

Notes for the Ekklēsia Meeting

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Do You Welcome the 'Baptism of Jesus'?

by Dan Trygg

“The axe is already laid at the root of the trees; therefore every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. ¹¹ 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. ¹² 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.’ ¹³ Then Jesus arrived from Galilee at the Jordan coming to John, to be baptized by him. ¹⁴ But John tried to prevent Him, saying, ‘I have need to be baptized by You, and do You come to me?’ ¹⁵ 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.” Matthew 3:10-15

We miss so much of what the scriptures are trying to teach us, simply because we do not take the time to research the background of the word pictures employed by the prophets, teachers and preachers recorded for us. We have “religified” words, so that they virtually have no real meaning to us, but they sound “spiritual”. An example is Matthew 3:11. **John the Baptist declares that the One coming after him is mightier than he is. He will “baptize them with the Holy Spirit and with fire”. Doesn’t that sound wonderful!!!** We loosely and blithely toss around the term, the “baptism of the Spirit”, but we don’t often think about the meaning of the term. **What does it really mean? If we look at the context here in Matthew 3, we get an entirely different picture of what the baptism of Jesus is all about. It is an awe-some, fear-some thing.** Not something to take lightly, at all. There is nothing blithe, casual or carefree about it. **This is a serious, heavy, warning-type of image that John is presenting.**

Matthew, Mark and Luke said that **John was like the one whom Isaiah had prophesied about, “Prepare the way for the Lord; make His paths straight!”** Again, the potential seriousness of this is lost on us, because we do not live under the absolute power of a king of that time. In that day, if a great, powerful king was going to travel through a city or village, or even the countryside, his heralds would ride ahead to announce his coming. **The people would hurry to clean up their yards, repair their streets, and put out their best appearance and welcome for the king.** If he should decide to stop there, they would make a great feast, and spare no expense to show him honor and hospitality, so that he would feel comfortable and welcomed. **If the king felt honored, he may show them his benevolence and honor them in return, ...but if he felt disrespected or dishonored, he would show them his disapproval and maybe even his wrath or judgment, in some way.** The application of this word picture to the lives of these religious pilgrims who were passing John on their way to the feasts at Jerusalem meant, **“Clean up your lives, and prepare your hearts for God. Show by the way you live, that you want more of God’s presence in your life. Make your life pleasing to Him, so that He will be honored by you, and will desire to fellowship with you.”** One key part of John’s message was that **they could do this by participating in a water baptism indicating their desire for a radical-shift-of-perspective in relation to God.** The water immersion signified both a washing off of old sin, a death to their past lives, and a rebirth to a new, fresh consecration to live for God. **It was a way to show their desire to honor God and live for Him with a fresh start and commitment.**

In the same way, the word pictures in Matthew 3:10-12 also had *a literal meaning from everyday life, and a metaphorical meaning to apply to their spiritual lives.* These were images taken from the everyday processes involved in agriculture. The first picture is of an axe laid against the root of a tree. What is that about? John explains this by saying that every tree that does not bear good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire. In other words, the picture is of the Divine Farmer, having brought His axe out to the grove of fruit or olive trees. This is not some hypothetical, “Someday, I am going to cut down those useless trees, those trees that are not producing good fruit.” No, His intent is clear. He has brought the axe out from the barn to the grove, and leaned it against a tree, while He determines which ones He is going to take down. **This is not an idle threat; this is an impending judgment against fruitlessness.** The word picture was *quite clear* to these first-century listeners, and the application would have been *unnerving* to those who may have been wondering how *they* were measuring up! Jesus later used this same, or a similar, word picture. He spoke of a vineyard owner who had a fig tree in his garden, that had been there for three years, but had not yet produced any figs (Luke 13:6-9). He complained to the vineyard keeper, “Cut it down! Why does it even use up the ground!” The vineyard keeper, however, appealed to the owner, “Give it one more year, and I will dig around it and fertilize it. If it produces figs, next year, great! If not, then we will cut it down.” The message is clear. **God is looking for the fruits of righteousness, justice, kindness and godliness. If we do not produce them, He will judge us for our lack of fruitfulness.** Again, in John 15, Jesus declared that He is the True Vine, and His Father is the Vinedresser (vss. 1,2). Every branch that is “in” Him that bears *no* fruit, the Father will *remove*. Such

branches will be thrown into the fire (vs. 6). Every branch that *does* produce fruit, the Father will *prune it* so that it will produce *more* fruit. Those who abide in (*live in, consistently draw their life from*) Him will bear *much* fruit (vs. 5). **The Father is glorified when we bear *much* fruit, and *truly demonstrate* that we *are* active-disciples of Jesus** (vs. 8).

What about the “baptism of the Spirit and of fire”? It is clear from the surrounding language that John is referring to the common practice of processing harvested wheat. John refers to a “threshing floor”, a “winnowing fork”, “gathering wheat into the barn” and “burning the chaff”. What is this all about? A threshing floor was a circle of flattened earth, usually 40 to 90 feet in diameter. In preparation for threshing, the circle would be raked level, larger stones would be removed to the perimeter of the circle, smaller stones would be picked out or raked under. Often the circle would be moistened with water, and some kind of roller would be rolled over it to flatten it more, and it was left to be hardened in the sun. The end result would be a smooth, flat, large circle. The optimal site would be on a hilltop or hillside, where the prevailing winds would regularly blow. The sheaves of wheat would be laid on this floor, and a team of oxen would be led around and around, over the wheat, dragging a threshing sledge. This threshing sledge was often just a large beam, but it could be a platform. Sometimes it had a rough surface with stones or metal pieces embedded into it. As the oxen pulled it, several people would sit on it to give it added weight. The threshing sledge would crush and tear up the wheat, separating the grains of wheat from the husks and stalks. Once this had been well pulverized, the workers would take winnowing forks, shovel-shaped tools with teeth on the leading edge, and scoop up the crushed, torn up and shredded wheat. They would throw shovelfuls of this mixture of stalks, husks and grain up into the wind. As it went into the wind, the lighter chaff and straw would be blown backward, and the heavier, denser grain would be carried farther. This would be done repeatedly, until all the grain had been well separated from the chaff. The chaff, or husks, would be gathered up and thrown into the fire, while the good grain would be gathered, inspected for rocks and foreign material, and put into containers to be stored away.

That is the *literal background* of this word picture John was referring to. What is the *metaphorical meaning*? John is saying that he “baptized (washed, cleansed) them with water unto repentance (a radical mind-shift in their relationship with God) toward the forgiveness of their sins”. **John’s baptism was a *fresh start*. The One coming after him, however, will baptize (cleanse, purify) them with the Holy Spirit (*pneuma* = wind) and fire.** He will *cut down* unfruitful trees. *He will thresh the lives of people, crushing, separating and thoroughly sorting their lives.* He has a winnowing fork in His hand, *to separate and remove the good from the bad.* **Whatever is good and useful fruit in God’s eyes will be preserved, but whatever is useless, wasteful and unprofitable will be thrown into the eternal fire.** The image of the baptism of the Spirit here is the *separating, stripping power* of the wind, which *removes all of the useless waste* from the crushed heads of grain. **There will be *no hiding from the wind and the fire*.** And, no one will escape this process of threshing, winnowing and separating “wheat” from “chaff”. He will not *overlook* anyone. He will *thoroughly* cleanse His threshing floor. **While John’s baptism offered a new beginning, the baptism of the Messiah will be a *final sorting, a judgment, exposure and measurement of what we did with our relationship with God.***

John was exactly right. The One coming after him was indeed *much greater than he was.* John was just a *prophetic preacher*. The One coming after him was the *Eternal Word*, ...Everlasting God clothed in human flesh. John came to bear witness of Him. *The whole purpose for John’s ministry was to make Jesus known* to the people of Israel (Jn. 1:31). Jesus came to reveal and demonstrate the heart and plan of God through His life, death and resurrection. *Jesus came to make the Father known* in a unique way, a way no one else ever could. John came to bear witness of the light of God. Jesus *was* the eternal light. John’s ministry was to draw people’s attention *to* Jesus, so that they might believe *in* Him and receive life *through* Him (Jn. 1:6-13). **John knew that *he must decrease, but Jesus would increase, ...and nothing could give him greater joy* than that (Jn. 3:29,30).**

When Jesus stepped out of the crowd to be baptized by John, John tried to prevent Him, saying, “I have need to be baptized by You, and You come to me?” What did John mean? From John 1:31-33, we find that John did not yet know that Jesus was the One he had been preaching about. **Did John know Jesus? Yes.** In Luke 1:36, we find out that Jesus’ mother and John’s mother were relatives. In fact, the angel referred to the miraculous conception in old, barren Elizabeth’s womb as a sign that God was well able to fulfill His word to Mary. Mary knew them well enough to go to their home, and walk right in, greeting Elizabeth. Undoubtedly, John and Jesus would have known each other through family functions and reunions at the yearly feasts in Jerusalem. They must have spent considerable time together for John to recognize that Jesus’ walk was much deeper than his own. Yet, it was not until John saw the Spirit descend upon Jesus in the form of a dove, that he knew that Jesus was the One who he was to bear witness to. *Jesus was baptized in water as a mind-shift, a consecration from private life to public ministry.* **From John’s baptism in water came the One who would both *die for all, and will be the Judge of all, ...the One who will sort, thresh, expose and separate the lives of every man, woman and child with the baptism of the Spirit and fire.***