

The True Messiah

Bible historians tell us that when John the Baptist began to preach and to baptize the multitudes that came out to hear him, there had been more than 400 years of silence since another prophet had last spoken in the land of Israel. Why that had been so, we don't know. But those intervening years had been a wilderness for the people of Israel. And perhaps, that is why when John the Baptist came preaching his message of repentance, the people wanted to think more of him than he truly was.

His words were so powerful and so convincing, his lifestyle was so holy, and his purpose was so clear, it was with great hope that the people began to ask the question, "Might this man be more than just a prophet?"

Hear these words from Luke chapter 3, as John responds to the people's reaction to his preaching. Beginning in verse 15,

¹⁵Now as the people were in expectation, and all reasoned in their hearts about John, whether he was the Christ or not, ¹⁶John answered, saying to all, "I indeed baptize you with water; but One mightier than I is coming, whose sandal strap I am not worthy to loose. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. ¹⁷His winnowing fan *is* in His hand, and He will thoroughly clean out His threshing floor, and gather the wheat into His barn; but the chaff He will burn with unquenchable fire."

¹⁸And with many other exhortations he preached to the people. ¹⁹But Herod the tetrarch, being rebuked by him concerning Herodias, his brother Philip's wife, and for all the evils which Herod had done, ²⁰also added this, above all, that he shut John up in prison.

²¹When all the people were baptized, it came to pass that Jesus also was baptized; and while He prayed, the heaven was opened. ²²And the Holy Spirit descended in bodily form like a dove upon Him, and a voice came from heaven which said, "You are My beloved Son; in You I am well pleased." (Luke 3:15-22)

Even though there had not been a prophet in Israel for over 400 years, during these days of John the Baptist, there still were many devout believers in Israel who were faithfully looking forward to the coming of the Messiah, the "Consolation of Israel". And so, as John came preaching the message of

repentance for the forgiveness of their sins, the people's hopes were greatly heightened.

And as we know from even before his birth, the Holy Spirit had filled this Prophet from God. And now, the Holy Spirit flowed freely within all the words John preached. And as the people listened to John's words, strange and wonderful changes began to take place within their hearts. They now had the desire to turn from the behaviors and lifestyles they once enjoyed. And so, they asked John, "What shall we now do?"

And John, being filled with the Holy Spirit, knew exactly what to tell them. The instructions he gave them were commands that they truly should have known already from the scriptures, but somehow had failed to learn, simple, but very practical acts of righteousness. He said, "If you have extra clothing, then share that clothing with others. If you have extra food, share it. If you are a tax collector, collect only what is right. If you are soldier, treat people with kindness, and be satisfied with your wages."

Changes, like those that were taking place within the hearts of these people, are the outward evidence of an inward "conversion", a turning of a person's heart away from sin and towards the purposes of God.

"Conversion" may not always immediately result in salvation, but "conversion" is a first step. And as it was with those dear people, when spiritual changes are working their way through our souls, we can't easily understand how we are to respond. These people only knew that their hearts were crying out within them to go on further and to learn, to know and to experience the things of God.

That is the way of God's Spirit and of His plan within our souls. He first cleanses our heart from sin through repentance, and then His Spirit begins to "groan" within us, causing us to yearn for more of God and to seek after His presence to fill that empty place where sin used to reside.

And somehow, no doubt because of the Holy Spirit working within them, these people's hearts began to yearn, and to call out for the Messiah that they now knew would come.

These first moments of conversion can be exciting moments for us folks. But we must also exercise caution. Our first moments, our first days of belief can be a particularly vulnerable time. When a heart has first been wiped clean from its sins, it begins to hunger to be filled. And in that hungering, there is an opening for the evils of satan to step in. As the words in the Parable of the Sower warn

us, the evil one can come in like the birds of the air and snatch away the precious seed that has been freshly sown in the soil of our heart.

That is why it is so important that in those first moments of conversion, fellow believers be available to come along side and carefully disciple and teach the truths of God's word to a new believer.

Though it does not say it here, I have no doubt that it was most likely one of the schemes of satan at work to immediately confuse these people into thinking that John the Baptist might be more than just a prophet, that He might actually be the Messiah.

And John might have appeared to be very much like the Messiah the people expected. He truly was, by far, the most powerful and convincing voice that any of them had ever heard. And He was saying right and righteous things, the very things that they had yearned to hear.

So, it was only natural for them to think, or at least to hope, that John the Baptist was perhaps himself the Messiah. And so, in their confusion, they asked him, "Are you the Messiah?"

Had John not been so filled with the Holy Spirit even before his birth, and so committed to his calling, he might have succumbed to the temptation to allow the people to exalt him and to worship him. But thankfully, he was fully surrendered over to Christ. And when the people asked him "Are you the Messiah?" He very quickly answered,

"I indeed baptize you with water; but One mightier than I is coming, whose sandal strap I am not worthy to loose. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. ¹⁷His winnowing fan is in His hand, and He will thoroughly clean out His threshing floor, and gather the wheat into His barn; but the chaff He will burn with unquenchable fire." (Luke 3:16-17)

John's testimony left no doubt that he was not the Messiah. But also, to fully stamp an absoluteness on that matter, Jesus suddenly appeared before the people, to Himself be baptized by John.

Listen, from the Book of Luke, beginning in verse 21 of chapter 3.

²¹When all the people were baptized, it came to pass that Jesus also was baptized; and while He prayed, the heaven was opened. ²²And the Holy Spirit descended in bodily form like a dove upon Him, and a voice came

from heaven which said, "You are My beloved Son; in You I am well pleased." (Luke 3:21-22)

God, very clearly, does not want anyone to receive the glory due His name. He has reminded us of that over and over again in these scriptures. He has declared that we shall put no other gods or "would-be" gods before Him, and neither should we put people before Him.

And here, in a very decisive way, God let those people then, and you and me now, know that it was Jesus and not John who should receive glory. After Jesus was baptized, the Holy Spirit descended upon Him, in full view of the people, and then God spoke like thunder out of heaven declaring about Jesus,

"You are My beloved Son; in You I am well pleased." (Luke 3:22)

There was to be no doubt, no question. Jesus was the Messiah, the anointed one, the one who had come to save His people from their sins.

John was only a messenger, a herald, a forerunner, sent out ahead of Jesus to announce His coming. He was not the Christ. As great and as wonderful as John was, he still was not even fit to unlatch the sandals on Jesus' feet.

And to fully confirm to us that John was not the one who would bring salvation to the people, we are told here that not long after this, John was put into prison and then killed by King Herod for speaking against Herod's scandalous behavior with his own brother's wife.

Again, God was decisive, and for a reason! He wanted the people then, and us now, to know very clearly that it is Jesus, His only begotten Son, who is to be our Savior.

John could only baptize with water, but Jesus would do something far more wonderful, far more precious and far more profitable for us. Through His death and resurrection, He would bring full and complete remission and forgiveness of our sins.

And then, after that, He would "baptize us with the Holy Spirit and with fire".

Folks, I confess that I truly do not fathom the full meaning of those words in verse 16, "He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire." But I do know that these simple words are wonderful beyond our imagination and comprehension.

Our Charismatic friends claim these words to be a special gift from God that comes to reside within us, a gift that causes us to speak in tongues, tongues that we don't understand, a gift that gives them great personal joy and peace.

And perhaps, that might be true. But again, I confess, I have yet to experience even a small measure of being "baptized" with the Holy Spirit and with fire" in that special manner.

I do fear that no particular denominational doctrine has a complete grasp of God's true meaning of those words, not our own, not the Charismatics, none of us.

I only know that if we truly could begin to comprehend these words and if we truly began to appropriate them for our souls, we will be completely different people. We would no longer allow our souls to be a "little bit Christian and a whole lot carnal". We would instead gladly exchange our wretched sinfulness for the joys of the righteousness of Christ.

May I suggest that deep within these few words rests much of the work of sanctification. And that within these few words, "He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire", is a "difference", a "change" that can take place within our souls that is beyond anything we can imagine.

Within my meager ability to understand, I believe that in these words, God is telling us that to be "baptized with the Holy Spirit and fire" is for Him to fully envelop, to fully saturate the heart, soul, mind and spirit of a believer with the person and presence of His Holy Spirit.

Firefighters use an expression, "fully involved" when describing a house that is being completely engulfed in flames and is beyond putting out.

For me, that seems to be what being "baptized with the Holy Spirit and fire" might look like, to be so "fully involved", so fully engulfed with the power and the presence of the Holy Spirit that nothing can quench its mighty power.

And that is what I want folks. I want that for me, and I want that for my family, and I want that for you and for your family, to be baptized with the Holy Spirit and with fire.

But let me hesitate here for a moment and give each of us a strong warning. To be "baptized with the Holy Spirit and with fire" will probably not mean only pleasant days and peaceful serene moments. Yes, the Holy Spirit is our Comforter. However, one of the most important attributes of the Holy Spirit is to

also convict and to cleanse us from sin. And often, that can be very, very painful, especially for those sins that we want to hold onto. Listen to these words in verse 17.

17His winnowing fan is in His hand, and He will thoroughly clean out His threshing floor, and gather the wheat into His barn; but the chaff He will burn with unquenchable fire.” (Luke 3:17)

We in our day might not be able to easily imagine what these words are saying to us. Few if any of us have ever been on a “threshing floor”. But the wheat is encased in a husk that must be removed in order to get to the precious kernels of wheat. To remove that husk, that chaff, is a hard process. But it must be removed. And that chaff, being of no value, is burned up.

God is using this word picture as a promise, but also as a stern warning that much the same process must take place in order to clear the way for our hearts to be cleansed from all its old sinful habits and inclinations. That is “sanctification”, and its process can surely be painful.

That “fire” will singe, it will burn, it will scorch every fiber of our being. And it will utterly destroy all the sinful ground that remains within us.

So, dear friends. If you pray right now to be “baptized with the Holy Spirit and with fire”, be prepared for some very, very difficult times ahead. God is a jealous God. He will absolutely use the Holy Spirit’s fire to do its true work. And that will surely hurt.

But also know, without fear, that God truly is trustworthy with our souls, with our spirits, and with our flesh. While yes, He will utterly destroy each of the sins within us, but He will also fully restore all that His fire cleanses within us. God is our dear loving Father. He is faithful to preserve us and to restore us back to a health that we have never known before, one cleansed from our sins and one filled with His precious presence.

Are you ready to do that? Have you arrived at a point in your life that you want to do real business with the Lord Jesus? Folks, I am ready! Let’s you and me join together and ask the Holy Spirit to begin to do His true work within us, to “baptize us with His Holy Spirit and with fire”.

I intend to dig us deeper into this special invitation in the weeks ahead, so I’ll pause for now. But consider again, if you are ready for real change to begin to take place within your soul, then this is it!

¹⁶John answered, saying to all, "I indeed baptize you with water; but One mightier than I is coming, whose sandal strap I am not worthy to loose. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. (Luke 3:16)