

AND WITH FIRE

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I have been preaching about the baptism *with* the Spirit or *in* the Spirit. Do not think of this as the baptism *of* the Spirit, as though it is something the Holy Spirit does. This is something that *Jesus* does. The baptism is the gift of the Spirit Himself from Jesus Christ.

There are things which the Holy Spirit does *for* us and we can properly speak about the regeneration of the Holy Spirit, the illumination of the Spirit, the fruit of the Spirit, the gifts of the Spirit, the anointing of the Spirit, etc. But when we refer to the baptism that Jesus gives we must speak of the baptism *with* (or *in*) the Holy Spirit.

There are several ways in which the Christian church has interpreted the baptism with the Spirit through the centuries:

- The first is the *historical* interpretation, which alleged that the Holy Spirit was given on the Day of Pentecost to the church, that He has been in the church ever since, and that we share in the Spirit as we share in the church.
- The second is the *Wesleyan* interpretation which relates the baptism with the Spirit to sanctification, affirming that beyond the initial experience of grace and justification by faith, there is a second work of a baptism with the Spirit for sanctification (to make us holy).
- A third interpretation may be called the *R. A. Torrey* interpretation, which maintains that the baptism with the Spirit is a special endowment for power to witness which is to be sought and experienced in the life of the believer.
- Fourth, there is the *charismatic* interpretation which relates the baptism with the Spirit to gifts or manifestations, associating these gifts with the expression of the baptism itself.

I believe that each of the four expresses one facet of truth and they all should be blended (not divided) in our thinking and believing.

The baptism with the Holy Spirit is the result of the Holy Spirit arriving on the earth to stay with the church, as recorded in Acts 2, for the purpose of making Christ-followers holy, both inwardly and outwardly, and giving us power to effectively bear witness of Christ to non-believers, and unify and build up the members of the body of Christ through the exercise of spiritual gifts. For these reasons and more, every follower of Jesus should pray to receive this baptism. It ought to be the normal experience of Christians everywhere.

Baptism of Fire

Have you ever heard someone use the phrase, “baptism of fire”? They are usually referring to some difficult or trying experience.

The Bible also describes a “baptism with fire” and there is some confusion about its meaning. Yet, to experience it and to understand it are crucial for those who choose to follow Jesus Christ. Let’s see what we can discover in God’s Word.

We’ll begin with the words of John the Baptist, as he described the appearance and ministry of Jesus:

Matthew 3:11 *"I baptize with water those who repent of their sins and turn to God. But someone is coming soon who is greater than I am—so much greater that I'm not worthy even to be his slave and carry his sandals. **He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire.**"*¹² *He is ready to separate the chaff from the wheat with his winnowing fork. Then he will clean up the threshing area, gathering the wheat into his barn but burning the chaff with never-ending fire."*

One Spiritual Baptism

If "baptism with the Holy Spirit" is confused with the conversion of believers, then "baptism with fire" might naturally be associated with the fiery judgment of unbelievers described in Matthew 3:12. Yet the actual grammatical construction in Greek suggests that verse 11 refers to only one baptism, that which *combines* the Holy Spirit and fire. For believers, this would most likely refer to the Holy Spirit's purifying and refining activity, but the same convicting power, when spurned by unbelievers, leads ultimately to judgment. John uses the image of a farmer separating valuable wheat from worthless chaff by throwing the grain into the air and allowing the two constituent elements to separate in the wind. The wheat, like believers, is preserved and safeguarded; the chaff, like unbelievers, is destroyed. (The New American Commentary)

Jesus Himself acknowledged that He had come for this purpose:

Acts 1:4 *"Do not leave Jerusalem until the Father sends you the gift he promised, as I told you before."*
⁵ *John baptized with water, but in just a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit."*

Although He did not use the word, "fire," in His prediction, here is what happened less than two weeks later:

Acts 2:1 *On the day of Pentecost all the believers were meeting together in one place.*² *Suddenly, there was a sound from heaven like the roaring of a mighty windstorm, and it filled the house where they were sitting.*³ *Then, what looked like flames or tongues of fire appeared and settled on each of them.*⁴ *And everyone present was filled with the Holy Spirit and began speaking in other languages, as the Holy Spirit gave them this ability.*

I don't believe those "flames or tongues of fire" were the fire John predicted, but I do believe they represented or illustrated that same fire, for the fire of which John spoke was an inward blaze that normally cannot be seen with the natural eye. In this case, God gave a visual illustration to alert them to the Spirit's intended work.

Purifying Fire

Fire in both Testaments is associated with judgment when the unsaved are in view and with purification when believers are in view. The Holy Spirit burns away sin out of the godly, and it consumes the ungodly if they cling to their sin.

Many people want the power of the Spirit, but they are not interested in the fire, the purity. But the baptism by Jesus in the Spirit *is* a baptism of fire—which speaks of purity. It initiates a process of dying to self, cleansing of motives, purifying thoughts and words, healing and building relationships. Many people want the Spirit's power to be seen outwardly, but they don't want the inward experience of a changed lifestyle.

Fire indicates the effective work of God's grace. This was Isaiah's experience:

Isaiah 6:6 Then one of the seraphim flew to me with a burning coal he had taken from the altar with a pair of tongs. ⁷ He touched my lips with it and said, “See, this coal has touched your lips. Now your guilt is removed, and your sins are forgiven.”

Zechariah’s prophecy foretold a similar activity:

Zechariah 13:9 “I will bring that group through the fire and make them pure. I will refine them like silver and purify them like gold. They will call on my name, and I will answer them. I will say, ‘These are my people,’ and they will say, ‘The Lord is our God.’”

Malachi also saw God in this role:

Malachi 3:3 He will sit like a refiner of silver, burning away the dross. He will purify the Levites, refining them like gold and silver, so that they may once again offer acceptable sacrifices to the Lord.

Apostle Peter applied the prophecies to the contemporary experience of Christ-followers:

1 Peter 1:6 So be truly glad. There is wonderful joy ahead, even though you have to endure many trials for a little while. ⁷ These trials will show that your faith is genuine. It is being tested as fire tests and purifies gold—though your faith is far more precious than mere gold. So when your faith remains strong through many trials, it will bring you much praise and glory and honor on the day when Jesus Christ is revealed to the whole world.

This is not some strange and unusual event, but the common experience of those who wish to draw close to God.

Mark 9:49 For everyone will be tested with fire.

Testing by Fire

This is not a testing that results in passing or failing, about which you might become anxious. Such testing is not designed to trip you up, but to transform you. It is not for the purpose of disclosing your weaknesses to anyone but yourself, and even then, not to defeat you but to draw you to the Lord who has power to change you.

However repugnant this discipline may seem, Jesus recognized it as necessary and beneficial, and at one point He exclaimed:

Luke 12:49 I have come to set the world on fire, and I wish it were already burning!

He did not wish difficulty on His followers, but clearly (and personally) understood that the activity of the Holy Spirit included a “burning” — not the feeling of burning, but the effects of burning.

The flame illumines. Fire cleanses. The Spirit does both. Light and heat. Clearly, “baptism with fire” describes the fiery character of the Spirit’s activity within the soul — searching, consuming, refining, subduing.

Indeed, it is possible to translate the phrase in Matthew 3:11 as “the Holy Spirit which purifies as fire.” (A Translator’s Handbook on the Gospel of Matthew)

The purifying “pop quizzes” of the Holy Spirit today in your life and mine guarantee that we will ultimately pass the “final exam.” There will be a test.

1 Corinthians 3:13 But on the judgment day, fire will reveal what kind of work each builder has done. The fire will show if a person's work has any value.¹⁴ If the work survives, that builder will receive a reward.¹⁵ But if the work is burned up, the builder will suffer great loss. The builder will be saved, but like someone barely escaping through a wall of flames.

Hebrews 12:29 For our God is a devouring fire.

It would be tragic if we had to wait for that final day to discover if the Spirit's work in us had been effective. All our days would be spent in anxious fear.

Actually, there will be no surprises in the final exam. Every element will have been tested in advance. You have only to reflect on the tests you have faced already to see how you have done (and how you will do).

Fire is the great revealer. It devours everything that is consumable so that only what is impervious remains, revealing that which is truly lasting — and in terms of the human spirit, eternal.

This is why leaders like Peter and James wrote things like this:

James 1:2 Dear brothers and sisters, when troubles come your way, consider it an opportunity for great joy.³ For you know that when your faith is tested, your endurance has a chance to grow.⁴ So let it grow, for when your endurance is fully developed, you will be perfect and complete, needing nothing.

"Perfect and complete, needing nothing" — that is God's goal for you. And isn't that what you want, too?

Let God Work

We've just got to get over our fast-food, pill-popping, instant-gratification, me-first mentality and *let God work*. He knows how to grow us up. He knows what it takes. And He knows your pace and capacity. Trust Him — not just in theory, but in the nitty-gritty challenges of daily living. If you will not trust Him in the small things (though they sometimes seem large), you certainly will not trust Him when things get really hairy. You'll explode. You'll deflate. You'll run for cover. You'll be defeated.

Receive Jesus' baptism with fire; don't resist it. Let the Holy Spirit do His work in you. He will do it graciously and perfectly.

In a paper-thin economy like ours, many have been touting the lasting value of gold. It's not really a new idea. Jesus gave similar advice, but the gold He recommended was more lasting than 24-karat. More lasting because of the process of purification it had undergone.

Revelation 3:18 So I advise you to buy gold from me—gold that has been purified by fire. Then you will be rich.

If you want your years to be truly "golden," learn to store up treasures in heaven, not on earth. Learn to use your experiences on earth to build up heavenly capital. When put to the test, trade up — from self-interest to loving care, from self-serving convenience to loving sacrifice, from selfish hoarding to loving generosity, from self-will to loving trust in God. Trade up!

"He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain that which he cannot lose." (Jim Elliot)