

A REED SHAKEN BY THE WIND
(LUKE 7:19-24).

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This story concerning John the Baptist is one of the most dramatic in the Bible. Although the following names may be meaningless to most people, the fact that Ambrose, Hilary, Chrysostom, Theophylact, Calvin, Beza and Melancthon discussed the incident and wrote their findings for posterity, proves that John's request fascinated the religious scholars of successive generations. More recently the debates continued with Meyer, Ewald, Godet, Plumptre, Farrar and others, and apparently, so to speak, John the Baptist started a ball rolling which never stopped. To say the least, his question to Jesus: "Art thou he that should come?" created unprecedented problems.

John had been imprisoned for approximately 18 months and lived alone with his memories. Beneath the blue skies of Galilee he had preached to enormous crowds, and for a while at least, had been the central figure in Israel. His forthright presentation of truth, his unshakable faith and courage, won an abiding place in the hearts of all listeners. Soldiers, priests and statesmen attended his services, and John's exploits were discussed in every Hebrew home. His dynamic ministry stirred every part of the nation; he had been God's anointed ambassador. Unfortunately, that time of spiritual refreshing had been replaced by solitude and incarceration in Herod's dungeon. Everything had changed dramatically, and for prolonged periods of time, John's only companions were the spiders who spun their webs in the corners of his cell. When the prisoner reminisced and relived the experiences he had known in the Jordan Valley, his mind Æ so some theologians believe Æ became a prey to doubt.

Occasionally John's disciples were permitted to visit their master, but their conversation never promoted comfort and confidence. They were his only means of communicating with the outside world, but alas, they brought disconcerting news of current events. "Master," said one of his friends, "do you remember that Camenter from Nazareth whom you baptized? You suggested He would be our Messiah. Did you make a mistake? It would be extremely difficult to find a more unlikely

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candidate for that position. That man neither speaks nor acts like a king of Israel. You denounced hypocrites; He dines with them. We expected Him to expel our enemies, but He fraternizes with them. John, is it possible that you were mistaken when you led us to believe He would deliver Israel?"

"And John calling unto him two of his disciples, sent them to Jesus saying: Art thou he that should come or look we for another?" Throughout the history of the church, theologians have inquired: "Did John ask that question because his faith had weakened, or did he send his friends knowing the Lord alone could solve their problems?" Later, when Christ replied to the question, He said: "What went ye out into the wilderness for to see Æ a reed shaken by the wind?" The banks of the Jordan River were lined with plants of many kinds, and when the winds blew through the valley, the rustle of the reeds could easily be heard. They swayed and leaned with the breeze. Had John been a shaking, bending reed? Some teachers believe his faith, temporarily, had weakened.

The Wind of Adversity.. . The danger of doubt

During World War II, Wales was extensively damaged by German bombs. Beautiful homes were reduced to rubble, and the town of Swansea was obliterated. It was annoying to hear

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people grumbling and asking: "Why did God permit this to happen?" Many of the questioners never attended any church and scoffed at religion. Yet, in times of trouble, they blamed God Whom they had ignored.

There is a great difference between a shaking reed and an unyielding oak tree, yet there are people who resemble both. Birds may nest safely in a tree, but a shaking reed is a poor haven in a tempest. Did John become increasingly despondent as he listened to the depressing conversation of his friends? Did he permit their biased opinions to darken the blue sky of his serenity? When his faith weakened, did he dispatch his friends on a regrettable errand?

When I was a young Christian, the son of our pastor came to stay in our home. His parents were away on business, and my mother consented to care for the small boy during their ab-

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sence. When it was time for the lad to go to bed, I listened and smiled when he prayed: "Oh, God, I'm not going to pray to You anymore. You do not answer my prayers anyhow. I asked You last night that I should have all my sums right today, and I had two wrong. It's no good asking You anything!" That small child was a forerunner of many older people with similar complaints. On the other hand, there is in the forest a vine which wraps itself around oak trees. It matters not from which direction the wind blows, the vine is either sheltered by the tree or pressed closer to it. It is better to cling than complain!

The Wind of Hypocrisy... The disaster of defiance

One day, when I was visiting homes in a rural area of Herefordshire, I met a very hospitable Irishman who expressed interest in the Gospel. He was so enthusiastic that I asked why he had not attended my meetings in the nearby Methodist church. Instantly, his countenance changed as he replied, "Oh no, I will never enter that place again. I have not been inside those doors for fifteen years." I asked what had happened at that time, and he cited an argument with a church leader. With God's help I brought those stubborn men together and that evening saw four people surrendering to Christ. The incident reminded me of what happened when the sons of Israel's high priest disgraced their calling.

..... the sin of the young men was very great before the LORD; for men abhorred the offering of the LORD" (1 Sam. 2:17). At that early period in Jewish history there were no synagogues throughout the nation, and if men desired to visit the house of God, they journeyed to Shiloh to attend one of the festivals. People anticipated the occasion, for it became a religious vacation when they met friends from all over the country. When the evil conduct of the priests became known, citizens detested the improprieties, and many families refused to obey the commandment to be present at Shiloh. The shekinah glory might be residing over the Tabernacle, but the winds of hypocrisy had blown it from the hearts of men and women. They saw the offenders but lost sight of the Lord.

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The Wind of Complicity. . . The defeat in departing

"For Demas hath forsaken me, having loved this present world, and is departed unto Thessalonica" (2 Tim. 4:10). Poor Demas, a yearning heart had destroyed his happiness. The drudgery of serving a prisoner irritated his soul, and in his restlessness, he found the beckoning night-lights of the world too glamorous to resist

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Perhaps he believed the approaching death of Paul would leave him without sustenance. What could be done if he were left alone in an alien city? Maybe Demas longed to participate in pleasures which Paul condemned. The women, wine and songs of Rome were attractive, but how could he enjoy the attractions of the city when his friend remained in a prison cell?

Then he thought of an alternative. He would go to Thessalonica, and be free to do whatever he desired. It may never be known how he felt when he made his final visit to the apostle. His eyes were furtive; his face flushed as he tried to conceal the uneasiness within his soul.

He had become a reed shaken by the wind, and although he did not yet realize the magnitude of his mistake, he was destined to regret his action. He deserted his best friend, and denied the Lord. Throughout the history of the church millions of professing Christians, unfortunately, have emulated his example.

If the pleasures of the world can be likened to a tree, then its fruits are numerous. An excessive desire to make money either by legitimate or illegitimate means; a desire to reach the top of a profession at any cost; the surrendering of spiritual convictions to enjoy something prohibited by the Word of God; or an illicit association which saps moral and spiritual strength. These are the adverse winds which prove whether a man is a shaking reed or a dependable Christian.

Mr. Robert Robinson, who wrote the hymn, "Come, Thou fount of every blessing," unfortunately became a reed shaken by the wind. He lost his communion with God, and in an attempt to alleviate his misery, traveled around the world. He met a young lady who asked what he thought of her favorite hymn, and was astonished to discover she had fallen in love with his own composition. He tried to evade her question, but she insist-

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ed on obtaining an answer. Finally, he confessed he was the author of those verses, but he had lost the joy of serving Christ. The young Christian reminded the sorrowful man that "the streams of mercy" mentioned in his hymn were still flowing. That girl changed his life, and the shaken reed found new stability in Christ.

Some theologians believe John had been influenced by the winds of adversity, but the evidence supporting that conclusion is not irrefutable. Dr. G. Campbell Morgan and many other illustrious teachers rejected that idea, affirming that John never wavered from his initial convictions and was undisturbed by the events which resulted in his imprisonment and death.

John knew what would happen even before he was arrested by Herod. He announced: "He must increase, but I must decrease" (John 3:30). God revealed to His servant the identity of the Messiah, and evidently imparted knowledge concerning the nature of His sacrificial ministry. John announced to his listeners that the Carpenter was "The Lamb of God which would take away the sins of the world" (John 1:29) and the idea that the evangelist lost his faith is unacceptable.

John's Witness... the tremendous message

When an angel predicted the birth of John the Baptist, he said: ".... he shall be filled with the Holy Ghost, even from his mother's womb" (see Luke 1:15). It is beyond comprehension that, even in embryonic form, John was controlled by the Spirit of God. That child grew to be the official representative of the Almighty, and wherever and whenever he ministered, the Lord endorsed what he did and said. He possessed a spiritual insight that few men had. His statement, "Behold the Lamb of God

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that taketh away the sins of the world," indicated the sacrifices in former dispensations pointed to Christ; that, whereas they met the need of individuals, Jesus became the Savior of the world. The wilderness preacher was controlled by the Almighty, but he knew his own ministry would soon terminate. His statement, "He must increase, I must decrease," said all that needed to be said. It is unlikely that such a man would be influenced by the gossip of a few disappointed disciples.

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John's Worry... the troubled men

It was always unwise to argue with people already convinced! The followers of John were not only disappointed by the demise of their leader, they were jealous of the Man Who succeeded him. Their enthusiasm had been limitless, and it was difficult to understand why their leader should be imprisoned while Another inherited his popularity. Perhaps those troubled men felt they had been robbed of pre-eminence in a national revival. The disciples of John missed the thrills of attending their master's meetings; life had become empty and meaningless.

John welcomed his visitors, but frowned when he realized the cause of their despondency. What could be done to help them? He would send them to Jesus, Who would know how to dispel their doubts. "Brothers," he said, "will you do something for me? Go and ask Jesus if He is the Messiah, and tell Him I sent you." John smiled and said to himself: `The Lord will know what to do.'" "And in that same hour he (Jesus) cured many of their infirmities and plagues, and of evil spirits; and unto many that were blind he gave sight. Then Jesus answering said unto them, Go your way, and tell John what things ye have seen and heard; how that the blind see, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, to the poor the gospel is preached. And blessed is he, whosoever shall not be offended in me" (Luke 7:21-23, italics mine).

John's Wisdom..., the thrilling Master

"And when the messengers of John were departed, he (Jesus) began to speak unto the people concerning John, What went ye out into the wilderness for to see? A reed shaken with the wind? . . . I say unto you, Among those that are born of women there is not a greater prophet than John the Baptist: but he that is least in the kingdom of God is greater than he" (Luke 7:24, 28). That strange, yet wonderful utterance, caused endless discussion among theologians. It is difficult to believe the most insignificant, uneducated believer in an African village would be greater than the man who foreran the Savior! Others believe Jesus referred to Himself; that since He assumed the lowest place among men, He was still much greater than John.

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There is no problem in the words of the Lord. Christ came to establish a new spiritual order: the kingdom of God on earth. He created something hitherto unknown: a realm to which John never belonged. Jesus emphasized that, where a man was exceeded the importance of what he was! The least inside the kingdom was greater than the greatest outside the kingdom. John was not a reed shaken by the wind; leaning one way today, and another tomorrow. Christ's commendation was not a cover-up! John stood tall in the sight of God, but the question maybe asked—How tall is tall?

An edition of The Sunday School Times carried an interesting story. Centuries ago two boys named Martin came into contact with Christ. One of them, later known as Martin of

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Basle, wrote on a piece of parchment: "O most merciful Christ. I know I can be saved only by the merit of Thy precious blood. Holy Jesus, I acknowledge Thy sufferings for me. I love Thee; I love Thee." He removed a stone from a wall in his house, and hid his message. It was discovered 100 years later when the home was demolished.

The other boy was Martin Luther, who said: "My Lord has confessed me before men. I will not shrink from confessing Him before kings." Today, everybody reveres the memory of Luther, but Martin of Basle remains only a name. It would not be difficult to decide which of the two men resembled the evangelist who cried: "Behold the Lamb of God which taketh away the sin of the world."

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