

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	δὲ	πορευομένων	ἤρξατο	ό	Ἰησοῦς	λέγειν	τοῖς
as	And	they departed	began	G3588	Jesus	to say	G3588
G5130	G1161	G4198	G756		G2424	G3004	

οὐχλοις	περὶ	Ἰωάννου	Τί	ἐξήλθετε	εἰς	τὴν
unto the multitudes	concerning	John	What	went ye	out into	G3588
G3793	G4012	G2491	G5101	G1831	G1519	

ἔρημον	θεάσασθαι	κάλαμον	ὑπὸ	ἀνέμου	σαλευόμενον
the wilderness	to see	A reed	with	the wind	shaken
G2048	G2300	G2563	G5259	G417	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.