

The Baptism of Water and the Baptism of Fire.

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As we open the New Testament we are arrested by the striking figure of John the Baptist. He was evidently a great heroic man, of strong personality, with a clear and definite message, which he delivered with thrilling and commanding power. There is one thing about him which is very noticeable and significant—he had the clearest and most accurate ideas as to the character and limitations of the work he had to do. He was but a forerunner, preparing the way for one greater than himself. Even when popularity surged around him and the people acclaimed him as a prophet of God, he never swerved by a single hair's breadth from the line which he had laid down in his first utterances. He always maintained his initial position—'He that cometh after me is mightier than I,' 'I baptize with water, but he shall baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire' (Mt 11¹¹).

At first sight, to a careless reader, it might seem as if the work of John and the work of the Messiah were to be in opposition. When fire breaks out, our readiest agent for quenching it is water. But John saw likeness, and not opposition, in the relation between his work and that of the Messiah. To him 'water' and 'fire' were agents of cleansing, and the difference in their efficacy was a measure of the difference in the work which both were to do. The Baptist and the Messiah were seeking the moral purification of the people, but the cleansing of the one was as the cleansing of water, and the cleansing of the other was as the cleansing of fire. Water washes away the outer defilement, and leaves the substance unchanged; fire penetrates and transforms what it cleanses. For instance, when gold is taken from the earth, sand and gravel mingle with it. It is washed in the pan, till the grains of gold lie clear and clean at the bottom—it has been baptized with water. But there are still impurities in the gold which water cannot touch. It must be melted and purged till its very substance is cleansed, and when that is done, we may say it has been baptized with fire. This distinction between the two methods of cleansing expressed to the mind of John the likeness and superiority of the work

of Jesus to his own. The truth he taught, the influence he exerted, was as water compared with fire. He could lead men to leave off their surface sins, induce them to live a new life in which these sins would be left undone. He could bring them to repentance which would produce a reformation. That was all, and that was not enough. It is one of the proofs of the greatness of John that he saw that repentance was not enough, that there was need of a deeper and more penetrating work which would reach the secret places of thought and desire, and make the inner life clean as well as the outer. Not repentance but renewal, not reformation but transformation, were necessary if men were to be ready for the Kingdom of God.

What, then, were the influences which John used to bring about this minor cleansing which he recognized as the limit of his power. It is easy to know. Listen to the stern prophet as he speaks to the people. What are the words which fall like blows upon their ears? They are, 'Flee from the wrath to come'; 'Behold the axe is lying at the root of the trees,' ready to cut down those that brought not forth good fruit. One is coming 'whose fan is in his hand.' The fire is already kindled in which He will burn up the chaff. John uses the influence of fear. It is a picture of terrific and impending judgment which he draws, words of awful and certain doom which he utters, and in large measure he gains the end he seeks. Multitudes submit to his baptism of water; thousands repent and reform.

But what was his idea as to the baptism of fire? How did he think that the Messiah would accomplish His greater work of transformation and renewal? Evidently he expected that the Messiah would work in the same line as himself, only more thoroughly. He would exercise the actual powers of judgment regarding which John was only able to use threats. John said that 'wrath' was coming; with the Messiah it would arrive. The Baptist pointed to the 'axe'; the Messiah would wield it. He warned the people that the sifting fan was in the Messiah's hand, but when He came He would use it, and actually

cast the chaff into the unquenchable fire. John regarded himself as a prophet or messenger of mercy. His message was a gospel to him. There is a grim pleasantry in the way in which he contrasts his method with that of the Messiah. He seems to say, 'You think I am severe in my threats, but wait till He comes who is mightier than I.' 'You regard my baptism of water as an uncomfortable experience, what will you think of the Messiah's baptism of fire.' 'Submit, submit, I beseech you, to the baptism of water, leave off your sins, repent, that you may be ready for Him who can baptize you in the unquenchable fire of His judgment.' Such was the Baptist's thought of the method of the Messiah whose way he was preparing. It expresses what was said by Malachi (3¹⁻³): 'The Lord whom ye see shall suddenly come to his temple. . . . But who may abide the day of his coming and who shall stand when he appeareth, for he is like a refiner's fire, and like fuller's soap, and he shall sit as a refiner and purifier of silver; and he shall purify the sons of Levi, and purify them as gold and silver.'

John was both right and wrong. He was right in thinking that repentance was not enough, and that the Messiah would renew and transform, but wrong in his thought of the method He would employ. It is the wonder of the world that John was mistaken in his anticipation of the influences Jesus would use. 'No weapon in his hand was seen, nor voice of terror heard.' He wrought not by judgment but by mercy, not by threatening but by pleading, not by punishment but by forgiveness, not by wrath but by love. The old fable of the contest between the wind and the sun faintly indicates the difference between the method of the Baptist and the method of Jesus.

John would compel men by the strength of his blasts of threatening, Jesus would win them by the warmth and genial tenderness of His love. John would reform by fear, Jesus would transform by love.

It was because Jesus did not act in accordance with his anticipations that the doubt was born in his mind which was afterwards expressed in the question of his disciples, 'Art thou he that should come, or look we for another?' He was perplexed because he saw not the 'axe,' or the 'fan,' or the 'fire.' He had looked for a ministry of judgment, and lo, he saw a ministry of mercy. No wonder that Jesus said 'he that was comparatively little in the kingdom of God was greater than John.' He was a prophet who preached with unequalled power the message of the Old Covenant, he did not see the wonder and grace of the New. He knew the constraint of the terror of the Lord, he knew not the cleansing and transforming might of His Love. The purifying influence which he expected did come, but it was not a fire of wrath consuming the adversaries; it was a fire of love that melted the hardness of rebellion, and purified while it consumed. The Spirit that he anticipated was the Old Testament Spirit of 'burning,' that is, of judgment. Even though he saw the Spirit descending and resting on Jesus in the form of a dove, that sign did not change his thought. The Messiah was to be a Judge, not a Saviour. To his surprise and to the surprise of the world, Jesus came not to judge but to save. John had no idea that a new dispensation was about to dawn. His warnings were his gospel, and they are as night is to day compared with the glorious gospel of the blessed God, revealed and realized by Jesus Christ.