

## JESUS IS ASKING

*“What did you go out into the desert to see?”*

Dear Friends in Christ,

Have you ever gone to see a feature length motion picture with someone who has “read the book”? Happens to me all the time. My wife is an avid and enthusiastic reader of all sorts of literature, and it is not at all uncommon that when we sit down to watch a movie, she has already read the book on which the movie is based.

Most of the time this is very helpful, especially if the plot is complicated or there are a lot of different characters. I can lean over and whisper, “Who is the guy with the beard?” And she will respond, “If you’d read the book you’d know that the guy with the beard was a childhood friend of the police officer.” And a few minutes later I’ll ask, “Why is the lady in the blue dress avoiding the old lady?” And she will whisper, “In the book it explained that when she was a little girl, she was mistreated by the old lady.”

It is almost always the case, that when you read the book first, you get more out of a movie, you understand the plot line and can follow it better, and you know each characters’ background and motivation better. It’s just easier to make sense out of what you see in a movie when you’ve read the book first. Now, if I can jump from the mundane to the spiritual, on a much more important level, Jesus makes this same point to the people of his day and to us. It’s just easier to make sense out of what you see and experience in this life if you’ve first read THE BOOK, God’s Word.

To the people of his day who were confused by John the Baptist, his message and his appearance, Jesus asks,

*“What did you go out into the desert to see?”*

They really didn’t know just who this wilderness preacher John the Baptist was . . . and they should’ve known! Because prophecies had been written about John for the previous 700 years! But what’s even more important, if they had figured out just who John the Baptist was, they would have known without a doubt who Jesus was.

John the Baptist is a key figure in the life of Jesus, a key figure in God’s wonderful plan of salvation, and a figure about whom the Old Testament prophets had clearly spoken. From the time of Abraham, 2,000 years before Jesus was born, the nation of Israel was eagerly awaiting a Savior, The Messiah, from among their own Jewish people. Any Old Testament believer familiar with scripture should have been expecting the arrival of John the Baptist and the ministry of John. The ancient prophets had taught that, as a preliminary measure, as a necessary first step in the divine plan, a “forerunner” would begin the work of preparing the way for the appearance of the Messiah.

Seven centuries before the birth of Jesus, the prophet Isaiah spoke of that forerunner, the preparer, as *A voice of one calling: “In the desert prepare the way for the LORD; make straight in the wilderness a highway for our God. . .”* Isaiah 40:3 (NIV). We are told that the religious leaders from Jerusalem went out to where John was preaching and baptizing in the desert and asked him, “Who are you?” John told them and all the assembled crowds, “I am NOT the Messiah we are all waiting for.” And then he quoted this very passage from Isaiah, *“I am the voice of one calling in the desert, ‘Make straight the way for the Lord.’”* John 1:23 (NIV). He identified himself to all those present as the forerunner prophesied by Isaiah, the “preparer” for the Messiah.

In the prophet Malachi, the last book of the Old Testament, God had declared: *“See, I will send my messenger, who will **prepare the way** before me. Then suddenly the Lord you are seeking will come to his temple; the messenger of the covenant, whom you desire, will come,” says the LORD Almighty.* Malachi 3:1 (NIV). So the messenger who prepares the way for the Messiah was to come shortly before the desired Messiah himself would come.

And finally, through Malachi the prophet, God declared that this “messenger who prepares the way” would be “the prophet Elijah” (Malachi 4:4-5). The angel Gabriel (Luke 1:16) and Jesus himself (Matthew 11:12-15, 17:10) testify that this “Elijah” to come was none other than John the Baptist who went “. . . *before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah* . . .” Luke 1:17 (NIV).

So Jesus asked the people who were confused by John and by his message and by his appearance <sup>7</sup> . . . “*What did you go out into the desert to see? A reed swayed by the wind?*” Jesus’ questions to the people reveal that they didn’t recognize what they were seeing. If they had been paying attention to God’s Word they would have understood that John was the ‘forerunner,’ the ‘preparer’ about whom Isaiah and Malachi had prophesied.

“Were you people expecting a wishy-washy teacher who told you half-truths and never took a stand on an issue, a *reed swayed by the wind*? No of course not, you should know from Scripture that the ‘forerunner,’ the ‘preparer’ would have the spirit and the power of Elijah.” Elijah wasn’t a mild-mannered, soft-spoken, rich kid. He was a bold prophet who confronted evil kings and queens eyeball-to-eyeball and told them when they were sinning. He once took on 850 false prophets single-handedly (with power from God) and he won!

<sup>8</sup> *If not, what did you go out to see? A man dressed in fine clothes? No, those who wear fine clothes are in kings' palaces.* Earlier in Matthew’s gospel we are told that John the Baptist was not wearing the tunic of the wealthy or the robes of a priest. Matthew 3:4, *John's clothes were made of camel's hair, and he had a leather belt around his waist.* “Wouldn’t you expect the ‘forerunner’ who went “in the spirit and power of Elijah” to be dressed like Elijah?” 2 Kings 1:8, *Elijah the Tishbite . . . a man with a garment of [animal] hair and with a leather belt around his waist.* Was that just a coincidence?

Jesus continued, <sup>9</sup> *Then what did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet.* <sup>10</sup> *This is the one about whom it is written: (quoting Malachi) "I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you."*

What John wore, where he preached, what he said, these were not merely “clues” as to who John the Baptist was, they were indisputable proof from Scripture that John was the messenger, the preparer of the way for the Messiah. And if the people had recognized John, from Scripture, as the forerunner of the Messiah, they would have realized from Scripture that Jesus was the Messiah.

With all the information contained in the Sacred Writings, Jesus expected the people of his day to know and understand what they were seeing. With all the information contained in God’s Word, Jesus can expect us to know and understand what we see in the world around us today. Just like the person who has “read the book” knows how the movie is going to play out, so too, we who have read THE book, the Bible, know a lot of what is in store for us and for the world around us.

Today’s second lesson from Peter’s second epistle makes an important point. All of God’s Word comes to us through writers who were divinely inspired by the Holy Spirit. All of God’s Word is true and trustworthy. You can use God’s Word to evaluate what you see around you and avoid being surprised. Did you really think that all people are inherently good and that this life was going to be a bed of roses? God’s Word tells us that all mankind is infected by sin and that all people have the capacity to do all sorts of evil. Did you think that it would be easy to live a Christ-like life? The Bible makes it clear that throughout your life you will be tempted to disobey and disregard God’s will not only by the Devil who “*prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour,*” but also by the world around you, and even by, or should I say, especially by your own sinful flesh, your sinful nature.

You can also look to God's inspired Word and see what the future holds. When you know what is written in Sacred Scriptures you won't be surprised to see the attacks that are being made on Christianity in American society. Did you think that your belief system would never be challenged? Did you think that persecution of believers in Christ is a thing of the past? Think again! God's Word tells you clearly that, in the days to come, people will oppose God's elect. There will be disrespect for God's Word and his ways. Evil of the worst kind will be on public display. Did you really think that mankind and all his technology and learning would make this earth a better and better place to live? The Bible says there will be wars and rumors of war right up to the end of time. The Bible says there will be catastrophes in nature and an increase in wickedness. The Bible says things will get worse, not better, before the end comes on Judgment Day.

But God's divinely inspired Word also instructs you in the truths of a loving God. Did you think God would forsake you in your sinfulness? The Bible not only speaks to you of God's plan for your salvation, God actually works through that very same Word to call you out of the darkness of unbelief into his wonderful light. He uses the power of that very same Word to strengthen your faith in Jesus and to trust in the death of Jesus as full and complete payment for all of your sins. Did you think you were on your own when facing the storms of life? His Word comforts you with the promise, *"I will never leave you or forsake you."* In the Bible he promises a way out of temptation. He promises a limit to what you are called to bear. He promises to supply you with all you need. He promises the protection of angels. He promises to use all things to work for your good.

Did you think that this world is spinning wildly out of control? Jesus says, *"I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world."* John 16:33 (NIV). None of the things you are called to encounter in this life -good or bad- will take you by surprise if you're paying attention to what God has said in His Word.

Nor is there a need to be frightened as the end of your life draws near. Jesus won't have to ask you, "What were you expecting?" because you already know. You've read the book so you know how it all ends. God's Word has told you that, without a doubt, for believers in Jesus, death is the doorway into eternal life.

Let us pray.

Heavenly Father, our Gracious God and Lord,

We give you thanks and praise for your eternal Word. Not only is it the power of God for our salvation but your Holy Scriptures have imparted to us the truths of what we can expect in this life and the knowledge of a blessed future for all who believe in Christ Jesus.

Help us to cherish your Word, to grow in our knowledge of your Word, to live your Word and to share your Word with others.

We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.