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What does baptism of the holy spirit and fire mean

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The Immediate Context of baptism by fire Looking at the surrounding context helps us to illuminate the point John was trying to make. Note all the imagery Matthew reports John using when he spoke these words: “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? Therefore bear fruit in keeping with repentance; 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. 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. 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 3:7-12). This passage is primarily a warning about coming judgment and the need to repent before it’s too late. In it, fire is mentioned three times in swift succession: The trees that do not bear fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire. Jesus will come to baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire. The wheat will be brought to the barn while the chaff is burned with fire. What is the fire in these contexts? And what is Jesus coming to do? In the first instance, Jesus comes with an axe. The trees bearing fruit stand while those that do not are cut down and burned. Thus, Jesus comes to make a distinction between those who bear fruit (the “fruit in keeping with repentance” already mentioned in the passage) and those that do not. He preserves the one and destroys the other. That destruction is represented by fire. The third instance is quite similar to the first. In it, Jesus comes with a winnowing fork to separate the wheat from the chaff. The wheat is preserved and the chaff is, again, destroyed by fire. Fire here is clearly divine judgment. Sandwiched in-between these two is the statement about Jesus coming to baptize them (i.e. the crowd that John is warning and calling to repentance) with “the Holy Spirit and with fire.” In context, this is saying the very same thing. Jesus is coming to separate the repentant faithful (who will be preserved) from the unrepentant wicked (who will be burned in the fire of His judgment.) The Gospel of Luke gives us a similar picture. After presenting the same image as Matthew about the axe and the casting of unfruitful trees into the fire, (Luke 13:7-9) Luke expands more fully on John’s call to repentance, (Luke 13:10-14). Luke then concludes: “Now while the people were in a state of expectation and all were wondering in their hearts about John, as to whether he was the Christ, John answered and said to them all, ‘As for me, I baptize you with water; but One is coming who is mightier than I, and I am not fit to untie the thong of His sandals; He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in His hand to thoroughly clear His threshing floor, and to gather the wheat into His barn; but He will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire.’” (Luke 3:15-17). Once again, the context is a fearful call to repentance and a coming judgment of some and the preservation of others. Thus, the baptism of the Spirit is the promised hope of every believer and the baptism of fire is the dire fate of every unbeliever. No Judgment, No Fire It is also worth noting that the other two gospels present far less detail on the content of John’s preaching. Specifically, neither of them mentions John’s warnings of impending judgment or his vivid image of trees and chaff being cast into the fire. As such, when they present John’s words about Christ, they likewise leave out the reference to fire there too: “And he was preaching, and saying, ‘After me One is coming who is mightier than I, and I am not fit to stoop down and untie the thong of His sandals. I baptized you with water; but He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.’” (Mark 1:7-8). “John testified saying, ‘I have seen the Spirit descending as a dove out of heaven, and He remained upon Him. I did not recognize Him, but He who sent me to baptize in water said to me, ‘He upon whom you see the Spirit descending and remaining upon Him, this is the One who baptizes in the Holy Spirit.’ I myself have seen, and have testified that this is the Son of God.’” (John 1:32-34). Thus, when judgment is not in view, we are not told about a “baptism of fire.” Similarly, Luke later reports the similar words of Jesus echoing John’s comments. The context of these quotes, however, is specifically directed to the disciples and the hopeful promise of the Holy Spirit. Thus, in those contexts, Luke says: “Gathering 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; for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now.’” (Acts 1:4-5). “And as I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell upon them just as He did upon us at the beginning. And I remembered the word of the Lord, how He used to say, ‘John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.’ Therefore if God gave to them the same gift as He gave to us also after believing in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could stand in God’s way?’” (Acts 1:11-17). In every one of these cases where the judgment of the wicked is not discussed and only the positive promise to believers is in view, the language about baptizing in fire is absent. The Old Testament Background While the exact language of being “baptized” (or “immersed”) in the Holy Spirit was coined by John the Baptist and Jesus, the image is drawn from Old Testament prophesy. Thus, the book of Acts opens with a reminder of the promise that Jesus would baptize His followers with the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:4-5) and then explains when this happens, that it was a fulfillment of the earlier promise recorded by the prophet Joel: “but this is what was spoken of through the prophet Joel: ‘And it shall be in the last days,’ God says, ‘That I will pour forth of My Spirit on all mankind; And your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, And your young men shall see visions, And your old men shall dream dreams; Even on My bondslaves, both men and women, I will in those days pour forth of My Spirit And they shall prophesy.’” (Acts 2:16-18, see Joel 2:28-29). Thus, to be “baptized” in the Holy Spirit was, in Old Testament terms, to have the Spirit “poured out” on you. Both denoted covering as with water, thus making sense of John’s analogy to water baptism. In the same way, the Old Testament prophets likewise used a similar image related to the idea of a “fire baptism.” For example: “‘Therefore wait for Me,’ declares the Lord, ‘For the day when I rise up as a witness. Indeed, My decision is to gather nations, To assemble kingdoms, To pour out on them My indignation, All My burning anger; For all the earth will be devoured By the fire of My zeal,’” (Zephaniah 3:8). The burning fire of God’s indignation will be poured out on all the nations and peoples of the earth. This is the baptism of fire. Similar language is used for God’s judgment elsewhere, such as: “He has bent His bow like an enemy; He has set His right hand like an adversary And slain all that were pleasant to the eye; In the tent of the daughter of Zion He has poured out His wrath like fire,” (Lamentations 2:4). “The Lord has accomplished His wrath. He has poured out His fire in anger; And He has kindled a fire in Zion Which has consumed its foundations,” (Lamentations 4:11). “Who can stand before His indignation? Who can endure the burning of His anger? His wrath is poured out like fire And the rocks are broken up by Him,” (Nahum 1:6). “Thus I have poured out My indignation on them; I have consumed them with the fire of My wrath, their way I have brought upon to their heads,” declares the Lord God,” (Ezekiel 22:31). Thus, just as the “baptism of the Spirit” pointed back to promises of God “pouring out His Spirit,” so too did the image of a “baptism of fire” point back to the imagery of God pouring out the fire of His wrath. Other Examples This idea of separating all humanity into two categories, one preserved to eternal life and the other plunged into the fire, is central to Jesus’ understanding of His own ultimate mission. Note, for example, the poignant kingdom parable of the wheat and the tares: “Jesus presented another parable to them, saying, ‘The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a man who sowed good seed in his field. But while his men were sleeping, his enemy came and sowed tares among the wheat, and went away. But when the wheat sprouted and bore grain, then the tares became evident also. The slaves of the landowner came and said to him, ‘Sir, did you not sow good seed in your field? How then does it have tares?’” And he said to them, “An enemy has done this!” The slaves said to him, “Do you want us, then, to go and gather them up?” But he said, “No; for while you are gathering up the tares, you may uproot the wheat with them. Allow both to grow together until the harvest; and in the time of the harvest I will say to the reapers, ‘First gather up the tares and bind them in bundles to burn them up; but gather the wheat into my barn.’”” (Matthew 13:24-30). Jesus explained the parable’s meaning thus: “And He said, ‘The one who sows the good seed is the Son of Man, and the field is the world; and as for the good seed, these are the sons of the kingdom; and the tares are the sons of the evil one; and the enemy who sowed them is the devil, and the harvest is the end of the age; and the reapers are angels. So just as the tares are gathered up and burned with fire, so shall it be at the end of the age. The Son of Man will send forth His angels, and they will gather out of His kingdom all stumbling blocks, and those who commit lawlessness, and will throw them into the furnace of fire; in that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Then the righteous will shine forth as the sun in the kingdom of their Father. He who has ears, let him hear.’” (Matthew 13:37-43). The whole point here is the same as the imagery used earlier by John the Baptist. Jesus has come to preserve believers unto eternal life and cast unbelievers into the fire of divine judgment. This is a central theme in Jesus’ teaching, especially in Matthew, and the two baptisms of Spirit and fire are just one of the many expressions of it. Note, again, the future judgment scene described in Matthew 25. We are told: “But when the Son of Man comes in His glory, and all the angels with Him, then He will sit on His glorious throne. All the nations will be gathered before Him; and He will separate them from one another, as the shepherd separates the sheep from the goats; and He will put the sheep on His right, and the goats on the left.” (Matthew 25:31-33). On the one hand, Jesus says to believers: “Then the King will say to those on His right, ‘Come, you who are blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.’” (Matthew 25:34). On the other hand, He says to the rest: “Then He will also say to those on His left, ‘Depart from Me, accursed ones, into the eternal fire which has been prepared for the devil and his angels.’” (Matthew 25:41). He then concludes by reiterating: “These will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.” (Matthew 25:46). Again, Jesus came to seal some for His eternal kingdom and will cast others to the fire. The Baptism of fire is God’s wrath on the unbeliever. It is not the blessing promised to the believer. We see this, perhaps most strikingly of all, when that baptism is described in Revelation: “And if anyone’s name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire,” (Revelation 20:15). Those who are plunged into the lake of fire are the unbelievers cast into eternal torment. This is the baptism of fire that Jesus will bring. The message is to repent! Believe in Christ and be delivered from the fire! Receive instead the Holy Spirit as a seal unto eternal life! This answer is based on the Christian theology of Emanuel Swedenborg (1688-1772), and his spiritual mode of interpreting the Bible. It represents the view on this subject of the “New Church” or “Swedenborgian” denominations that accept Swedenborg’s theology. The question is based on Luke 3:16-17: John answered all of them by saying, “I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming: I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.” There are four key elements here related to the question that need to be explained and understood: Baptism Baptism with water Baptism with the Holy Spirit Baptism with fire Baptism In the New Testament, baptism was practiced by John the Baptist and Jesus’ disciples, and commanded by Jesus himself (see Matthew 28:16-20) as a permanent ritual, or sacrament, that would introduce people into the Christian church. Those who are baptized are considered Christians, whether baptized as infants or as adults. Baptism itself is a ritual of cleansing. As originally practiced, it involved being fully immersed in flowing water such as the Jordan River. In non-religious terms, baptism is a bath. The purpose of a bath physically is to clean the body of dirt and impurities. Spiritually, therefore, baptism represents the cleansing of a person from evil, falsity, and sin. This is the first step in the process of being born again, or spiritual rebirth. That is why baptism is presented in the New Testament as “the baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins” (see Matthew 3:11; Mark 1:4; Luke 3:3; Acts 2:38, 13:24, 19:4). Baptism is not about mere physical cleansing; it is a ritual symbolic of the spiritual cleansing of repentance from our sins, and thereby accepting God’s forgiveness, entering into the Christian religion, and being born again as a new creation in Christ (see 2 Corinthians 5:17). In Christianity, baptism takes the place of all the Old Testament rituals of washing and purification. Luke 3:16 and Matthew 3:11 speak of three forms of baptism: with water with the Holy Spirit with fire Since baptism in general represents a cleansing of Christian believers from evil, falsity, and sin, each of these forms of baptism represent a cleansing at a different level of a Christian’s life. Baptism with water In Matthew 3:11, John the Baptist says: I baptize you with water for repentance. In the Bible, water is often used as a symbol of truth. For example, Deuteronomy 32:2 reads: May my teaching drop like the rain, my speech condense like the dew; like gentle rain on grass, like showers on new growth. Baptism with water, then, represents allowing our lives to be cleansed by the truth of Jesus’ teaching. But more specifically, the baptism of water performed by John the Baptist was a baptism of repentance from evil, falsity, and sin in a person’s outward behavior. When the people being baptized by John asked him what they must do, he told them that they must stop acting wrongly, and start acting rightly: “What should we do then?” the crowd asked, John answered, “Anyone who has two shirts should share with the one who has none, and anyone who has food should do the same.” Even tax collectors came to be baptized. “Teacher,” they asked, “what should we do?” “Don’t collect any more than you are required to,” he told them. Then some soldiers asked him, “And what should we do?” He replied, “Don’t extort money and don’t accuse people falsely—be content with your pay.” (Luke 3:10-14) In fact, John’s imprisonment and later execution by Herod was a result of his rebuking Herod for his behavior: But when John rebuked Herod the tetrarch because of his marriage to Herodias, his brother’s wife, and all the other evil things he had done, Herod added this to them all: He locked John up in prison. (Luke 3:19-20) The first baptism, then, baptism by water, represents the cleansing of our outward actions, and our speech, from evil, falsity, and sin. The first step in Christian life and rebirth is to stop speaking falsehoods and lies, and stop doing things that are evil and sinful. This is the “baptism of water for repentance” practiced by John the Baptist and by the disciples of Jesus. But there are two further, and deeper, forms of baptism. John the Baptist said that Jesus Christ (the “one more powerful than I” who “is coming”) “will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.” Baptism with the Holy Spirit The Holy Spirit, like water, refers to truth. But it is truth of a deeper kind. It is not outward truth, but “the spirit of truth”: When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth; for he will not speak on his own, but will speak whatever he hears, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. (John 16:13, and see also John 14:16-17, 15:26) Baptism with the Holy Spirit, then, is the next step beyond the cleansing of our outward life through repenting from sin and instead speaking and acting with kindness and truth. Baptism with the Holy Spirit is the cleansing of our inward self, and specifically of our thoughts and beliefs. The truth that does this is not the outward truth of right behavior represented by the baptism of water performed by John the Baptist, but the deeper spiritual and divine truth that cleanses our mind and spirit from falsity and error. When we are baptized with the Holy Spirit, we follow the guidance of the Holy Spirit into all the truth. We allow the Holy Spirit to re-form our thinking, our faith, our beliefs. The result of baptism with the Holy Spirit is that our mind is enlightened, and we walk in the light of God’s spiritual truth. Baptism with fire The Third and final form of baptism mentioned in Matthew 3:11 and Luke 3:16 is baptism with fire. Since ancient times, in all cultures, fire with its warmth has been seen as a symbol of love. In the ancient love poem called “The Song of Solomon,” 8:6, we read: Set me as a seal upon your heart, as a seal upon your arm; for love is strong as death, passion fierce as the grave. Its flashes are flashes of fire, a raging flame. And when Solomon dedicated the first temple, and the people saw fire from the Lord descending over it, they instinctively recognized that it represented the Lord’s love for them: When all the people of Israel saw the fire come down and the glory of the Lord on the temple, they bowed down on the pavement with their faces to the ground, and worshiped and gave thanks to the Lord, saying, “For he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever.” (2 Chronicles 7:3, italics added) When Jesus Christ baptizes us with the Holy Spirit, it is a baptism with spiritual and divine truth. When Jesus Christ baptizes us with fire, it is a baptism with spiritual and divine love. Having had our outward behavior cleansed with the baptism of water, and our mind cleansed with the spirit of truth, the third baptism is to have our heart cleansed with the baptism of the fire of God’s love. We humans are a mixture of good and evil loves and motives. Some of the things we want are good. We may enjoy doing a kind deed for a fellow human being in need. But some of the things we want are bad. We may enjoy cussing out someone who has crossed us. Perhaps through the power of Christ working in our lives we have been able to reform our behavior so that we no longer cuss people out, lie, steal, and so on. Perhaps we even know in our mind that these things are wrong, and we therefore discipline ourselves not to act on them even when we desperately want to. In the final baptism, the baptism with fire, Jesus Christ cleanses our hearts, meaning our loves, desires, and motives, so that we no longer even want those evil impulses. We no longer have those evil and selfish impulses. Or if we ever do, instead of feeling the old pleasure at the thought of slugging someone who’s insulted us, we find the very thought of doing such a thing intensely distressing and unpleasant. Baptism with fire is the cleansing of our loves, desires, and motives from all evil, selfish, and greedy impulses, and from the pleasure we used to get from nursing and indulging in those evil desires. The intense process of purification by fire This does not happen easily. It is no accident that “trial by fire” is a process of intense heat, the burning off of chaff, and the purging of dross from metal ores in the process of refining them with intense heat: His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire. (Luke 3:17) And: See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me, and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple. The messenger of the covenant in whom you delight—indeed, he is coming, says the Lord of hosts. But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears? For he is like a refiner’s fire and like fullers’ soap; he will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the descendants of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, until they present offerings to the Lord in righteousness. (Malachi 3:1-3) This cleansing of the heart in the fire of divine love does not happen without the burning off of all our selfish and greedy thoughts and desires in the heated crucible of hard life experience. As those selfish and greedy thoughts of ours force their way out into harsh words and wrong actions, the impure parts of ourselves are incinerated by “burning coals being heaped upon us” (see Proverbs 25:21-22; Romans 12:19-21), meaning the knowledge and awareness of our own selfishness and greed, and the painful experience of the terribly destructive words and actions that they lead us to say and do. As we experience these things, the evil desires of our hearts are purged from us, until we no longer have any desire to say and do those evil and destructive things, and take no pleasure in them whatever, but find them horrifying and disgusting. This is the “baptism with fire” with which Jesus will baptize us if we follow him to the end, fighting the good fight, finishing the race, and keeping the faith (2 Timothy 4:7). Summary As we go through this full process of being born again by being baptized with water, the Holy Spirit, and fire, Jesus Christ cleanses our actions, our thoughts, and our desires. In other words, he cleanses us completely, from head to toe and from the outside in. This process continues throughout our lifetime here on earth. And since even “the heavens are not clean in God’s sight” (Job 15:15), we continue to be purified and perfected in heaven to all eternity. The compact answer to the question, then, covering all three forms of baptism, is this: Baptism with water is the cleansing of our outward speech and behavior from evil actions and lies. Baptism with the Holy Spirit is the cleansing of our mind and spirit from falsity and error. Baptism with fire is the cleansing of our heart from evil impulses and desires, and from the pleasure we used to derive from them.

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