

The Four Baptisms

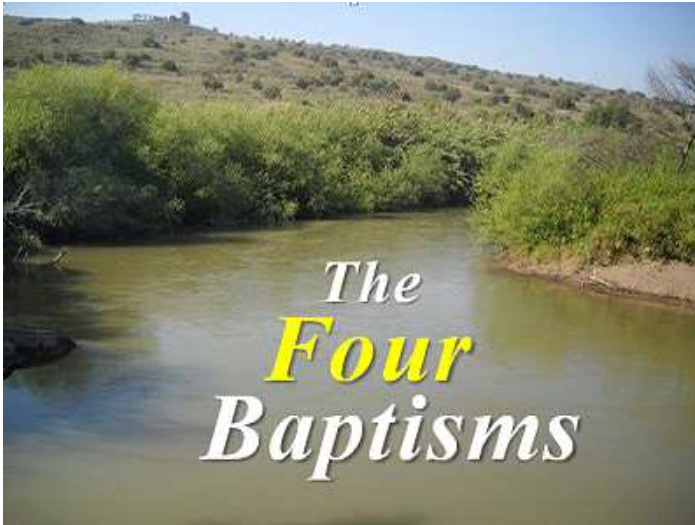
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First Christian Church, Hamilton, Illinois —January 11, 2015

Matthew 3:1-17 NIV

In those days John the Baptist came, preaching in the Desert of Judea and saying, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near." This is he who was spoken of through the prophet Isaiah: "A voice of one calling in the desert, 'Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.'"

John's clothes were made of camel's hair, and he had a leather belt around his waist. His food was locusts and wild honey. People went out to him from Jerusalem and all Judea and the whole region of the Jordan. Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River.



But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to where he was baptizing, he said to them: "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? Produce fruit in keeping with repentance. And do not think you can say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham. The ax is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.

"I baptize you with water for repentance. But after me will come one who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not fit to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor, gathering his wheat into the barn and burning up the chaff with unquenchable fire."

Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to be baptized by John. But John tried to deter him, saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" Jesus replied, "Let it be so now; it is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness." Then John consented.

As soon as Jesus was baptized, he went up out of the water. At that moment heaven was opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and lighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased."

We've just passed through the season of Christmas, celebrating the birth of the Lord Jesus. Often, when speaking of how important this event is for us, preachers will say that Jesus Christ was born to die for our sins, and be raised that we might have eternal life. That's true enough, as far as it goes. But stop and think about it for a moment. If Jesus was born only to die and be raised again, then why did Matthew, Mark, Luke and John bother to tell us what happened in between? Evidently the Gospel writers believed it was important to tell us what Jesus did and said between his birth and his crucifixion. If it wasn't important, why did they go to all that trouble?

The earliest preachers of the church felt the same way. In a sermon Peter gave in Acts, chapter 10, he states, "You know the word which he sent to Israel, preaching good news of peace by Jesus Christ (he is Lord of all), the word which was proclaimed throughout all Judea, beginning from Galilee after the baptism which John preached: how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power; how he went about doing good and healing all that were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him" (Acts 10:36-38).

So part of our experience of the Christian life is to know *the whole story of Jesus* — not only his death on the cross and his resurrection from the dead, but also what Jesus did during his earthly ministry. The events of

Jesus' life, and what he taught about living in the kingdom of God, and how he healed people and performed mighty works and signs — what we call "miracles" today — all of these things are part of the Gospel, too. And we need to pay attention to them, because they have significance for our experience of Jesus today. We're now in that part of the church year traditionally called Epiphany, "revelation" or "manifestation." During this season we're considering some of those Gospel events through which the glory of our Lord was first revealed, so that we might better come to understand *who Jesus is* as the Messiah, the anointed One of God.

Today we'll take up one of the first Gospel events that reveal the true identity, and mission, of the man from Nazareth. This is the account of Jesus' baptism in the River Jordan. We'll begin with that, but we'll also discuss what it means for you and me to "follow the Lord in baptism." And we'll also be thinking of two other kinds of baptism mentioned in the Gospels that we don't always talk about. So our teaching today is called "The Four Baptisms."



Let's begin, then, by looking at Jesus' baptism by John in the River Jordan. John, as the Gospels tell us, had been baptizing people as a symbol of their repentance of sin and turning to God. Baptism, or immersion in a pool of water, was something the Jews had been practicing already whenever a Gentile would convert to Judaism. John was "breaking the rules" because he was baptizing people who were already Jews. There hadn't been a recognized prophet for hundreds of years, and now comes this weird guy wearing clothing made from camel's hair and eating locusts and wild honey, calling people to confess their sin and return to the Lord. Yes, he was weird, but people were getting the message; the Gospels tell us that even some of the Jewish teachers and priests were coming to be baptized. John's preaching was a sign that God is on the move again in the life of his people, and his baptism was a way of preparing for the coming of the Lord.



But now, here comes Jesus asking to be baptized, and Matthew tells us that John has a little trouble with that. John understands that Jesus is the one God has chosen to redeem his people, the one who "will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire." He thinks *Jesus* ought to baptize *him* instead! But Jesus insists: "It's the right thing to do," he says. So John goes through with it.

But what happens next? This is where the baptism of Jesus becomes an Epiphany, a manifestation of who he really is. When Jesus is baptized, the Holy Spirit comes upon him and he hears God speaking to him in a special way: "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased." That's almost a quote from Psalm 2, "You are my son, today I have begotten you." That

Psalm speaks of the Lord's choice of his "anointed one," or *Messiah*. So Jesus' baptism is a Messianic baptism. It's a declaration that he's the one who has come to deliver God's people from their enslavement to sin — just as the Lord told Joseph in a dream, "You shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins."

Friends, this is important. If Jesus isn't who the Gospels say he is — the Son of God, the Messiah of Israel — then nothing else that happens to him matters. Even his death on Calvary and his resurrection from the dead wouldn't really matter, because the important thing is *who* was crucified and *who* was raised from the dead — which is what the Gospel record of his life and ministry is telling us. The Romans crucified thousands who had the nerve to revolt against their oppressive rule. And the Bible tells of several who were raised from death, like the son of the Shunammite woman whom Elisha raised, or Lazarus whom Jesus called forth from the tomb, or Dorcas who came back to life at the command of Peter. But the Gospels want us to understand that the man who died on Calvary's cross and then defeated death, appearing again to his disciples in Jerusalem and Galilee, was a particular man with a particular message and mission — the message and mission of the Son of God, the one sent to redeem Israel and fulfill God's plan for the emergence of his kingdom on earth. The Gospels, by telling the full story of that man — what he did and said — are filling out what the voice from heaven declares when Jesus is baptized: "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased."



But, in the New Testament, everyone who comes to the Lord Jesus and acknowledges that He is Lord and Messiah also gets baptized. What does it mean for you and me, like Christians through the ages, to "follow the Lord in baptism?" The baptism of Jesus was a baptism into Messiahship, but that's not how you and I see our baptism, is it? If we do, we're in big trouble! There's only one Messiah, the Lord Jesus Christ; as Peter says in Acts 4:12, "There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved." Some people today may think they're their own saviors, because that's what our culture encourages. But trying to be your own Messiah is a sure-fire formula for messing up your life, and the lives of others. When we "follow the Lord in baptism," we're following his action and his obedience, but our baptism doesn't mean exactly what his meant. What does it mean?

For an answer, we need to turn to the words of the Apostle Paul in Romans 6:

Don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life.

If we have been united with him like this in his death, we will certainly also be united with him in his resurrection. For we know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves to sin — because anyone who has died has been freed from sin. Now if we died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him (*Romans 6:3-8*).

So, when we're baptized as believers in Christ, it's a way of saying that we've been incorporated into Jesus. We've been joined with him in his death and resurrection. We've died to our old self and we've come to life again as a member of the body of Christ. In other words, when we take this step we enter a new world, a world in which the motivation or "spark" of our life comes not from ourselves but from Christ, through his Holy

Spirit. As Paul says, "If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!" (2 Corinthians 5:17).

At this point you might be saying, "That's all very well and good, Dr. Leonard, but I've known plenty of baptized Christians who certainly didn't live out the meaning of their baptism. They're just like they were before, and I struggle with my old self too." In response, I would point out that this isn't a new issue; the apostle Paul, in the New Testament, surely had to deal with Christians who weren't living out that dying and rising with Christ in their behavior. And his answer was this:



Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things. For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God (*Colossians 3:1-3*).

In other words, quit living like somebody you're not, and live like the person you really are. Baptism isn't just something *we* do, it's also something *God* does. Our baptism makes a difference in us, because it's a sign of God's grace. When we were baptized we died with Christ, and our true life is with him in his heavenly glory. By his Spirit we have the power to take that which is rightfully ours, and live the resurrection life. God has put that money into our bank account, and baptism is our passbook or withdrawal slip. If we don't use it, we're the losers — but it's always there for us. So if you ever don't feel good enough to be called a Christian, if you ever doubt that you belong to God, just say to yourself: "*I've been baptized!*" So I know the Spirit of God will enable me to be who I'm supposed to be."

The waters of baptism symbolize the cleansing of God's Holy Spirit, the Giver of life. It's the practice of this congregation to baptize by immersion, under water, and we have a facility here for that purpose. Immersion is an important symbol, because in the Bible water can also symbolize death and separation from God. To rise out of the waters of baptism is emblematic of our resurrection life in Christ. But some churches baptize in other ways. I would just like to say that how much water is used shouldn't be a cause for division between Christian groups. What's important isn't how deep the water is, but how deep is the *repentance and faith* of the believer who's baptized, and how deep is the *love of God* for those who come to him, desiring to become members of his Son.

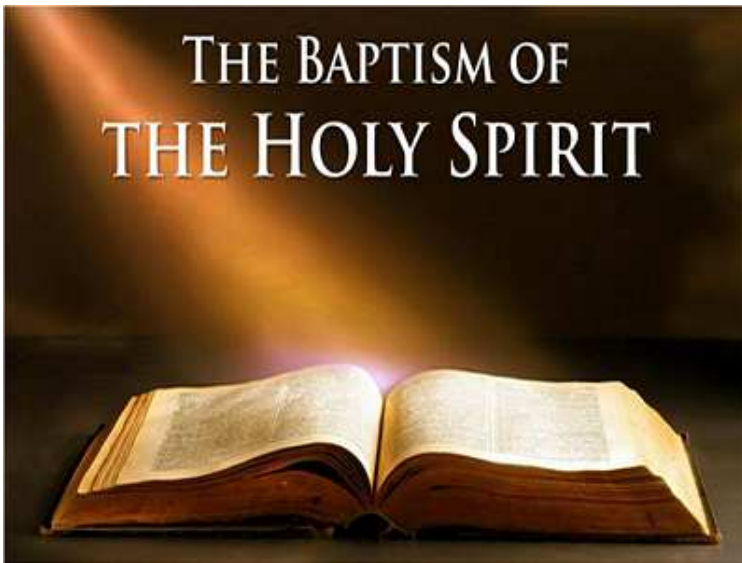
I said I would speak about four baptisms, and I've covered just two: Jesus' baptism into his Messianic calling, and our baptism into Jesus. But the New Testament mentions two other baptisms. In the same passage we read about Jesus' baptism, John the Baptist declares, "He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire." So there is, thirdly, the baptism with the Holy Spirit and, fourthly, the "baptism of fire." What kind of baptisms are these?

First, we need to understand that the word "baptism" comes from a Greek word that means "to dip"; it was used by people who dyed cloth in various colors. Being baptized means we "die" into the death of Jesus. But it



also means we get “died” the color of Jesus, so we can be recognized as members of his family. I think that’s what it means to have the baptism of the Holy Spirit. Now, many people say that we get baptized in the Holy Spirit when we get baptized in water, so the baptism in the Holy Spirit isn’t really a separate baptism. We don’t have to settle that question in order to recognize that some baptized Christians haven’t ever worked out what their baptism means, in terms of being “died the color of Jesus” and living a victorious and joyful life. I’ve met some Christians who acted as if they’d been baptized in lemon juice, and clearly something was missing from their life and testimony.

So being baptized with the Holy Spirit is a way of expressing the blessing of God in our life. As the Apostle Paul says, “Do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery; but be filled with the Spirit, addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with all your heart,



always and for everything giving thanks in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ to God the Father” (Ephesians 5:18-20). The baptism in the Holy Spirit is what happens when we take on the richness that flows from the life of God into ours — not in a selfish way, but in a way that lets us share it with others. For example, it’s hard to convey the joy of knowing the Lord to other people if you’re weighed down with depression yourself. We can’t give for the work of God’s kingdom, or provide financial help for people in need, if we’re broke. Praying for the sick, and ministering healing to others, is hindered if we’re cumbered by illness ourselves. It isn’t easy to encourage others to develop their skills and possibilities if we’re not exercising whatever ministry gift he’s given us.

So the Lord fills us with his own life, his Holy Spirit, so that we can do whatever he’s called us to do to be a blessing to other people. The infilling of the Spirit is the release of Jesus’ resurrection power in our life that enables us to witness to him more effectively, sustain a life style consistent with biblical principles, and overflow with the praises of God and a joyful attitude, just like Paul said. All of this requires that you and I *let go of ourselves* and latch onto God as the “prime mover” of our life. However that release occurs for you, that’s your baptism in the Holy Spirit. Whether that’s an outflow from our baptism into Jesus, or something the Lord specifically does for us at a later point, isn’t important. What’s important is that we learn to open ourselves up to the full working of God in our life, so the baptism in the Holy Spirit — that third baptism — becomes a reality for us.

But now let’s look at that fourth baptism I mentioned. John the Baptist said that Jesus would baptize us “with the Holy Spirit and with fire.” Perhaps that’s a reference to the “tongues of fire” that appeared on the day of Pentecost, when the apostles were “filled with the Holy Spirit” (Acts 2:3), but I’m going to take it in a different sense because of what Jesus says in Luke 12:50-51: “I have a baptism to be baptized with; and how I am constrained until it is accomplished! Do you think that I have come to give peace on earth? No, I tell you, but rather division” (Luke 12:50-51 RSV). That sounds kind of ominous, doesn’t it? What did Jesus mean by it?

The Gospels make it clear that Jesus understood that those who couldn’t accept his message about the emerging kingdom of God would oppose him. He saw that he would have to undergo rejection and persecution, even death on the cross, in order to accomplish what his Father has sent him to do. As Isaiah had predicted centuries earlier, the Servant of the Lord would be “cut off out of the land of the living, stricken for

the transgression of [his] people" (Isaiah 53: 8). God called Jesus, as Messiah, to suffer to atone for our sins and bring us back into the family of God. And that meant he had to undergo what we might call a "baptism of fire."

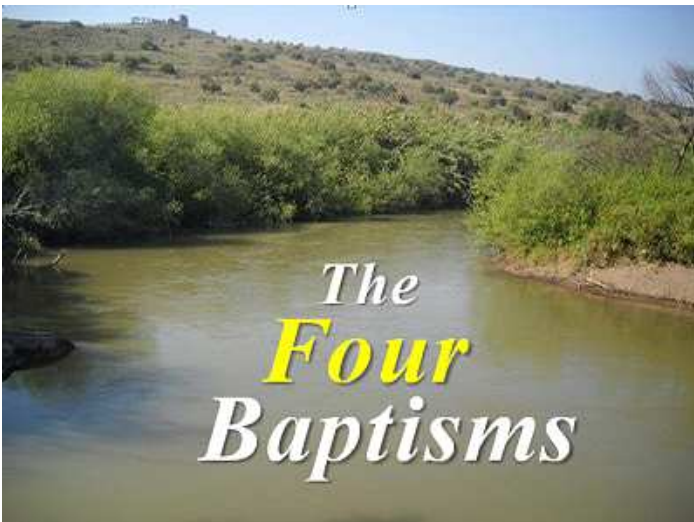
The Christian faith is under attack today, both in this nation and around the world. Christians in Iraq are facing persecution from barbarous Islamists. Here, we encounter opposition from militant atheists and others who despise the precepts of Scripture. You and I may not be required to undergo the kind of "baptism by fire" some Christians are facing. We might not have to "take up our cross" in the same way. But we might have to deal with our own version of the "baptism of fire" — some experience or event that shakes us up, and causes us to reach out to God in a new and more intense way because we know he is our only hope.

From my earliest days as a believer, I couldn't help but notice that many committed Christians I knew had confronted some major problem in life, and it was through this trial that they turned to the Lord. It may have been a serious illness, or the breakup of a marriage, or difficulties with a family member, or a financial reversal, or the loss of a career, or the passing of a loved one, or an addiction to alcohol or drugs. Whatever that "baptism of fire" was, it was a testing of their faith that brought them into a new dependence on the power of Christ in their life. Or, in some cases, the crisis was what God used to bring them to faith in the first place, because they found they had nowhere to turn but to him. This might be the case for you as well, as it certainly was for me. There's no "cookie cutter" formula for this; each of us has dealt with this "baptism by



fire" in his own way. But we've found the Lord faithful despite our problems, and our faith has grown stronger as a result.

Four baptisms, then: The Messianic baptism of Jesus, our baptism into him, our baptism in the Holy Spirit, and the "baptism of fire" we may have to undergo. Do you hear Christ calling to you today, perhaps through your personal "baptism of fire," to renew your commitment to the Lord and his purposes for you? If so, come to his table this morning and join in celebrating what Jesus has done to make us one with him and fill us with his life. Meet him here, as we share the bread and the cup, the symbols of his presence with us.



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