrences have present or future aspects.

*The kingdom of heaven* can refer to the future and fully visible reign of Christ throughout the earth. Such instances of the future aspect of *kingdom* being emphasized might include:

“Not everyone who says to Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of My Father who is in heaven will enter.”  
(Matthew 7:21)

“But I say to you, I will not drink of this fruit of the vine from now on until that day when I drink it with you, new, in My Father’s kingdom.”  
(Matthew 26:29)

Another future aspect of *the kingdom* is explained in the “Parable of the Noblemen” (Luke 19:12-27) that Jesus told because the people incorrectly “supposed that *the kingdom of God* was going to appear immediately” (Luke 19:11).

But *the kingdom* can also be used to describe Christ’s present Lordship within the hearts of His followers in this current age. Examples of the present aspect of *kingdom* being emphasized might include:

“From that time Jesus began to preach and say, ‘Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.’”  
(Matthew 4:17)

“But if I cast out the demons by the Spirit of God, then the kingdom of God has come upon you.”  
(Matthew 12:28)

“Truly I say to you, there are some of those who are standing here who will not taste death until they see the Son of Man coming in His kingdom.”  
(Matthew 16:28)

“But woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites, because you shut the kingdom of heaven in front of people; for you do not enter it yourselves, nor do you allow those who are entering to go in.”  
(Matthew 23:13)

And of course, both the present and future aspects of *kingdom* can sometimes be implied.

“Truly I say to you that the tax collectors and prostitutes will get into the kingdom of God before you.”  
(Matthew 21:21)

In this comparison about *John the Baptist*, it appears that Jesus is talking about His future and fully visible *kingdom*. Jesus just said that there was no one *greater than John the Baptist*. If *anyone* was currently serving in *the kingdom*, surely *John the Baptist* would have included. How then could *John* be *the greatest* and *the least in the kingdom be greater than he*, unless Jesus is talking about the future *kingdom* and comparing *the least in it* then with *John* now? What Jesus likely means by His remark is that as great and significant to the *kingdom of heaven* as *John the*

*Baptist* has been in this life and present age, even *the one who is least in the future and fully visible kingdom of heaven is greater* and will do *greater things than* [John] is doing now.

But as soon as Jesus compares John's stature and importance with that of *the one who is least in the future kingdom*, He begins to speak about present state of *the kingdom* and John's role within it.

*From the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven suffers violence, and violent men take it by force.*

*The days of John the Baptist* refers to the public ministry of *John the Baptist* which preceded Jesus's ministry by a few months, if not years. John's message was "Repent, for *the kingdom of heaven* is at hand" (Matthew 3:2). The phrase *violent men take it by force* could refer to the *violence* done to John (and other faithful members of *the kingdom of heaven*) by the earthly authorities such as the Pharisees and Sadducees who took John into custody (Matthew 4:12) and Herod who currently held John imprisoned (Matthew 11:2). As Jesus foretold being a faithful witness can be hazardous to the body (but not the "psuche") (Matthew 10). The Christian Church will encounter much *violence* and persecution throughout the Book of Acts and beyond. The *violence* Jesus is speaking of here very well could refer to the *violence* of persecution against *the kingdom*.

But it also could refer to a different kind of *violence* altogether. Jesus could mean that it requires a kind of spiritual *violence* to overcome the temptations of the present age to enter the *kingdom*. If this is the case Jesus is alluding to something very similar to what Paul describes in Ephesians 6:10-17 as putting on the armor of God and preparing for spiritual warfare. According to this interpretation, *violent men* would be *men* like *John* who took *the kingdom by the force* of resisting their sin nature, the corrupting patterns of this world and its temptations of luxury and prestige. If this is what Jesus means, then such spiritual *violence* against the schemes of the devil is commendable.

*For all the prophets and the Law prophesied until John.* This is an interesting statement by Jesus. The phrase *all the prophets and the Law* is a cultural expression for the Jewish scriptures we know as the Old Testament.

What does Jesus mean when he says that they *prophesied until John*? He could mean that the age of the Old Testament where God speaks primarily through *prophets* came to an end when *John* first began his public ministry. Jesus noted that John is said to fulfill the prophecy that Elijah would come prior to the advent of Messiah. This likely means the phrase, "*until John*," indicates that the Baptizer was the last of the Old Testament *prophets*. Jesus, then, was in effect saying that one age has closed, namely *the prophets and the Law*, and another age is beginning. The age being offered is the advent of *the Messianic kingdom*. Since Israel declines to follow Jesus, instead what is initiated is the age of the Gentiles (Luke 21:24; Romans 11:25).

Another meaning Jesus might have had when He said, *For all the prophets and the Law prophesied until John*, is that the scriptures *prophesied* of *John* and foretold John's coming as the forerunner of the Christ. Both meanings could be inferred together without eliminating the other.

Jesus concludes His endorsement of John and his ministry with these words: *And if you are willing to accept it, John himself is Elijah who was to come. He who has ears to hear, let him hear.*

The key thought of this statement is *John himself is Elijah who was to come.*

*Elijah* (~900 B.C. – ~ 850 B.C.) was a famous prophet within Israel's Northern Kingdom during the reign of the wicked King Ahab. *Elijah* was known for performing powerful miracles in the name of God. These include prophesying the beginning and end of a severe famine that lasted three years (I Kings 17:1 and 18:41), the raising of the widow's son (I Kings 17:17-24), and striking the Jordan's waters to allow him to cross (II Kings 2:8). But his most famous miracle was his public showdown with 450 prophets of Baal when *Elijah* called upon God to send down fire to consume the soaked altar (I Kings 18:19-40). The book of Kings also tells us that *Elijah* never died: "As they were going along and talking, behold, there approached a chariot of fire and horses of fire which separated the two of them. And *Elijah* went up by a whirlwind to heaven" (II Kings 2:11).

The prophet Malachi, who foretold of a Messianic forerunner (Malachi 3:1) also prophesied that *Elijah* would return before the "great and terrible day of the Lord" (Malachi 4:4). Indeed the last three verses of the Old Testament have strong Messianic overtones. In them both Moses the lawgiver and *Elijah* the prophet are mentioned by name.

"Remember the Law of Moses My servant, the statutes and ordinances which I commanded him in Horeb for all Israel. Behold, I am going to send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and terrible day of the Lord. He will turn the hearts of the fathers back to their children and the hearts of the children to their fathers, so that I will not come and strike the land with complete destruction."

(Malachi 4:4-6)

This prophecy encouraged many Jews to expect and look for *Elijah* as a sign that God's Kingdom and Messiah were coming soon.

For his part *John* said that he was neither the Christ nor *Elijah*.

"This is the testimony of John, when the Jews sent priests and Levites to him from Jerusalem to ask him, 'Who are you?' And he confessed and did not deny; and this is what he confessed: 'I am not the Christ.' And so they asked him, 'What then? Are you Elijah?' And he said, 'I am not.' 'Are you the Prophet?' And he answered, 'No.' Then they said to him, 'Who are you? Tell us, so that we may give an answer to those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?' He said, 'I am the voice of one calling out in the wilderness, 'Make the way of the Lord straight,' as Isaiah the prophet said.'"

(John 1:19-23)

If *John* denied that he was *Elijah* when questioned by the priests how then is *John himself, Elijah* as Jesus says?

The preceding clause may provide some clues. Preceding this statement that *John is Elijah* is the clause, *And if you are willing to accept it*. The clause functions as modifier. In effect it suggests that *John is* not literally *Elijah*, but *is* a kind of *Elijah who was to come*. John came and fulfilled an *Elijah*-esque role to prepare the way for the Messiah and arouse Israel to repentance for the *kingdom of heaven* is at hand. The clause *if you are willing to accept it* is a lengthier version of our expression “*if you will*” which we use to compare and equate two dissimilar things. This interpretation fits with Jesus’s admonition *he who has ears let him hear* which immediately follows Jesus’s statement.

But the opening clause could also be an offer that Jesus invited His Jewish audience *to accept*. If so, what exactly was Jesus’s offer?

Remarkably, He was offering them *the kingdom of heaven*’s establishment upon the earth. His offer is as follows: *If you* [the nation of Judea] *accept* that *John is* functioning as *Elijah* and that he *is* the foretold forerunner of the Messiah, then *you* ought to accept Me [Jesus] as the Messiah. And *if you* accept Me as the Messiah, then I will bring about visible *the kingdom of heaven* upon earth now. But *if you* do not *accept* these things about John and Myself, then the inauguration of the visible *kingdom* will wait until a future time.

This was quite an offer Jesus is making to His people. Do *you* want *the kingdom of heaven* to come now or do *you* want it to come later? If you want it to come now, then *accept* that *John is Elijah* and by extension, that I am the Messiah and *you* shall have it.

*He who has ears to hear, let him hear* this offer for what it is and *accept it* now. Of course, the Jews largely rejected Jesus as their Messiah and turned Him over to the Romans to be executed. Collectively Israel did not *have ears to* understand. It could be that in denying he was Elijah who was to come, John was prophesying that Israel would reject Jesus’ offer to inaugurate the kingdom during His first advent. In saying *if you are willing to accept it*, Jesus makes clear that the offer is real, and Israel had the potential to choose the kingdom.

If then John could have been Elijah, had Israel accepted Jesus as Messiah, but was not due to their rejection, then when will Elijah come? According to Malachi, it will be “before the coming of the great and terrible day of the Lord,” but we are not told specifics. One possibility is that Elijah will be one of the two witnesses of Revelation 11. Since “it is appointed for men to die once” (Hebrews 9:27) and Elijah was raptured to heaven on a fiery chariot without having died, this could signal that Elijah will return as one of the two witnesses, die then be raised up and raptured yet again (Revelation 11:8-12). Elijah’s appearance on the Mount of Transfiguration could presage this event (Matthew 17:3).

## **Biblical Text**

**This is the one about whom it is written,**

**‘Behold, I send My messenger ahead of You,**

**Who will prepare Your way before You.’**

**Truly I say to you, among those born of women there has not arisen anyone greater than John the Baptist! Yet the one who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.**

**From the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven suffers violence, and violent men take it by force. For all the prophets and the Law prophesied until John. And if you are willing to accept it, John himself is Elijah who was to come. He who has ears to hear, let him hear.**