

Matthew 11:12

The Violent Take It by Force

by *David Briones*

Jesus said, “*From the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven has suffered violence, and the violent take it by force*” ([Matt. 11:12](#)). Two questions have left readers scratching their heads: first, what is meant by the kingdom’s *suffering violence*, and, second, who takes the kingdom *by force*? To gain some clarity on this issue, let’s start with the second question and work our way back to the first.

Who are “the violent” who “take [the kingdom] by force”? The word translated “the violent” always carries a negative connotation. It therefore cannot describe a positive action, as in “eager men are forcing their way into it” (J.B. Phillips). It must refer to those who opposed the kingdom. This becomes even more obvious when we recognize that the word translated “take” (or “lay hold of”) almost always involves malicious intent. Wicked people who fit this description include Herod Antipas, who imprisoned John the Baptist ([Matt. 11:2](#)), and the Jewish leaders who opposed Jesus’ ministry (9:34; 12:22–24).

What is meant by the kingdom’s “suffering violence”? The Greek verb can rightly be translated one of two ways: “suffering violence” or “forcefully advancing.” Both are possible translations. The first option understands the kingdom to be under attack by the forces of darkness (Herod Antipas, Jewish leaders, and so on). Option two envisions God as forcefully advancing the kingdom against that very opposition. While each highlights a true element of the kingdom of heaven, option one is more convincing. For if “the violent take [the kingdom] by force,” then it would make more sense to view the kingdom as “suffering violence” at the hands of “the violent.” In both clauses of [Matthew 11:12](#), God’s kingdom is the direct object of unbelieving hostility.

As the kingdom faced hostility then, so does it now. But believers can confidently rest in God’s triumph over evil, sin, and death itself in the Lord Jesus Christ. Whatever opposition the kingdom and its subjects may face, Job’s declaration to the Lord remains true: “I know that you can do all things, and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted” ([Job 42:2](#)).