

Matthew 11:7

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

And as they departed, Jesus began to say unto the multitudes concerning John, What went ye out into the wilderness to see?
A reed shaken with the wind?

Analysis

As John's disciples departed, Jesus began praising John to the crowds: 'What went ye out into the wilderness to see? A reed shaken with the wind?' The rhetorical question expects a negative answer. A 'reed shaken with the wind' symbolizes a vacillating, unstable person who bends to popular opinion and changing circumstances. Jesus emphatically denies this describes John. Despite his momentary question from prison, John was not a compromiser who adjusted his message to please audiences. He had courageously confronted Herod, confronted Pharisees as a 'generation of vipers' (Matthew 3:7), and proclaimed hard truths regardless of cost. The wilderness setting is significant—people traveled to the Jordan Valley's austere environment specifically to hear John's uncompromising message. They didn't seek entertainment or comfortable teaching but prophetic truth. Reformed theology values this prophetic boldness: faithful ministers speak God's Word without trimming it to cultural preferences.

Historical Context

The 'wilderness' refers to the Judean wilderness near the Jordan River where John conducted his ministry (Matthew 3:1-6). This harsh, desolate region became the site of massive popular movement as 'Jerusalem, and all Judaea, and all the region round about Jordan' went out to hear John (Matthew 3:5). Reeds grew abundantly along the Jordan's banks, swaying with every breeze—a perfect metaphor for instability. In contrast, John wore camel's hair and leather belt (Matthew 3:4),

deliberately evoking Elijah (2 Kings 1:8), and his message was uncompromising: 'Repent: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand' (Matthew 3:2). He confronted religious hypocrisy, demanded genuine repentance, and refused to curry favor with authorities—leading to his imprisonment and eventual martyrdom (Matthew 14:1-12). Jesus's public defense of John countered any who might have questioned John's faith due to his inquiry.

Related Passages

1 Corinthians 13:4 — Characteristics of love

1 John 4:8 — God is love

Study Questions

1. What modern cultural 'winds' tempt Christians to compromise or soften biblical truth, and how do we resist becoming 'reeds shaken'?
2. How does John's combination of bold public ministry and private struggle encourage believers who experience doubt while maintaining faithful witness?
3. What distinguishes legitimate flexibility in communication style from the instability of compromising message content?

Interlinear Text

Τούτων as G5130	δὲ And G1161	πορευομένων they departed G4198	ἤρξατο began G756	ὁ G3588	Ἰησοῦς Jesus G2424	λέγειν to say G3004	τοῖς G3588
ὄχλοις unto the multitudes G3793	περὶ concerning G4012	Ἰωάννου John G2491	τί What G5101	ἐξήλθετε went ye G1831	εἰς out into G1519	τὴν G3588	
ἔρημον the wilderness G2048	θεάσασθαι to see G2300	κάλαμον A reed G2563	ὑπὸ with G5259	ἀνέμου the wind G417	σαλευόμενον shaken G4531		

Additional Cross-References

James 1:6 (Parallel theme): But let him ask in faith, nothing wavering. For he that wavereth is like a wave of the sea driven with the wind and tossed.

John 5:35 (Parallel theme): He was a burning and a shining light: and ye were willing for a season to rejoice in his light.

Ephesians 4:14 (Parallel theme): That we henceforth be no more children, tossed to and fro, and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the sleight of men, and cunning craftiness, whereby they lie in wait to deceive;

Genesis 49:4 (Parallel theme): Unstable as water, thou shalt not excel; because thou wentest up to thy father's bed; then defiledst thou it: he went up to my couch.

Matthew 3:5 (Parallel theme): Then went out to him Jerusalem, and all Judaea, and all the region round about Jordan,

Matthew 21:25 (References John): The baptism of John, whence was it? from heaven, or of men? And they reasoned with themselves, saying, If we shall say, From heaven; he will say unto us, Why did ye not then believe him?

Luke 8:18 (Parallel theme): Take heed therefore how ye hear: for whosoever hath, to him shall be given; and whosoever hath not, from him shall be taken even that which he seemeth to have.