

Baptism of the Holy Spirit

By: Jason Cole

One of the most debated subjects in New Testament theology is the meaning of the baptism of the Holy Spirit. The resurgence of modern day charismatics has made this issue more prevalent. It is likely that most Christians have heard someone speak of the baptism of the Holy Spirit. The question for us is, what exactly does this mean? What is it that the original audience of the New Testament church understood it to mean?

Most often today, the idea of the baptism of the Holy Spirit is defined as some sort of external evidence for the presence of the Holy Spirit coming upon a person and evidenced by the speaking of tongues. Other times people will suggest that the baptism of the Holy Spirit was to encourage the discouraged and afraid disciples. Still other would say that it was the singular event that created the apostleship. However, the apostles were already established and set apart by Jesus. Furthermore, Cornelius received the baptism of the Holy Spirit and he was not an apostle. Paul never did receive it that we know of and he was an apostle. We certainly cannot deny that the baptism of the Holy Spirit confirmed the apostles as God's spokesmen, but I do not believe that is all that it did.

One of our biggest faults in interpretation is that we often try to interpret the Bible in our own culture and with Western or Gentile eyes. We need to think like Jesus thought if we are going to understand this. By that, I mean that we need to understand the culture and context of the issue. Whatever it was that baptism of the Holy Spirit means, the original audience would have understood it better than we do.

Roger Chambers speaks about the baptism of the Holy Spirit and its impact on "Jewish National Israel". As far as Jewish National Israel, Jesus' coming, death and resurrection was an ending, not a beginning.

Before we can truly understand the meaning of the baptism of the Holy Spirit, we need to first look at first usage of the term in Scripture. The first promise of the baptism of the Holy Spirit was to the Pharisees and Sadducees.

Matthew 3:5-12 - 5 Then Jerusalem was going out to him, and all Judea and all the district around the Jordan; 6 and they were being baptized by him in the Jordan River, as they confessed their sins. 7 But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, he said to them, "You brood of vipers, who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? 8 Therefore bear fruit in keeping with repentance; 9 and do not suppose that you can say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham for our father'; for I say to you that from these stones God is able to raise up children to Abraham. 10 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."

In this instance, John the Baptist is preaching and promising some type of judgment upon the Pharisees and the Sadducees. It was typical for someone to address a whole people by way of their leaders. This is what John was doing. He was addressing the whole nation of Israel through their spiritual leaders. This was not just a promise for something for the Pharisees and Sadducees. This is a promise for the nation of Israel. This is a promise of some type of national judgment.

In fact, the language is clear judgment language. Notice that John speaks of "fire", a "winnowing fork" and the ax being at the root of the tree. Not only is the idea of judgment present, but it is imminent judgment. The ax is already at the root of the tree.

It is interesting that modern day charismatics speak so longingly for the baptism of the Holy Spirit, but if you read what John says about it, the reaction might be quite different. It does not sound like something we should desire for ourselves.

If you look at John's specific language, we can see that this is also Old Testament imagery that he is picking up on. In the book of Isaiah, we see the imagery of an ax chopping down a tree (Isaiah 10). The Old Testament figure was that the axmen was God, the axe was the nation of Assyria and Israel was the tree. God was promising judgment on the nation of Israel to be carried out by the Assyrians.

So, when John speaks, he is speaking of a similar type of judgment. He is saying that judgment is coming. Once again Israel is the tree and God is the axmen. Note the axe is already at the foot of the tree when John speaks; meaning judgment is about to come. It is near. The winnowing fork is in his hand. Jesus is just beginning his public ministry as John spoke. In other words, John's words cannot be separated from the fact that Jesus' coming was what indicated the ax was at the root of the tree. His coming was the last chance for the nation of Israel. He separates the wheat from chaff and the chaff is burned up. Between the axe and winnowing fork comes baptism of the Holy Spirit.

The connection between John saying this and Jesus' ministry beginning cannot be ignored. The coming of Jesus was the last opportunity for repentance for Jewish national Israel, or what we might call Temple based religion. Jesus himself had spoken of the Jews as a people who killed the prophets and stoned those sent to them (Matthew 23). Those who killed the prophets were about to commit the consummate sin, which was the rejection and murder of the long promised Messiah. Certainly it was an individual sin, but it was also a national sin. Peter even spoke of it as such on the Day of Pentecost. Peter accused the crowds of crucifying the Messiah. As a result of their rejection, they would suffer the ultimate national punishment, which would be the destruction of their city and their Temple as a result of their sin. Not only that, but it was the end of God's special covenant relationship with Israel.

In Matthew 24, Jesus clearly ties the fate of Jerusalem to their sin. Many of the parables of Jesus speak about the punishment coming because of the rejection of the Son (Matthew 21:33-36; 22:1-14). The point being that it is one thing to kill God's prophets, it an altogether different thing to kill the son.

The Jews as a people were about to reject Jesus. The original promise of Baptism of the Holy Spirit was made and notice the context of judgment. It is not just in the context of judgment, but of national judgment. It is hard to deny that the original promise of the Baptism of the Holy Spirit which

was directed towards the scribes and Pharisees and ultimately to the Jewish nation is in the context of national judgment.

The second promise of the Baptism of the Holy Spirit is in Acts 1:

Acts 1:4-8 - ⁴Gathering them together, He commanded them not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait for what the Father had promised, “Which,” *He said*, “you heard of from Me; ⁵for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now.” ⁶So when they had come together, they were asking Him, saying, “Lord, is it at this time you are restoring the kingdom to Israel?” ⁷He said to them, “It is not for you to know times or epochs which the Father has fixed by His own authority; ⁸but you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be My witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth.”

It did not take long for this promise to come to fruition. It is on the Day of Pentecost that we see it all happening. Acts 2 tells us that “they were all together in one place” when it happened. It is very important for us to identify who the “they” is. The context makes clear that the references is to the eleven apostles plus the newly appointed Matthias. This was not something that happened upon all the people at Pentecost, but rather on the apostles and for the people.

When the events start unfolding in Acts 2, the people actually ask the question, “What does all this mean?” Peter answers by stating that it is the fulfillment of the prophecy of Joel 2. Peter quotes the prophet Joel, saying the Spirit will be poured out on “all flesh”.

This statement had to be troubling in some ways. The Spirit being poured out on all flesh would have been offensive to any Jew. It is hard for us to go back and grasp the feelings of superiority the Jews had towards the Gentiles. However, the Jews hated the Gentiles. They really placed value on their lineage. This is why they would often say things like, “we have Abraham as our father.” They really believed that they were saved based on their lineage. This would naturally create a problem for any non-Jew. Now, Peter is saying that God’s plan all along has been to pour His Spirit out on all people.

Now, the Jews added to this all sorts of false Messianic expectations. I believe that it was some of those false Messianic expectations that were intentionally confronted with the baptism of the Holy Spirit. Pentecost was confronting this false idea that when the Messiah came and established a kingdom that it would be an all Jewish kingdom. Jesus never taught this. Jesus made sure that he taught that his kingdom was a spiritual kingdom. We tend to look at Pentecost as the beginning of something. Sure, the Day of Pentecost was a beginning. It was the beginning of the church. It was the beginning of a kingdom where there is no distinction between Jew or Greek, male or female. However, it is likely that the Jews would have seen it more as the end of something. It was the end of their being an exclusive people of God.

Once again, when we see the coming of the baptism of the Holy Spirit, it does not sound like a positive thing. We see words like blood, smoke and fire. In fact, what we see at Pentecost sounds a lot like what we read about taking place at Mount Sinai. Moses went to Mt. Sinai to receive the Law. There were sounds of trumpets, thunder, clouds, and fire covered the mountain. All of that was so that Moses could be identified to the people as God's actual spokesman. At Pentecost God was identifying the Apostles as God's official spokesmen. The Holy Spirit was upon the Apostles here in Acts 2, but it was for the people....just like the events at Mount Sinai were for the people. Today, people want to speak of the baptism of the Holy Spirit as some spiritual experience that they want and that every person should desire. However, the baptism of the Holy Spirit was not even for the apostles, it was for the crowds. It may have been a spectacular sight. It may have been supernatural, but it is impossible to ignore the implications of judgment that came alongside it.

It seems that the baptism of the Holy Spirit directly rebuked the typical Jewish thinking of the time. At Pentecost, the first thing God does is cause the people to speak in other languages. Peter reveals that this is Joel's prophecy fulfilled. This language of moon turning dark was standard Old

Testament prophetic formula for the judgment and destruction of a nation. It is clear that those listening would have interpreted things this way (Ezekiel 32:7-11, Matthew 24:29).

In each case it used by God for nations who were judged for their sin. Peter's sermon in Acts 2 was not just the "first Gospel sermon" but also one of the last Jewish sermons. It was a sermon delivered to Jews, for Jews and in language they would clearly understand. He then tells them why God will bring destruction.

Men of Israel, listen to these words: Jesus the Nazarene, a man attested to you by God with miracles and wonders and signs which God performed through Him in your midst, just as you yourselves know—²³ this *Man*, delivered over by the predetermined plan and foreknowledge of God, you nailed to a cross by the hands of godless men and put *Him* to death. ²⁴ But God raised Him up again, putting an end to the agony of death, since it was impossible for Him to be held in its power. ³⁶ Therefore let all the house of Israel know for certain that God has made Him both Lord and Christ—this Jesus whom you crucified." (Acts 2:22-24; 36)

God sent Jesus. He sent adequate testimony. He raised Him from the dead, yet the Jews by and large rejected Him. Peter is making sure that they know as a people they are under a sentence of divine judgment. The point made was that a person must separate from "this generation" or else they will incur the judgment with it (Acts 2:40). Peter taught in Acts 2 that the Gospel is universal and that God will judge the Jews. Notice that Peter references the fact that the Jews rejected and betrayed Jesus (Acts 2:22-24; 36). Peter taught that the Jews have to disassociate themselves from Jewish Israel (Acts 2:36-40). Peter never said, "the Baptism of the Holy Spirit is a great thing, you should desire it". Nowhere in the Bible is anyone ever commanded or even recommended to be baptized in the Holy Spirit.

It is interesting to notice the connection of speaking in tongues to the baptism of the Holy Spirit. Most interpreters would say tongues were primarily for communication. However, the Bible does not state that. There was no speaking in tongues before Pentecost. Also, we do not even find the gift of tongues in the later list of gifts recorded in Romans 12 and Ephesians 4. In the first century, Greek was a

Universal language. The Jews would have not only expected the Messianic kingdom to be all Jewish kingdom, but they also expected it to be a Hebrew speaking kingdom. They believed that Hebrew was “God’s language”. When we look at the baptism of the Holy Spirit, we not only see judgment language used, but we see clearly that God was destroying the commonly held Jewish misconceptions. At Pentecost, there were people from all nations and His Spirit was poured out on all flesh. Now, we also see that at the establishment of the church different languages were spoken.

When the Apostle Paul gives instruction and correction to the church at Corinth concerning their misuse of speaking in tongues, he quotes from Isaiah 28. Isaiah was preaching a message of repentance to the Jews. However, they did not listen to Isaiah’s message. In fact, they accused him of speaking in childish language. He tells them that it will be a sign of judgment that they are preached to in another tongue. God is saying to the mocking Jews, “When you hear that language you will know it is me that is talking and you will know it is telling you to repent”. Paul makes direct application to this in 1 Corinthians 14.

The national tone of judgment is more clear when we consider Peter’s words after the 3,000 were pierced to the heart and told to be baptized. Peter pleaded with the people further, “be saved from this perverse generation.” Peter is making clear that judgment was coming from which the people needed to be saved from. I do not believe he simply is telling them that they need to be saved from the fire of Hell. He is telling them that they need to separate themselves from the nation of Israel or else they will incur the same fate as the nation of Israel.

In Acts 10, we have another instance of the baptism of the Holy Spirit. Even after God showed His judgment on the Jewish nation, for the first ten years, the church remained largely Jewish. As a result, God called Peter to the house of Cornelius. It was there that the Spirit came upon them just as it did the Apostles in the beginning. This was a judgment in a sense upon the Jewish church indicating that salvation was available to all people. The events at Cornelius’ house were primarily for the apostles.

Some have interpreted the baptism of the Holy Spirit to be an event intended to credential the apostles. However, the apostleship was already created. Paul was an apostle and we never know anything of the baptism of the Holy Spirit connected with him. Cornelius received the baptism of the Holy Spirit and was not an apostle. I do not believe that this is what the baptism of the Holy Spirit was about. It is quite evident that the purpose of the baptism of the Holy Spirit was intended to be a sign of judgment upon the Jewish nation. It indicated that not only would they be punished for rejecting the Messiah, but also that in the Messianic kingdom it would be totally different than they expected.

While there is a lot of confusion on the subject of baptism of the Holy Spirit, it is absolutely clear that the baptism of the Holy Spirit is not a miraculous event that accompanies salvation. When you look at what the Bible says about the baptism of the Holy Spirit, it is clear that the events were unique events in history which were a way for God to pronounce judgment on the nation of Israel for their rejection of the Messiah. Any teaching that cites the baptism of the Holy Spirit as the point in time a person is saved today and evidences it by the speaking in ecstatic utterances is not teaching what John, Jesus, or the Apostles taught about the subject.

