

Baptism with the Holy Spirit and Fire

All four gospels include John's message that Jesus would baptise with the Holy Spirit:

'I baptise you with water for repentance. But after me comes one who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. *He will baptise you with the Holy Spirit and fire.*' (Matthew 3:11)

And this was his [John's] message: 'After me comes the one more powerful than I, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. I baptise you with water, but *he will baptise you with the Holy Spirit.*' (Mark 1:7-8)

John answered them all, 'I baptise you with water. But one who is more powerful than I will come, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. *He will baptise you with the Holy Spirit and fire.*' (Luke 3:16)

Then John gave this testimony: 'I saw the Spirit come down from heaven as a dove and remain on him. And I myself did not know him, but the one who sent me to baptise with water told me, "The man on whom you see the Spirit come down and remain is *the one who will baptise with the Holy Spirit.*"' (John 1:32-33)

Two of these references, the ones from Matthew and Luke, refer to a baptism of 'Holy Spirit and fire'. What does this mean?

i) A superior baptism

Firstly, the language that John uses to describe the baptism of Jesus is designed to highlight Jesus' supremacy to John. John merely baptises with water; Jesus will baptise with the Holy Spirit and fire. This is why John is not even worthy to untie his sandals.

ii) A baptism of judgment

Fire can symbolise a number of things, but in the Matthew and Luke passages it almost certainly refers to judgment. Both of these authors refer to baptism with the Holy Spirit and fire in the context of John's message of judgment. Let's look at these passages in full:

Matthew 3

⁷ But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to where he was baptising, he said to them: 'You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? ⁸ Produce fruit in keeping with repentance. ⁹ And do not think you can say to yourselves, "We have Abraham as our father." I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham. ¹⁰ The axe has been laid to the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.'

¹¹ 'I baptise you with water for repentance. But after me comes one who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. *He will baptise you with the Holy Spirit and fire.* ¹² His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing-floor, gathering his wheat into the barn and burning up the chaff with unquenchable fire.'

Luke 3

⁷ John said to the crowds coming out to be baptised by him, 'You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? ⁸ Produce fruit in keeping with repentance. And do not begin to say to yourselves, "We have Abraham as our father." For I tell you that out of

these stones God can raise up children for Abraham.⁹ The axe has been laid to the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.'

¹⁰ 'What should we do then?' the crowd asked.

¹¹ John answered, 'Anyone who has two shirts should share with the one who has none, and anyone who has food should do the same.'

¹² Even tax collectors came to be baptised. 'Teacher,' they asked, 'what should we do?'

¹³ 'Don't collect any more than you are required to,' he told them.

¹⁴ Then some soldiers asked him, 'And what should we do?'

He replied, 'Don't extort money and don't accuse people falsely – be content with your pay.'

¹⁵ The people were waiting expectantly and were all wondering in their hearts if John might possibly be the Messiah. ¹⁶ *John answered them all, 'I baptise you with water. But one who is more powerful than I will come, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptise you with the Holy Spirit and fire.'* ¹⁷ 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.'

Now the reason why Mark and John refer only to 'Holy Spirit' and not to 'fire' becomes clear. In neither of these passages does John the Baptist refer to Jesus coming in judgment.

Here's a further way in which Jesus is superior to John. John merely comes to preach judgment; Jesus comes to execute it. John uses a striking image to speak of this future judgment: he pictures Jesus coming with a winnowing fork. This shows us that there are two stages to his judgment.

The first stage is *separation*. A winnowing fork is used to separate the wheat (the good bit) from the chaff (the useless bit). Jesus separates the one from the other, gathering the wheat into his barn.

The second stage is *destruction*. Jesus destroys the chaff by burning it. In other words, there will be a day of reckoning. The wicked will be dealt with as the harvester deals with the chaff.

Sure enough, when Jesus launches his earthly ministry, he comes with his (metaphorical) winnowing fork. Much of Jesus' ministry can be understood in terms of separation. This explains some of the sayings of Jesus that might sound harsh to our ears:

'Whoever is not with me is against me.' (Luke 11:23)

'Do you think I came to bring peace on earth? No, I tell you, but division.' (Luke 12:51)

The first stage of Jesus' judgment is underway and Jesus, like John, repeatedly warns his listeners of the second and final stage of judgment that is still to come.

iii) A single baptism

This brings us to the final and most difficult aspect of the phrase 'baptism with the Holy Spirit and fire.' How many baptisms does John have in view here: one or two?

Sometimes the phrase 'Holy Spirit and fire' has been understood as referring to two baptisms: a baptism in the Holy Spirit for the righteous; a baptism in fire (judgment) for the unrighteous. This is the most straightforward way to understand the phrase.

However, most biblical scholars are now of the view that John is not referring to two separate baptisms for the righteous and the unrighteous, but a single baptism for all. In other words, fire is not reserved for the unrighteous; it's also for the righteous.

How are we to make sense of this? A central teaching of the Bible is that believers in Jesus are saved from judgment. This is the meaning of the doctrine of justification by grace through faith.

To understand this, we need to remember that fire does two things: it refines as well as consumes, purifies as well as destroys. Jesus came to plunge all of us in the Holy Spirit and fire. The same Spirit which destroys the wicked refines and purifies the righteous, burning up all the dross in our lives.

Let's fast forward and see how this worked out. It didn't happen in the way that John the Baptist probably expected.

When Jesus poured out his Holy Spirit at Pentecost (Acts 2), the Spirit came on his followers. They were plunged in the Holy Spirit and fire. They were not destroyed, but initiated into an ongoing, purifying work of the Spirit in their lives.

But the outpouring of the Spirit on believers for their purification was not accompanied by an outpouring on non-believers for their destruction. This final judgment is pushed back, reserved for a time in the future.

Actually, a better way of looking at it is probably to say, not that the final judgment is pushed back, but that the final judgement *for believers* is brought forward. Then, wonder of wonders, the outpouring of the Spirit does not result in *us* being consumed, but in *our sin* being consumed. It does not result in *our* destruction, but the destruction of the *sinful nature*. All this is the consequence of being plunged (baptised) in the Holy Spirit.

Andrew Sampson, December 2020