

GO DEEPER INTO THE GOSPELS
WEEK 06 - WEDNESDAY, MAY 20, 2020
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SCRIPTURE: Matthew 3:1-17; Mark 1:1-11; Luke 3:1-22

All four gospels tell us about John the Baptist and his ministry to the people of Israel. John called on the people to get serious about God and to renew their devotion to him in light of the fact that the kingdom of God was coming soon. However, implicit in this call was a warning of judgment; if the people did repent, the kingdom of God would come, but if they did not, they would be overwhelmed by their enemies and be destroyed.

WATER VERSUS FIRE

“As for me, I baptize you with water for repentance, but he who is coming after me is mightier than I, and I am not fit to remove his sandals; he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will thoroughly clear his threshing floor; and he will gather his wheat into the barn, but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire.” (Matthew 3:11-12; cf. Mark 1:7-8; Luke 3:16-17)

“...he who is coming after me is mightier than I, and I am not fit to remove his sandals...”

John the Baptist was an important figure in the history of Israel, but he was not God’s word (“*logos*”) made flesh - the manifestation and embodiment of God’s amazing plan of salvation (cf. John 1:14; 1 John 1:1-3). As his forerunner, John was subservient to Jesus; John’s ministry was not an end in and of itself, but was meant to get the people ready for the ministry of Jesus. To illustrate his subservience to Jesus, John said that he was “not fit to remove [Jesus’] sandals.” According to the Talmud,¹ in the Jewish culture of the day, to loosen, remove, or carry someone’s sandal, indicated you were their servant.² Therefore John was saying that he was not even worthy of being compared to him. As he said elsewhere about Jesus: **“He must increase, but I must decrease.” (John 3:30, NASB).**

“...I baptize you with water for repentance... he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire...”

As was explored in previous studies, baptism is a symbolic ritual that demonstrates an internal reality. The act of baptism is important but is an empty ritual if there is not accompanied by the “baptism of the Holy Spirit” by Jesus. To be baptized with the Holy Spirit is to experience God’s regenerative power; God makes you spiritually alive. The prophets spoke of the Messiah ushering in an era in which God’s Spirit would be “poured out.” For example, God said through Joel: **“...I will pour out my Spirit on all mankind...” (Joel 2:28, NASB; cf. Isaiah 32:15; 44:3; Ezekiel 36:26-27; 39:29).**³ This “outpouring” of the Spirit is a wonderful promise of the coming kingdom of God; something the disciples of Jesus experience in part as a preview of what is to come (cf. Acts 2:4). However, the Messiah was also to baptize the people with fire, which many scholars believe is in contrast to the baptism of the Holy Spirit.⁴ The fire referenced here by John is the “fire” of destruction; the fate of the unrepentant is to experience the fire of God’s judgement which ends in annihilation.

¹ The Talmud is a collection of ancient Jewish writings consisting of Jewish oral law and its commentary.

² Lancaster, D.T. *Chronicles of the Messiah*. United States: First Fruits of Zion, 2017.

³ France, R.T.. *The Gospel of Matthew*. United Kingdom: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2007.

⁴ Ibid.

“His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will thoroughly clear his threshing floor; and he will gather his wheat into the barn, but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire.”

John then illustrated what he meant by having us picture the Messiah before a gathered harvest of wheat. According to France, *“The threshed grain is thrown up into the air with a winnowing-fork so that the wind can blow away the chaff while the heavier grain falls back onto the threshing-floor.”*⁵ Not everyone will have a place in the kingdom of God when it comes - only those who repent. It is the job of the Messiah to separate the unrepentant from the repentant. Interestingly, since the word “spirit” can mean “wind,” the coupling of “Holy Spirit” with “fire” in the previous verse could have additional meaning. John is illustrating the effect of Jesus’ message and ministry on the people. Jesus brings with him a baptism of the Holy Spirit, but this means the person will be confronted with a choice: respond to God in repentance or continue to sin and be destroyed. Like the useless parts of the harvest that are separated from the wheat and burned up, those who do not respond to Jesus’ message of repentance will be left to endure their enemies’ oppression. This seems harsh, but we must remember that John is speaking as a prophet and is putting things in blunt terms in order to move the people towards repentance, to be ready to embrace the Messiah.

JOHN BAPTIZES JESUS

“Then Jesus arrived from Galilee at the Jordan coming to John, to be baptized by him. But John tried to prevent him, saying, ‘I have need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?’ But Jesus answering said to him, ‘Permit it at this time; for in this way it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness.’ Then he permitted him. After being baptized, Jesus came up immediately from the water; and behold, the heavens were opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending as a dove and lighting on him, and behold, a voice out of the heavens said, ‘This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well-pleased.’” (Matthew 3:13-17, NASB; cf. Mark 1:9-11; Luke 3:21-22)

“‘I have need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?’... ‘Permit it at this time; for in this way it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness.’”

Finally, Jesus enters the scene and his introduction is surprising; Jesus approaches John and asks to be baptized by him. Jesus’ request is surprising and puzzling to John since Jesus is the one he had been referring to as one who was greater than him. Furthermore, this request is surprising to gospel readers, since we know that Jesus is presented as being perfectly righteous. Why, then, would Jesus request to be baptized, a ritual that represented a commitment to repentance. Jesus’ answer to this question, that “it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness,” is slightly cryptic but scholars tend to think he simply meant “it’s the right thing for us to do right now.”⁶ Being baptized by John indicated to the people that Jesus endorsed his ministry and it encouraged others to participate. Furthermore, Jesus being baptized acts as a symbolic precursor of what was to happen later on the cross. Just as, on the cross, he **“...was numbered with the transgressors...” (Isaiah 53:12)**, so too, in his baptism, Jesus would identify with sinners and be an example to them.

“After being baptized, Jesus came up immediately from the water; and behold, the heavens were opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending as a dove and lighting on him...”

We are then told that after Jesus came up out of the water, that the “heavens were opened” and “the Spirit of God descended on him as a dove.” Firstly, the phrase “heavens were opened” was a way in

⁵ France, R.T.. *The Gospel of Matthew*. United Kingdom: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2007.

⁶ Ibid.

Jewish culture to simply say that some “other-worldly” event was occurring; something from the heavenly realm was being revealed.⁷ What was being revealed is the truth that Jesus is God’s Son, the one on whom God’s Spirit rests, as it says in Isaiah: **“The Spirit of the LORD will rest on him...” (Isaiah 11:2, NASB)**. The gospel writers report that the Spirit of God descended onto Jesus in such a way that it was noticeable and visible to those present. Interestingly, there are no direct parallels in the Hebrew Scriptures or Jewish literature likening the Holy Spirit to a dove.⁸ It is possible that the gospel writers were alluding to the dove referenced in the story of Noah’s ark (cf. Genesis 8:11), but it could be that “descending like a dove” was simply a way to say that God’s presence came down upon Jesus like a bird descending onto a person. Regardless, Lancaster points out that this event was essentially Jesus’ anointing ceremony.⁹ In the days of the kings of Israel, a prophet would anoint the head of the prospective king with oil and this indicated that he was set a part for that task and that God was with him. Specifically, when Samuel anointed David with oil, **“...the Spirit of the LORD came mightily upon [him]...” (1 Samuel 16:13, NASB)**. John the Baptist was the prophet who “anointed” Jesus by immersing him in water; God then gave a visual and audible endorsement of Jesus, firstly by the descent of the Spirit and then by a “voice out of the heavens.”

“...and behold, a voice out of the heavens said, ‘This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well-pleased.’”

Hearing a “voice out of the heavens” was not something only depicted in the gospels. In ancient Jewish literature, a heavenly voice (called a *“bat kol”* in Hebrew) would be heard, giving confirmation, validation, and authorization in various circumstances.¹⁰ Here, the heavenly voice confirms that Jesus is God’s beloved Son,” which is an allusion to the Messianic psalm in which God says to the Messiah: **“You are my Son, today I have begotten you.” (Psalm 2:7, NASB)**. Furthermore, there are parallels to the way Isaac is spoken of as Abraham’s **“...only son, whom [he loved]” (Genesis 22:2, NASB)** and to how God spoke of the Messiah through Isaiah, saying he is **“...[God’s] chosen one in whom [He] delights...” (Isaiah 42:1, NASB)**. In any event, the overall point is this: it is time to move on from John the Baptist and focus instead on Jesus; and this is true both in the narrative of the gospels, but also in our study of the gospels. From this point forward, we will explore the words and deeds of Jesus the Messiah, for he is the only one who embodies God’s *logos* and gives us the wisdom which leads to salvation.

⁷ Lancaster, D.T. *Chronicles of the Messiah*. United States: First Fruits of Zion, 2017.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ <http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/2651-bat-kol>