

Storming the Throne of Grace: A HOLY ASSAULT ON THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN

Congregation,

There is a well-known question: "What will constrain the hands of the Almighty?" The answer is: "Prayer and supplication." We see this in Penuel, where Jacob constrained the hands of the Almighty and prevailed through God's power. Today I want to speak to you about this power to constrain God's hands. The text can be found in Matthew 11:12, where we read: *"And from the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven suffereth violence, and the violent take it by force."*

The subject of our text is **"A HOLY ASSAULT ON THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN."**

First we will consider the *objective* of this holy assault.

Secondly, the *power* of this holy assault.

And thirdly, the *victory* gained by this holy assault.

1. The objective of this holy assault.

The disciples of John the Baptist had gone to the Lord Jesus with the following question: *"Art thou he that should come, or do we look for another?"* We can read the Lord Jesus' answer from verse 4 onward: *"Go and shew John again those things which ye do hear and see: The blind receive their sight, and the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, and the poor have the gospel preached to them."*

With these words, He actually said: I am the fulfillment of what the prophets have spoken. We can read an example of what the prophets had spoken in Isaiah 29 and 35. There, the prophets foretell that when the Messiah would come, the eyes of the blind would be opened, the lame would leap like a hart, the deaf would hear again, and the meek will have the Gospel preached unto them. Thus, by referring to these prophecies, the Lord

Jesus says: I am the fulfillment of the prophecies concerning the Messiah and His coming into the world. I do the work of the Messiah; I am the true Messiah who was promised.

After the disciples of John the Baptist return to their imprisoned master, the Lord Jesus begins to talk to the multitude about John the Baptist. We read the beginning of this conversation in verse 7: *"And as they departed, Jesus began to say unto the multitudes concerning John."* So Jesus begins to talk with the people about John the Baptist. The Lord Jesus makes it clear to the multitude that John the Baptist holds an eminent position in the Kingdom of God. Malachi spoke of him when he wrote: *"Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the LORD"* (Malachi 4:5).

This is how the Lord Jesus explains John the Baptist's position in the light of the Old Testament. He said: *"And if ye will receive it, this is Elias, which was for to come"* (Matthew 11:14). But at the same time, Jesus said: *"Notwithstanding he that is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he."* By this He means that the least and weakest believer, living in the dispensation of the fulfillment of the prophecies, is greater than John the Baptist. According to the marginal notes of the Dutch Statenvertaling, this is because the preaching of the Gospel under the New Testament is so much clearer than under the Old Testament.

Then the Lord Jesus concludes His comments about John the Baptist by saying: *"And from the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven suffereth violence, and the violent take it by force."* Here He refers to the great change in the dispensation of salvation, which began with the coming of John the Baptist. In essence, the Lord Jesus says: "Momentous things are going to take place." He speaks of changes in the Kingdom of Heaven. Here the Kingdom of Heaven is the New Testament dispensation, the fulfillment of the prophets; the New Testament church. The Lord Jesus says: "The new dispensation will be accompanied by big and tremendous changes." And these changes have begun with the appearance of John the Baptist. Since the coming of John the Baptist, significant events have occurred in the Kingdom of Heaven. Great historical events of salvation have taken place. God has written new history, especially the history of salvation.

We believe that God writes His history in this world. The coming of John the Baptist is, as it were, a special moment in time, a turning point, a pivotal moment in God's history; the coming of John the Baptist marks the start of a new era. It is as if the Lord Jesus says: "Now great things are going to happen." The shadows of the old dispensation will disappear and all will be fulfilled in the new dispensation. Now salvation will no longer be limited to the Jews but the wall of division between Jew and Gentile will be broken down and the heathen shall share in the blessings of the Messiah. Also, the Gentiles will now inquire after the root of Jesse; and this root of Jesse shall stand for an ensign of the people; [and, indeed,] to it shall the Gentiles seek (Isaiah 11:10).

When Jesus speaks about these things, He uses figurative language to make His meaning clear. He says: *"And from the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven suffereth violence, and the violent take it by force."* In the original it says: "The Kingdom of Heaven is being stormed." The marginal notes of the Dutch Statenvertaling confirm this: "It

is accepted with great desire and zeal by large multitudes." The Lord says that such a time as this will soon come. The Kingdom of Heaven will be taken by storm in the near future. It will be conquered and taken by large multitudes.

The audience of the Lord Jesus understood His message well. They had experienced the great changes that came about through the preaching of John the Baptist. When John the Baptist preached, there was a particular outpouring of the Holy Ghost on his hearers. John's preaching brought about fundamental change: an awakening. People of all walks of life became concerned about the well-being of their souls. Even the most hardened of sinners became concerned.

They came to John the Baptist from all quarters: rough soldiers, publicans who collaborated with the Roman oppressors, semi-Gentiles from the border regions, intellectuals and simple farmers. They became deeply concerned and asked John the Baptist: "And what shall we do?" You can read this in the third chapters of both Matthew and Luke. We read that even the Pharisees came. Many of these proud, self-satisfied, and self-righteous Pharisees were impressed by the preaching of John the Baptist. The Sadducees came too. They were the liberal Jews, usually from the enlightened and rich people. They only believed in things that could be proven. They did not believe in angels, neither did they believe in the resurrection or the eternal nature of the soul. But even the Pharisees and many Sadducees came to the Baptism of John.

In fact, John the Baptist was surprised at their attendance, as we can read in Matthew 3. Publicans and sinners came to him also. Rude Roman soldiers came to him. People came from all Judea and the surrounding country to hear the preacher on the banks of Jordan. And the people asked him: "And what shall we do?" And when John directed them to repent and invited them to be baptized, they were baptized, confessing their sins.

It was as though the Jewish church had fallen into a deep sleep before the time of John the Baptist. However, through the penitential preaching of John, through preaching about the Messiah Who was to appear shortly, the people were shaken awake and became concerned. A longing was awakened in them, a longing to share in the Messiah and the blessings of God's Kingdom. The people left their work - plowmen left the field, soldiers left their tents, mothers left their homes - all to hear John the Baptist. They said to one another: "Elias has come." John the Baptist was the great prophet, the one who would precede the Messiah. Was God about to fulfill His promise? Would His Kingdom come now? They sought John's baptism. They repented. They longed for forgiveness and yearned after the coming of Israel's long-promised Messiah.

The changes among the people of Israel that were brought about through John's preaching were significant. Flavius Josephus, the historian, made it very clear that the whole country was moved. The general spirit of complacency came to an end. The people became deeply concerned. Many questions were asked. Could he be Elias? Would the Messiah come now?

So when the Lord Jesus speaks about John the Baptist, He typifies the age and says: "*And*

from the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven suffereth violence." Jesus says that with the coming of John the Baptist, a new dispensation has begun. "Until now," He says. He means: it has just begun, it will continue; it will get stronger; it will become a mighty movement. They shall come from the East and from the West, and from the North and from the South, to become heirs of God's Kingdom with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Both Jews and Gentiles shall enter that Kingdom. They shall not, however, enter in easily. They shall enter that Kingdom as fighters, as men who storm that Kingdom and take it. So the Lord Jesus speaks about the new dispensation, saying: *"Now the kingdom of heaven suffereth violence, and the violent take it by force."* People will fight to enter Christ's Kingdom. We will consider this in our second thought, in speaking of:

2. The power of this holy assault.

The Lord Jesus speaks of "the violent" and of "violence." The Greek words used here do, indeed, point to soldiers storming and taking a stronghold. This Greek word "violence" is also used in Acts 27. There, it is used to describe the violence of the waves that was so great that the hinder part of the ship was broken. Just as waves pound a ship with their violence, just as troops storm and take a stronghold, so also the Kingdom of God shall be taken. This is the image that Jesus sketches here before his audience.

Congregation, I think that we, Calvinists, struggle with the word violence and the concept of an assault on heaven. Isn't mankind totally unable to do any good and inclined toward all evil? How then can a person take the Kingdom of God by violence? Surely clenched fists don't go with the Kingdom of God, but rather hands folded in prayer? Surely you don't enter the Kingdom of God as a valiant warrior, but rather as a penitent sinner on your knees? Yes indeed, the words of Jesus in this portion of Scripture are unsettling. How are we to interpret them? After all, does not Scripture say: *"Not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit"*? It can't be that the power and violence of mankind has a prominent importance in the Kingdom of Heaven, can it? After all, isn't the salvation of a sinner the one-sided work of God? Does not Paul say: *"So then it is not of him that willeth, nor of him that runneth, but of God that sheweth mercy?"* Isn't salvation wrought purely out of free grace? Isn't salvation a work of God without man's will and works?

Yes, that is indeed a part of God's truth. It is, however, not the whole of God's truth. God's sovereignty stands over against man's responsibility. And with this in mind, Jesus says: *"Strive to enter in at the strait gate."* And Paul also admonishes us: *"Fight the good fight of faith, lay hold on eternal life!"* He does not tell Timothy to just wait patiently for a while. No, he says: *"Fight the good fight of faith, lay hold on eternal life!"* And through the mouth of Amos the Prophet, we hear the Lord calling: *"Seek ye me, and ye shall live."* Dear congregation, we must not ignore this aspect of God's truth. We will do so at our peril, for the Lord will hold us accountable if we ignore this truth. God will ask us what we have done with His call to repentance and faith in Christ.

Yes, but congregation, does this mean that Scripture contradicts itself? How do you obtain that Kingdom - by storming it? Or by receiving it in an empty hand as a gift of mercy

from God? Do you have to take the Kingdom by storm ... or do you have to wait at the pool of Bethesda until the water is troubled? Do you have to do everything yourself ... or does God do it all? It cannot be both at the same time, can it? Surely, it is either the one or the other?

Congregation, the solution to this apparent contradiction is not so difficult. Scripture teaches us very simply that God's work, the work of regeneration, always comes first. It is God Who visits man, just as He visited our first parents when they fled trembling from Him. First there is God, Who renews the hearts of sinners and bends their will through the Holy Ghost. But when that happens, man does not stay in his easy chair any longer! The whole man comes into action. When God sets our soul's gears in motion, then all its gears start turning at once. It all starts with God and it is God Who sets all of it in motion! It is His work, and only His work!

We also read about this in our well-known Canons of Dordt. In the Canons, a special kind of passiveness is mentioned. When considering regeneration, it says that "God works in us without our aid." Yet, you must not compare it with a surgical operation, where you are given a general anesthetic and then you know nothing until you wake up after the surgery is complete. No, it is not like that. You are consciously aware: God's work happens to you and you notice it, but at the same time it happens without your help.

The work of regeneration is an intervention of God's free grace. God comes into your life. He starts to have dealings with you. God starts to work in your heart: without us and within us. Often you must say with Rebekah: "Why am I thus?" You cannot explain it. You experience something that you have not experienced before. You now experience what it means to be unconverted and to miss God. There is a cry to God in your soul. You now see what sin means in the eyes of an eternally holy and just God. The world loses its glitter and its merit. Everything outside of God and Christ becomes poor and empty. Because you are missing God and His favor, you consider God's children to be happy and rich and yourself to be poor and miserable. You see, congregation, that is what happens when God begins that work of regeneration - *without* you and yet *within* you.

But when God has done this work in your heart, then you, yourself, cannot sit still and wait. In those same Canons of Dordt the following is written: "Whereupon the will thus renewed is not only actuated and influenced by God, but in consequence of this influence, becomes itself active. Wherefore also, man is himself rightly said to believe and repent, by virtue of that grace received." The fruit of the renewing grace of God is that the dead come to life; that prodigal sons arise; and that the people at Pentecost cry out: "Men and brethren, what shall we do?" When God works in the hearts of sinners, they start to knock, to call, to seek, and to cry to God. Jesus says: "The violent take the Kingdom by force." Congregation, such people will launch a holy assault on the Kingdom of God.

This expression points to a powerful desire to enter the Kingdom. They storm that Kingdom. They storm it as a stronghold is stormed. This points to a powerful desire, a deep

conviction, and a determined effort. God's grace works a desire to take the Throne of Grace by storm.

Congregation, compare this with your own prayers, your church attendance, your Scripture reading and your own listening to the sermon. Compare all your own efforts against this holy assault, this storming of the Throne of Grace. Does it compare with what Jesus says here: "The violent take the Kingdom by force?"

Generally speaking, church-goers are all keen to go to heaven. Isn't that why you go to church, after all? Isn't that why you read your Bible and do not join in with the rest of the world? Surely you want to enter God's Kingdom upon your death. Boys and girls, why do you go to church? Why do you pray and read your Bible? Is it really only because you think it will help to get you to heaven?

Hold on! That is not doing violence to the Kingdom of God. Doing violence is something totally different. What the Lord Jesus is talking about here is not merely: "I hope for the best and I would like to go to heaven." It is also not the pious language of: "Oh, if only it may happen to me", "Oh, I hope that one day it will be my lot." Would that be doing violence to the Kingdom of God? Do the violent, who take the Kingdom by force, look like that? No, the Lord Jesus is talking here about something totally different. He says: *"And from the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven suffereth violence, and the violent take it by force."* It is about those who assault the Throne of Grace, rather than the complacent masses. It is about stormers, rather than cowards. It is about those who fight, rather than those who stand by. It is about action and not about pious wishes. Congregation, with all our pious words and wishful thinking, we will be left outside the Kingdom of Heaven. As soon as a cross has to be borne, as soon as there is pain or a sacrifice to be made, then the desire to enter the Kingdom fades away. It is as the Proverbs say: *"The slothful man saith, There is a lion in the way; a lion is in the streets"* (Proverbs 26:13). As soon as difficulties arise, people are offended for Jesus' sake and turn away from Him.

Doing violence to the Kingdom of God is the fruit of the Holy Spirit's work in a person's heart. When the Spirit works in the heart, then the person cannot just sit by idly. Then such a person cannot be satisfied with wishful thinking and say: "It can still happen yet and I hope that it does happen some time." No, if the Spirit works in a person's heart, then that man or woman, that child, becomes deeply concerned, just like the people under John the Baptist's preaching. Then it becomes personal. Then we realize that there is an eternity coming and that I have a soul to lose. Then the realization becomes real to me that one day I will have to stand before God and be judged by Him. Then the threat of a terrible hell and going lost forever becomes real.

When we begin to feel these things and when they become a reality, then our former false sense of peace comes to an end. Then the sinner feels in earnest: "I have a soul! I am in danger of being lost forever! I have grieved God by my sins! I cannot stand in His presence; I cannot meet Him!" And, then, congregation, we too become as those violent

ones. We are then pressed, pressed from within, to fight, to wrestle, to knock, to cry, and to seek to enter that Kingdom of peace.

Before, our desires were divided between God and the world. At that time it was so easy for us to serve two masters. Our greatest care was: "What shall I eat, what shall I drink?" Now, however, there remains only one thing of importance: "What must I do to be saved?" The soul's weight is felt. Only one thing is important now: How can my soul be saved? How can I be saved from the wrath to come?

Such a person is prepared to lose everything in order to gain Christ. Though a man may know little about dogmas or conversion stories, one thing is engraved deeply in the heart: I must find Jesus or be eternally lost! Such a one starts to assault the Kingdom of God and the Throne of Grace.

There are two things that cause a man to use violence on the Kingdom of God. A nice expression from Puritan theology regarding this goes as follows: "A blend of fear and hope draws a soul to Christ." The Lord uses this means to cause a man to use violence on the Kingdom of Heaven. He uses a blend of hope and fear. Not fear by itself - for if there were only fear, we would say with Cain: "My punishment is greater than I can bear." And also not hope by itself - for if there were only hope, then we would comfort ourselves and say that everything has been accomplished at Golgotha. Then we would simply reason: "Jesus died for sinners, and I am a sinner ... so, surely, I will go to heaven."

No, it is a blend of fear and hope. That blessed mixture is in the heart of every man whom God converts. On the one hand there is fear, real fear - fear of being lost forever, fear of the wrath of a holy God, fear for the condemnation in the Law. They are possessed by fear. Fear causes them to cry out: "O, what must I do and whereto shall I flee? Is there a way of salvation? Is there deliverance?" But there is also hope. Hope in God's undeserved mercy. Hope aroused by the Gospel, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners. God shows them that in Christ they can be saved and escape the wrath to come. He says in the Gospel that the door of the Kingdom is open in Christ. They can read the Gospel message above the gate to God's Kingdom: "*And let him that is athirst come. And whosoever will, let him take the water of life freely*" (Revelation 22:17).

It is this mixture of fear and hope that makes a man use violence on the Kingdom of Heaven. It is this combination of fear and hope that enables the sinner to overcome all resistance and difficulties. Whereas others become disappointed and give up in their attempts to enter the Kingdom, returning to their former life or even becoming offended, these violent ones do not cease their assault. A cross of affliction cannot stop them, nor reproach, nor strife - no, not even the temptations of the Devil Himself.

O congregation, it is true that the Devil will surely oppress them. There is no-one the Devil hates more than those who use violence on the Kingdom of God. He cannot endure them being no longer in his service. He cannot accept that they have become deaf to his

sweet and deceitful whisperings. Satan will say: "God has not chosen you. God never intended to save someone like you." He will try to persuade us that it is therefore useless to knock, to call, and to weep. But, congregation, when driven by both the fear of necessity and the hope upon God's free grace, the sinner will valiantly continue to storm the Kingdom of Heaven.

You see, congregation, that is what those who violently assault the Kingdom of God look like. They knock on its door. They cry to heaven and say with the Canaanitish woman: "Yet the dogs eat of the crumbs which fall from their masters' table." They plead on God's promises and say: "Lord, Thou hast surely said: 'In Thee the fatherless findeth mercy.'" They throw themselves humbly at Jesus' feet and cry out: "Jesus, Thou Son of David, have mercy on me." They cling to God, just as Jacob at Penuel did cling to the Lord with supplications and tears. They say: "I will not let Thee go, except Thou bless me."

There is a sweetness, too, in doing violence to the Kingdom of God. There is a sweetness in that knocking, in that weeping, in that hoping on God's free grace. There is heavenly joy in humbling oneself at the feet of the Saviour and crying out: "Be merciful to me."

So sinners do violence to the Kingdom of God. They must enter that Kingdom - at all costs. Whatever adversities or opposition they meet, whatever discouragement they receive, they can and will and shall not give up. They weep, cry, knock, seek and do violence to the Kingdom of God.

Such people will also find no rest in the law of works or in self-righteousness. Although that inclination is present in every heart, the Holy Ghost gives them no rest in the law. The law only brings them under the wrath of God. It is a false refuge. No, they know that true rest can only be found in Jesus. They seek that rest with the Saviour of lost sinners. The mix of fear and hope affords them no rest. For their fear is not taken away by improving themselves or by good works. Their fear is not even removed by sweet tears of repentance. No, their fear can only be taken away by the blood of Christ. They must have Jesus, otherwise there will be no rest for them.

And so they are driven onward by restlessness and fear, and drawn by hope and yearning. As the Lord Jesus says: "The violent take the Kingdom by force." We will consider this in our last thought, in speaking of:

3. The victory of this violence.

We read that they take the Kingdom of God by force. The word "take" here means: seize, conquer, possess. So they are conquerors. Scripture says of all worldly aggressors: "The branch of the terrible ones shall be brought low." We see this with the proud Egyptian Pharaoh, the great Nebuchadnezzar, the dreaded Nero, and the hated Hitler. God makes sure of that. Terrible ones shall be brought low. But these violent ones - they will conquer. Noah did not build the Ark in vain, the Canaanitish woman did not hope on Christ in vain and the thief on the cross did not cry to Jesus in vain. Paul did not fight the good fight in vain and Abraham did not leave Ur of the Chaldees in vain. They took the Kingdom of Heaven by force. They became conquerors of the Kingdom of God. Their holy violence

resulted in victory.

So there is violence in that calling and weeping in their great distress. There is violence in their prayers, their tears, and their pleadings that are sent up to God. There is violence in that pleading on God's promises and the words: "Lord, surely Thou hast promised, and Thou hast spoken?" That calling and crying to heaven, that pleading on His Word is like a holy assault on the promises of God. That moves Him. God is not to be compared with the cold and stony Buddha. You can pray and cry all day to Buddha, but he stays just the same. God, however, is the God Who can be entreated. He is the living God! He is the God Who says: "I have surely heard Ephraim bemoaning himself thus."

A miserable sinner's calling and seeking is a holy assault on Heaven. It applies great force upon God's loving heart. It pleases God to be conquered. The Lord said to Jacob: "As a prince hast thou power with God and with men." The Lord Jesus said to the Canaanite woman: "O woman, great is thy faith." Never did a soul cry to God ... to be rejected! If that were the case then God would cease to be Himself. No, congregation, the God Who hears prayer, the God by Whom there is forgiveness, the God Who has set up a Kingdom of salvation in Christ - this God is true to His Word: he that seeketh shall surely find; and he that knocketh, to him the door shall surely be opened.

"The violent take the Kingdom by force." The apostle Paul describes it in this manner: "Receiving the end of your faith, even the salvation of your souls." That is what God's children receive. They take the kingdom by force. It is written here with the meaning of: "To seize, to conquer, and to possess." They receive the Kingdom as if it were a trophy. It is the spoil of their battle and in that way it becomes their possession.

When we hear the Lord Jesus saying this, we reply: "How is that possible? How can a miserable, unworthy sinner receive the Kingdom of God as a trophy for his struggling, weeping, seeking and pleading on God's promises?"

To understand this, we must think of the great Conqueror of Gethsemane and of Golgotha: the Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. He also took God's Kingdom by force. For of Him we read: "*Who in the days of his flesh, when he had offered up prayers and supplications with strong crying and tears unto him that was able to save him from death, and was heard in that he feared.*" Jesus Christ, the great Conqueror, opened the Kingdom of God for lost sinners. He unlocked the entrance to that Kingdom by His bitter suffering and reconciliatory death.

To the weary, battle-worn assailants of the Kingdom of Heaven, those taking the Kingdom by storm, He calls: "*Come unto me, all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.*" These valiant warriors, weary and worn out, now may enter their objective - the Kingdom of Heaven - by free grace and through faith in God's Gospel promise. And all that remains for these violent ones is a sinner's poor faith, which clings to God's promises and cries out to Christ: "Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God." They take the Kingdom of Heaven by force. It becomes their spoil. As a trophy of Christ's conquering, as a free gift of grace obtained by Christ- this is how they become conquerors, indeed more

than conquerors, in the struggle and receive God's blessing.

Let us sing together Psalter 5:2,5

"And from the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven suffereth violence, and the violent take it by force." That sounds strange to our ears. We want an easy religion. In fact, both the worldly man and the religiously orthodox man want the same: a demand-free religion, a religion that does not cost too much pain and trouble, a religion which makes you feel good and is agreeable to the flesh.

It can even be a religion that is very orthodox on the surface. The minister's sermons always leave you in the false security of your inability: a religion that allows you to wait quietly in your secure little corner, saying: "Well, after all conversion is something which God has to work."

How terrible, if you are left in such a false state of peace! How terrible if that safe little corner is never disturbed! Of course, it is not so pleasant if it is disturbed. Our devout bubble is then pierced and it empties quickly. Then we see that our religion is just hot air and nothing else. But, congregation, the restlessness that is caused by God's disturbance is infinitely better than the false peace of the Devil.

Are you still waiting at ease? Can you still reassure yourself with the fact that, after all, there are only a few who are saved and a man cannot save himself? Congregation, boys and girls, can you travel to your eternal destruction in such passive complacency? Do you honestly think that you can endure God's wrath for even a moment? O, dear listener, let yourself be shaken awake. Don't give yourself rest; instead, face the reality of your condition: "I am on a journey to eternity. And when I shall meet God there will only be two possible outcomes: an eternity in the agonies of hell or an eternity in the joys of heaven. And what is my destination?"

The violent take the Kingdom of Heaven by force. If we are counted among these violent ones, then we will make use of the means of grace. That is part of that violence. The means of grace do not simply consist of a pious sighing. No, then you take up your Bible and you read it, with prayer and supplication, seeking as a poor and needy sinner. Then you go to your bedroom and you seek God in secret. Then you no longer leave your seat empty in church but you attend faithfully. Then you don't waste your time with watching TV or reading vain books; then you reach for a good book.

Doing violence on the Kingdom of God. O, congregation, make use of the means of grace! Luther says that you can compare the Bible with a tree - a richly laden tree. It bears delicious fruit. But you have to shake the tree to obtain the fruit. Only by shaking the tree does the fruit fall off.

The violent take the Kingdom of Heaven by force. Again, congregation, compare this with your own church attendance, your prayer and Bible study. Does your use of the means of grace compare favorably with what we read here? *And the violent take it by force.*

Congregation, there are many who think they can enter heaven sitting in an easy chair. Some think they will get there with an easy faith that says: "Jesus died for us all, why should I make such a fuss?"

And others think they will get there with a head full of knowledge. They talk just like God's children and imitate them and know how God converts a sinner better than many ministers. But all these are not what our text calls 'the violent.' Both those superficial Hallelujah callers and those pious heavy-weights do not know what is necessary to receive the Kingdom of heaven as a trophy. They know nothing of doing violence to the Kingdom of God. Congregation, God's Word is clear: there is no conquering of heaven without this holy assault upon God's Kingdom!

John Bunyan also writes about this in his *Pilgrim's Progress*. At one point in his travels, Christian found himself in Interpreter's house. All sorts of things were revealed to him in that house. From the flat roof he saw a beautiful palace in the distance. The palace was lit up, light streamed out through the windows. Interpreter told him: "That is the house of God, where God's love and communion is experienced." Standing at the door to that beautiful palace were angels to let people in. But the way up to the palace was blocked by hostile soldiers. Then Christian saw, further down the path, a man with a writing table. A great company of men stood around the man. The man at the writing table asked whose name he could write down to take on the evil soldiers who were blocking the entrance to the palace. But nobody volunteered. Then eventually a young man came running along, who said: "Write down my name." He put a helmet on his head, took his sword in his hand and fought a way through the hostile soldiers and was received by the angels with joy in the royal palace.

Christian then remembers the words of Jesus: "For many are called, but few are chosen." Bunyan used the man with the writing table to represent a preacher - and most of the men standing around him hear the message but take no action. They are all called and invited to enter the Kingdom of Heaven. But only a few say: "Write my name down." Few engage in the good fight and do battle on their way to the Kingdom of Heaven.

Congregation, it is true that there is a lot of unnecessary violence in our world: a lot of young blood has been spilled in pointless wars. But, young people, there is nothing futile about the fight to enter the Kingdom of Heaven: it is the good fight and eternal victory is directly connected to it. Have you already said to the Lord: "Write my name down on the roll?" Have you started the good fight yet?

The preaching of John the Baptist was clear: "Repent ye, repent ye!" It was a message that had not been heard in Israel for nearly four centuries. It was the message of the prophets of old. Now, however, something new is added: "Repent ye ... for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand." This was also the message of Jesus. He also taught: "For the Kingdom

of Heaven is at hand." It has come to your door. So they had to repent, because the Kingdom had come so close.

Congregation, that is why you must repent, too; God in His free grace has come so near to you. The Lord says: "He that seeketh findeth; and to him that knocketh it shall be opened." That is why you must repent, because the Kingdom of God has come so near. *"And from the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven suffereth violence."* Ever since the days that John preached, "Repent ye, for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand," a new dispensation has begun. Today, we live in that new dispensation. Salvation has not only come so much nearer, it has also become so much clearer. And the Lord Jesus tells us that since the beginning of that new dispensation, the Kingdom of God suffereth violence. Are you also one of these warriors? Do you belong to that company? For now is the acceptable time, now is the day of Salvation. And, congregation, this is certain: "The violent take the Kingdom by force."

Amen.

Closing Psalter 416: 4,7