

Matthew 11:7-9

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With John the Baptizer's disciples leaving the scene, Jesus uses this occasion to begin a conversation about John's role and hopes that the crowds had for this man. But as Jesus does so, He powerfully reveals His own Messianic identity for those who have ears to hear.

The parallel gospel account of this event is found in Luke 7:24-26.

As John the Baptizer's disciples were departing to report back to their imprisoned master what Jesus had said, Christ began to speak and address the crowds gathered around Him about John. This tells us that the questions posed by John's disciple's were likely asked in a public setting. This would account for the cryptic messages being sent, as described in the prior section.

Jesus asked the gathered crowd, *What did you go out into the wilderness to see?* His question was rhetorical. Before the emergence of Jesus's ministry, John the Baptist was drawing crowds of his own in the wilderness of Judea (Matthew 3:1). His message was "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Matthew 3:2). John's message resonated so much among the people, that Matthew wrote that "all Jerusalem was going out to him" (Matthew 3:5). He baptized so many in the Jordan River who took his message to heart, that even the religious authorities took a special trip *out into the wilderness* to observe what was happening (Matthew 3:6-7).

Jesus was now questioning His own crowds about John. And His questions seem to presume that some of them actually *went out into the wilderness* to pay John a visit. If this is the case, this might suggest that Jesus asked these things in vicinity of Jerusalem and Judea while He was on His teaching and preaching tour throughout the towns and cities of the lost sheep of Israel. Jerusalem is in the southern part of Israel, which was known as Judea.

Jesus's line of questions center around motive and hope. *What caused you to leave your busy lives and trouble yourself to make a half day's journey out into the wilderness? What did you seek and hope to find?*

Jesus humorously answers His own question of *What did you go out into the wilderness to see?* with an image: *A reed shaken by the wind?* The expected answer to this rhetorical question is "no." Anyone who went to the quietness of the Jordan river, likely would see countless reeds along its banks. And the reeds will blow as the wind blows. But this is commonplace, and not worth the effort. John did not blow with the political or cultural winds. He stood strong against the winds. Which is why people came to see him. They were hungry to hear what was true.

Jesus repeats His main question. *But what did you go out to see?* And He suggests another image: *A man dressed in soft clothing?* Again the expected answer to this rhetorical question is "no." The Judean wilderness would be the last place to look for anyone hoping to find *a man dressed in soft clothing*. *Soft clothing* refers to the fancy silks and apparel that only the wealthiest of the wealthy could afford. *Those who wore such things were in kings' palaces!* It was men

dressed in soft clothing who had imprisoned *John*. *John* did not wear *soft clothing*. He was a bit of an eccentric and famously wore coarse camel's hair and a leather belt (Matthew 3:4). *John* was not of the political or cultural elite. *John* did not bow in the winds of their culture or intrigue. He did not benefit from their status. Rather, *John* was a prophet of the Living God. That is why people went to see him.

Jesus repeats His question a third time for emphasis. *But what did you go out to see?*

This time he answers factually. *A prophet? Yes I tell you.* The real reason people left their towns and cities for a day was in hopes of hearing from *a prophet* of God. The prophet did not bow to human rulers or sensitivities. He did not bow in the wind or curry favor so he could live with soft clothing. Rather, he spoke the truth. The truth is often the greatest enemy of those who use cultural or political status to exploit others.

Throughout the history of Israel, God spoke to His people through many prophets, but for the last four hundred years He had been hauntingly silent. Malachi was the last prophetic utterance recorded, some four hundred years prior. As the foreign Greeks and now the Romans ruled over the Jews, many were desperate to see the national deliverance the Law and the Prophets foretold. The prophet Daniel had set forth a count down until Messiah would appear. The clock was to start when a proclamation was given to rebuild the wall of Jerusalem, after Jews had returned from their exile at the hand of the Babylonians. Daniel prophesied that 49 "sevens" or weeks of years would take place until the advent of Messiah. This would be 343 years.

This likely led to a greatly heightened sense of anticipation, since such a proclamation had been issued and acted upon about that long ago, at the time of *Jesus'* ministry (Daniel 9:24-25; Nehemiah 2). The arising of a *prophet* might have inspired hoped that perhaps this strange man preaching about the kingdom of heaven was *a prophet* sent by God to break the divine silence.

But *Jesus* continues. *Yes, I tell you, and one who is more than a prophet.* This line affirms that *John* was not only indeed a such *a prophet*, but *a prophet* of great significance. *John*, as *Jesus* will soon tell *the crowds*, was the *prophet* who was the Messiah's forerunner, sent to prepare the way (Matthew 11:10). But even as *Jesus* affirms the prophetic voice of *John*, He speaks to the real hope and desire that motivated the crowds to seek him in the wilderness.

The real hope burning within their hearts *about John* was one they hardly dared to speak. They hoped that he was *more than a mere prophet*. They hoped that *John* was the Messiah come to rescue them. *John* was *a prophet*. But he was not the Messiah they sought (John 1:19-20). There is a dramatic irony that leaps from this passage. *Jesus* is the long-sought Messiah. The very *One* whom *the crowds* had hoped to see when they went out into the wilderness is the same *One who is* speaking to them now. Even though *Jesus* does not explicitly state that He is the Messiah to them at this point, His words are intended to arouse the Messianic hope in their hearts. He is practically daring them to believe that He is their Messiah.

Biblical Text

11:7-9 As these men were going away, Jesus began to speak to the crowds about John, “What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed shaken by the wind? But what did you go out to see? A man dressed in soft clothing? Those who wear soft clothing are in kings’ palaces! But what did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and one who is more than a prophet.