

3 Baptized with the Holy Spirit and Fire (3:15-18)

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JesusWalk e-mail Bible study invites you. Current lesson

Whenever we talk about certain doctrines and sacraments across denominational lines, we tend to get into trouble because words have certain meaning triggers for us. We're going to be examining two such word war-zones this week -- "water baptism" and "baptism of the Holy Spirit." Our goal is not to lay out an entire doctrine of baptism or of the Spirit. Our goal is to determine WHAT THE TEXT SAYS. So I ask your indulgence and patience. There is an important discipline to studying scripture, and that is not to read into the text what we already believe, but to examine it for what it says. Two areas of discussion are off-limits in our discussion groups this week: (1) what is the correct mode of baptism today, and (2) the relation of speaking in tongues to the baptism of the Spirit.

Luke 3:15-18. "The people were waiting expectantly and were all wondering in their hearts if John might possibly be the Christ. John answered them all, "I baptize you with water. But one more powerful than I will come, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire." And with many other words John exhorted the people and preached the good news to them.

Exposition

Every year individuals are propelled from obscurity into the national limelight -- a hit song, an act of kindness or evil that is picked up by the press. Celebrities attract fawning hero-worshippers who can distort the celebrity's sense of who he is. Celebrities sometimes mistake the gushing good will of their followers for reality. John the Baptist was an instant celebrity.

John's Submission to the Messiah (3:15-16)

In a culture that had Messiah on their mind, it was inevitable that people would wonder if the powerful desert prophet John the Baptist were the long-awaited Messiah himself. "Is he the Christ?" the crowds inquired. The word "Christ" is a transliteration of the Greek word *christos*, meaning "the Anointed One, the Messiah." The word "messiah" is a transliteration of the Hebrew word *mashiah*. "Christ" is not Jesus' last name. It is a title that means "Messiah."

To his credit, nowhere does John the Baptist try to cling to his public following. John's Gospel tells us that The Baptist even pointed his own disciples to Jesus (John 1:35-37), and accepted Jesus' eclipsing role with graciousness. John the Baptist refers to the Messiah as "One more powerful than I" (3:16b). "More powerful" (NIV) and "mightier" (KJV) translate the comparative form of the Greek adjective *ischuros*, "strong, mighty, powerful" in physical strength, or mental or spiritual power.[1] This is similar to the expression in John's Gospel, "He must become greater (*auxano*); I must become less (*elattoo*)" (John 3:30). Self-exalting ego doesn't motivate John. Being faithful to the "word of God" (3:2) that came to him does.

John illustrates this submission to the Messiah with his statement about sandals: "the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie." (3:16c) Jewish servants were not required to perform the menial duty of unfastening their master's sandals, only non-Jewish slaves.[2] But John says that he isn't even as worthy as a foreign slave to perform this service. He isn't in the same league as the Messiah. But the most striking comparison John makes between his ministry and the Messiah's is in terms of baptism.

Water Baptism (3:16a)

John had been known as "the Baptist." Baptism set him apart from other prophets in the past, and other reformers in his own day. But even in terms of baptism, John says, the Messiah exceeds him. Our word "baptize" is a transliteration of the Greek word *baptizo*, which means "dip, immerse, submerge, baptize." [3] It's important to understand this basic meaning, regardless of our own church's practice of baptism, or how much water our church may use. John was baptizing in the Jordan River, and probably assisted penitents by either dipping them into the water himself (or perhaps by assisting them to dip themselves). Jesus did not annul this form of water baptism but continued it, having own disciples baptize believers in his name (see Matthew 28:19; Mark 16:16; John 3:22, 26; 4:1-2; Acts 2:38, 41).

The Early Church understood water baptism much as John the Baptist did, representing God's cleansing and the washing away of our sins (Acts 22:16). It is a baptism of repentance still, since by submitting to Christian baptism, a person either tacitly or explicitly acknowledges his need for cleansing, and therefore his

sins that demand forgiveness and cleansing. On the Day of Pentecost, Peter told his convicted hearers, "Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit" (Acts 2:38), tightly tying repentance to baptism as John the Baptist had done (Luke 3:3).

The point of comparison between John the Baptist and the Messiah is in the medium in which or with which [4] the baptism takes place. John immerses his disciples in water, while the Messiah will immerse his followers in the Holy Spirit.

Spirit Baptism (3:16d)

The biggest question in this passage is what it means to "baptize in the Holy Spirit." Church doctrines aside, the basic meaning is to immerse or dip a person in the Holy Spirit. To flood a person with the Holy Spirit. Water is just a symbol of cleansing. The Holy Spirit, on the other hand, is the actual agent of cleansing and empowerment.

To study the meaning a bit further, let's look at two closely-related passages written by Luke, one at the end of Luke, the other early in Acts: "I am going to send you what my Father has promised; but stay in the city until you have been clothed (*enduo*) with power (*dunamis*) from on high." (Luke 24:49)

"Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about. For John baptized with water (*hudati*), but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit (*en pneumatihagio*).... But you will receive power (*dunamis*) when the Holy Spirit comes on (*epiechomai*) you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." (Acts 1:4, 5, 8; see 11:15-16)

Examine some of the words with me as we expand our understanding a bit:

- · **"Clothe (KJV 'endue') with power."** The verb is Greek *enduo*, "dress, clothe"[5]. This may be similar to the analogy of baptism, the idea of covering completely with. The word translated "power" is Greek *dunamis*, from which we get our word "dynamite." To cover with power. What a thought!
- · **"Receive power."** The verb here is the extremely common Greek word *lambano*, "to receive." The emphasis here is not on voluntary acceptance here but upon possessing it. Tag. You're "it." It's your turn. What would you do if you were given a package of high explosives or a grant of limitless hydroelectric power from a dam high in the mountains? Think what you could do with it! You've received power.
- · **"Come upon."** The Greek verb is *epiechomai*, a compound word that means "come over or upon." It can refer to unpleasant happenings or to an enemy attack. But here it used of the Holy Spirit coming upon the disciples. [6] The word suggests something out of our control that happens to us. Spirit baptism is wholly in God's power and at his time and pleasure.
- · **"Pour out."** The Spirit is "poured out" upon believers (Acts 2:17-18, 2:33, 10:45). Similar to the water baptism analogy, in pouring the water is in a vessel above the believer, and is saturating the believer with the Holy Spirit.

The "baptism of the Holy Spirit" involves being covered with, immersed in, empowered by the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is the very basis of our life in Christ and our connection to God. Jesus floods us with the Holy Spirit. What a wonderful thought and promise!

(In a separate essay entitled "Spirit Baptism, the New Birth, and Speaking in Tongues." I explore this in greater detail. You can read this essay at <http://www.joyfulheart.com/scholar/spirit-baptism.htm>, but discussion of its contents is off-limits for our regular JesusWalk discussion groups. We have a special, short-lived group if you want to discuss it with me and others.)

Fire Baptism (3:16e-17)

Luke's Gospel connects the baptism of the Holy Spirit with a baptism of fire. John the Baptist says: "He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire." (3:16d-17)

The process of preparing grain involved (1) threshing, that is, crushing, beating or thrashing the grain heads in order to loosen the grain kernels from the surrounding stems and husks; and (2) winnowing, using a kind of wooden pitch fork (a winnowing fork) to throw the threshed grain heads into the breeze, so the lighter chaff will blow downwind, and the heavier grain kernels will fall back to the ground, separating the two. The floor would be "cleared" by threshing and then winnowing all the grain heads until the chaff and grain had been completely separated. The grain was then gathered into baskets and stored in the barn, but the remaining stems and husks piled together and set ablaze.

Look with me at a couple of interesting words. The verb translated "clear" (NIV) or "purge" (KJV) is Greek *diakathairo*, "clean out, cleanse thoroughly." [7] The idea of thoroughness and complete cleaning is

contained in this compound verb. The second interesting word translated the "unquenchable" is Greek *asbestos*, a mineral supposed by the ancients to be inextinguishable when set on fire.[8] John the Baptist isn't talking about just regular fire here that would burn itself out when the chaff is consumed, but a kind of eternal, unquenchable fire.

So what is this fire baptism? There are three possibilities:

- **A figure of purification of sin** as the Holy Spirit does his cleansing work in us as part of the process of sanctification. Indeed, the Spirit's cleansing in us is sometimes painful, but nothing in the context suggests that this is what John had in mind.
- **A symbol of the tongues of fire** that appeared over the heads of the 120 disciples in the upper room on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2:3). This, too, is a stretch for John the Baptist. In the Pentecost passage, the fire probably represents the Shekinah glory of God rather than fires of purification.
- **A prophecy of the eschatological separation of the righteous from the unrighteous**, and judgment by the Messiah at the end of the age. This fits contemporary expectations of the Messiah, as well as the words "cleanse thoroughly" and "unquenchable fire" contained in the passage. Jesus' parable of the Wheat and the Tares (Matthew 13:30, 41-42) includes this kind of analogy of separation and final judgment. Remember Henry Alford's well-known Thanksgiving Hymn, "Come Ye Thankful People, Come," verse 3?

"For the Lord our God shall come, And shall take His harvest home. From His field shall in that day All offenses purge away; Give His angels charge at last In the fire the tares to cast, But the fruitful ears to store In His garner evermore."

So John is prophesying of Jesus that he will (1) flood his followers with the Holy Spirit, and (2) judge the unrighteous at the End of the Age. When Christ returns, he will come in judgment. The first time he came in mercy, but when he returns at the End of the Age it will be with final, terrible judgment. What should disciples learn from this? First, we need to get off the fence and determine whose side we're on. We need to learn a healthy fear of God. Sometimes people talk about Jesus as if he's their buddy. Jesus is no one's buddy. Peter learned quickly that even those close to him cannot presume upon his will without meriting a sharp rebuke (Matthew 16:23). He is our Friend, but not our buddy. He is always our Master.

Second, we need to consider our friends and loved ones, and pray for their salvation. Jesus will surely come in terrible judgment, and unless people repent of their sins, they will perish and experience eternal punishment. There is the exhilarating promise of the baptism of the Holy Spirit, but the sobering warning of judgment for those who do not welcome the Messiah.

Have You Been Baptized?

This passage urges some personal reflection. Have you acknowledged Jesus' power and authority over you as John the Baptist did? Have you been baptized? Our JesusWalk forum is not the place to debate the proper time and mode of baptism. But how about you? Have you repented of your sins and submitted yourself to public Christian baptism? If not, why don't you talk with your pastor about it this week? We're disciples. We're not going to put off until a later time the lessons about which Christ is dealing with us now.

Have you been immersed in the Holy Spirit? If you've repented of your sins and asked Christ to be your Master, then He responds with the gift of the Holy Spirit and the resulting new birth. Again, this is not the place to debate various views of the baptism of the Holy Spirit. It is a personal question. What's going on in your life? Are you swimming in the Spirit or just sipping occasionally? Are you spiritually dry. Do you long for God with a deep thirst? The Messiah wants you flooded with his Spirit, and anything less isn't enough. Open up your heart to him as we pray together.

Prayer

Lord, I want to be your disciple. Like John, I acknowledge you as my Messiah and Master. You're more powerful than I, and I am unworthy in myself even to provide you menial service. But you have washed me, and I am clean. Thank you. You have poured out your Holy Spirit and I am learning to drink fully. Immerse me afresh this week in your Spirit. I acknowledge the terrible judgment that you will bring to this world when you come. Help me to be ready. Help my friends and loved ones to be ready, too. O Great Baptizer, in Your name, I pray. Amen.

Key Verse

"He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire." (Luke 3:16)

Questions

Special rules for this week's discussion: We are NOT discussing the mode of baptism or the relationship of speaking in tongues to the baptism of the Holy Spirit in our regular JesusWalk discussion groups. If you

want to discuss that, join Pastor Ralph's special, short-lived discussion group by sending a blank e-mail to spirit-baptism-subscribe@onelist.com. Please tread lightly this week, since our various churches teach different things. Let's focus on what the TEXT itself says, and learn from that.

- Isn't John the Baptist's humble statement, "the thongs of whose sandals I am unworthy to untie," a bit overstated? Are we unworthy to serve Christ? If so, why? If not, why not?
- What does John's comparison of water baptism to Spirit baptism tell us about what Spirit baptism means?
- What does it mean to be "Spirit-filled"? How would our lives be different if we were truly filled and flooded with the Holy Spirit?
- We may be afraid of "fire-of-judgment" kind of language, but what should our response be to warnings of terrible judgment?
- How good a change-motivator is the warning of future judgment? What other motivators might people respond to in addition to this? Or better than this?

References

- BAG 383.
- Marshall, p.146. He cites a number of Rabbinical sources for this.
- G.R. Beasley-Murray, "Baptism, Wash," NIDNTT 1:143-150. Beasley-Murray explains, "In secular Greek *bapto* means (a) dip, (b) dip into a die, and so die, and (c) draw (water). *baptizo* is an intensive form of *bapto* and means (a) dip, and (b) cause to perish (as by drowning a man or sinking a ship" (p. 144).
- The first phrase *hudati* ("in water") uses the "instrumental dative" case, while the second phrase, *en pneumati hagio* ("in the Holy Spirit") uses the preposition *en* ("in") in an instrumental sense.
- BAG 264. The KJV translation "endue" means both "put on, don" as well as "provide, endow," and is often confused with the word "endow," though "endow" comes from a different root that means "gift, dower." (Merriam-Webster, pp. 382-383).
- BAG 285.
- BAG 183, Thayer 137. *Diakathairo* is a compound word formed from *dia-* "thoroughly" and *kathairo*, "to cleanse,' properly from filth, impurity, etc." (Thayer 312).
- Merriam-Webster, p. 66.

Note: Two helpful books that discuss some of these matters in detail are G.R. Beasley-Murray, *Baptism in the New Testament* (Eerdmans, 1962); and James D.G. Dunn, *Baptism in the Holy Spirit* (SCM Press Ltd., 1970). The latter book is pretty technical.

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