

Baptism: Water, Spirit, and Fire

Everything about John the Baptist is captivating! First, John was born in a most unusual and miraculous way, fulfilling prophecies dating back 700 and 430 years before his birth (see Is 40:1-5 and Mal 3:1; 4:5). Also, his times were filled with turmoil and tumult, led by volatile and villainous people hungering for political and religious power. Furthermore, his appearance was overtly prophetic. With long, matted hair and an unkept beard, he dressed in garments made of camel hair, and sustained himself on a diet consisting of locusts and honey. Even his message was different. It was singular, direct, and repetitive. According to the gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, it was simply, “Repent!” (Lk 3:3; Mk 1:4; Matt 3:2).

Which leads to the most captivating aspect of this larger-than-life biblical personality: his purpose. One of the most profound things about John’s ministry was that it **pointed to something greater than himself and his ministry**. He was the forerunner, whose role was to prepare the way for the arrival of royalty. This royal figure - the Christ or Messiah (Anointed One) - was of such significance that John was to level and straighten the paths for this King’s arrival. Through John’s ministry, “Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low” for the entrance of this singular King and His glorious kingdom (Lk 3:4-6).

In Luke 3:15-17, John the Baptist describes his ministry in the following fashion:

As the people were in expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Christ, John answered them all, saying, “I baptize you with water, but he who is mightier than I is coming, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.”

It is clear that John utilized the practice of water baptism in preparation for Jesus’s ministry. Similarly, it is important to note that there is a difference between John’s ministry and Jesus’s ministry. This is evident in John’s deferential description, placing him at the feet of Jesus, not even worthy to untie his sandals. What incredible self-awareness, humility, and reverence of the Messiah from a man who Jesus says “among those born of women there has arisen no one greater than John the Baptist” (Matt 11:11). So, what is the difference between John's baptism and Jesus’s baptism? What is the difference between the baptisms of water, Holy Spirit, and fire?

Not unlike water baptism today, John immersed those who came to him in the waters of the Jordan River as a **symbol of their spiritual posture**. To put it another way, John's baptism was an external sign of a person's internal repentance. It, therefore, was intertwined with his preparatory purpose: turning the hearts of people back to God for the arrival of the King. John heralded the message, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Matt 3:2). Put bluntly, John was shouting, "King Jesus and His kingdom are here! So, it's time to get your heart and life turned around, because He is judge, jury, and executioner!" John expected Jesus to come with great might, power, and justice. He, like many, envisioned the Christ as a victorious military leader, who would separate the wheat from the chaff by crushing the Roman occupation and overthrowing religious corruption.

Yet the hearts of people did not change and eventually rejected the King. The kingdom did not come in the form of a military conquest and ritualistic cleansing as John and others expected (see Lk 7:18-23). Instead, the kingdom came in an unlikely way, with the King's victory won by means of His sacrificial death, burial, and triumphant resurrection. However, even before these glorious events, Jesus had promised that He - God - would remain with us always by means of the indwelling Holy Spirit (Jn 14:25-29).

Unlike water baptism, the Spirit's baptism isn't simply a symbol of a spiritual reality, it **is** a spiritual reality! Salvation comes through giving up on your own goodness, works, knowledge, and wisdom and trusting in the finished, perfect work of Christ (Eph 2:8-9). **All those who receive salvation or new life in Jesus are baptized into Christ by the Holy Spirit**. As the Holy Spirit takes residence in us, He begins His transformational work. Like fire, He begins to melt our very core. Like a refiner, He heats us up until He is able to skim off our impurities. More and more, our life begins to mirror back Jesus's reflection. And as the Holy Spirit continues to melt our hearts, skims away the dross, allows us to cool, and repeats the process, the more we begin to look like the Lord Jesus (Gal 5:22-25). The Holy Spirit enables us to do what we could never do on our own by convicting (Jn 16:8), regenerating (Jn 3:5-6), assuring (Rom 8:16), enlightening (Jn 16:13), transforming (2 Cor 3:18), bearing fruit (Gal 5:22-23), gifting (1 Cor 12:7), and empowering (Acts 1:8).

Galatians 5:22-25 (ESV) - *"But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is*

no law. And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.”