

# Luke

*Baptism of Fire*  
*Luke 3:15-20*

*With Study Questions*

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Now as the people were in expectation, and all reasoned in their hearts about John, whether he was the Christ *or not*, <sup>16</sup> John answered, saying to all, "I indeed baptize you with water; but One mightier than I is coming, whose sandal strap I am not worthy to loose. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. <sup>17</sup> His winnowing fan *is* in His hand, and He will thoroughly clean out His threshing floor, and gather the wheat into His barn; but the chaff He will burn with unquenchable fire." <sup>18</sup> And with many other exhortations he preached to the people. <sup>19</sup> But Herod the tetrarch, being rebuked by him concerning Herodias, his brother Philip's wife, and for all the evils which Herod had done, <sup>20</sup> also added this, above all, that he shut John up in prison (Luke 3:15-20).

## **Introduction**

I've been asked to be part of a podcast in a couple of weeks, titled *Where Are You With God?* The answer to that question changes everything in our lives. Every decision, all comfort, all morality, all of our goals, ambitions, the way we approach difficulties and successes, where we go and refuse to go when it comes to our spiritual, psychological and emotional strength, where we go for answers - everything - will be an entirely different color based upon how that question is answered.

We enter this portion of Scripture with the backdrop of John removing all false answers to that question. There is no true peace with God merely based upon our blood or ancestry (Luke 3:8; John 1:13). There is no true peace with God apart from, at some level, the evidence of a changed life (Luke 3:10-14). There is no true peace with God found merely through external ordinances like baptism or the Lord's Table (Luke 3:7). Simply put, a redeemed heart changes everything. These things can be observed in others, but we are also called to examine it in ourselves.

**Examine yourselves, to see whether you are in the faith (2 Corinthians 13:5).**

Having removed many of the objects of false assurance, of deceptive means of peace, John will now begin to seek to place the eyes of his listeners hearts upon the One, the only One, through whom peace with God can be found. He begins by making sure no one is confused about his own roll in this.

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### **Knowing Your Place**

John was, little doubt, a fiery teacher. Some consider John to be a transitional figure in the Bible between the Old and New Covenants. Jesus, of course, had some very affirming words about John (Matthew 11:11) but John was adamant about knowing his place.

In this passage we see the people wondering if John is the promised Christ-the Messiah. Will peace with God be wrapped up in John? John makes it abundantly clear that he is not the one. John did not view himself as working side-by-side with Christ. He presents himself as unworthy to loosen a sandal strap of Jesus. One might see an image of John on his knees before Christ, with the honor of loosening His sandal strap, only to realize he is unworthy even of that!

There is a tricky line here for ministers. In one respect we need to work toward our own expendability. John would be an example of one who was taken out of the picture quite rapidly (Mark 6:25). Yet, at the same time, pastors are called to be paternal, caring, engaged and not merely professors.

I recall one of my closest pastor friends asking me what I do in order to avoid our church being built upon my own personality. I jokingly said, "I work hard at being grumpy and disagreeable, like you." He wasn't that way, of course. A pastor should be as loving and engaged with his congregation as possible. We should not view John's strong words as unloving.

At the same time, the congregation should ever be informed that the church is not built upon the pastor. I find it disturbing when churches crumble due to some moral failure of the pastor. It means it was not built

upon a proper foundation in the first place. There should ever be a strong, undeniable, impression that your church that it is built upon Christ.

John describes Jesus as “**One mightier**” *ischyroteros* than he. There are many adjectives for Jesus. Might and power must not be left out. The context of John’s preaching pointed to the power of Christ. That will culminate with a reference to a “**winnowing fan**,” which we will touch on in a moment. But John the baptizer (the actual term), who baptized with water, will first speak of a different type of baptism that will come through Christ.

## Baptisms

Jesus “**will baptize with the Holy Spirit and Fire.**” Naturally, there is a great deal of speculation as to what this/these baptism(s) are<sup>1</sup>. Luke will later record the Holy Spirit being poured out upon the church at Pentecost (Acts 2). And, along with this, there were “**divided tongues as of fire**” (Acts 2:3).

The baptism of the Holy Spirit may well be speaking of the revelation of God’s word that He would provide in the New Covenant. Of the many new things in the New Covenant, one is your access to the full word of God. Old Covenant Christians did not walk about with bound copies of Genesis through Malachi. And, of course, they didn’t have Matthew through Revelation at all.

Our lack of willingness to access what the Spirit has provided in the Scriptures may be a primary cause of the feckless Christianity dominating our current era. When your pastor preaches, he should be helping you more firmly grasp Scriptures that you are already familiar with, rather than words with which you are entirely unacquainted.

The baptism of fire is a bit more confusing to commentators. Fire can speak of refinement (1 Peter 1:7) or judgment (Matthew 25:41). Based upon the verses that follow, it may include both. Truly, “**our God is a consuming fire**” (Hebrews 12:29). But for those clothed in Christ, they can approach God and not be consumed. But God is in the business of removing our dross, usually a painful process. It is a healthy enterprise for us to ask ourselves, when God brings His baptism of fire and removes the rubbish from our lives, will there be anything left?

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<sup>1</sup> Keeping in mind that the word ‘baptism’ can metaphorically refer to being overtaken by something or identified with something.

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### **Imminent Winnowing**

The language in this passage, **“His winnowing fan is in His hand,”** along with the previous, **“even now the ax is laid to the root of the trees” (Luke 3:9)** has undeniable imminence attached to it. Something was about to happen. The near immediate event which was an outward demonstration of that which John was preaching, Jesus would preach on later.

Recorded three gospels (Matthew, Mark and Luke), Jesus would preach on the destruction of the temple, which would have been emblematic of the judgment of Jerusalem. Jesus, preaching in regard to the chief priests and Pharisees, taught,

**Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people producing its fruits (Matthew 21:43).**

The kingdom of God would no longer be administrated through Israel but through the church. We haven't time to dig deeply into this, but the church should heed Paul's warning in Romans.

**Then you will say, “Branches were broken off so that I might be grafted in.”<sup>20</sup> That is true. They were broken off because of their unbelief, but you stand fast through faith. So do not become proud, but fear.<sup>21</sup> For if God did not spare the natural branches, neither will he spare you (Romans 11:19-21).**

In the same way Israel was broken off due to unbelief, churches to this day can be broken off, if they don't remain faithful. Sadly, this happens with regularity.

### **Eternal Peace or Unquenchable Fire?**

Even though there was an imminence to which John was referring, the consequences, the blessing or curse, of this would be eternal. The idea of Judgment Day has fallen upon hard times, much to our disbenefit. We should not live our lives as if there will be no reckoning. To be **“wheat”** in God’s **“barn”** is the apex of glory and blessedness. The death of His children is **“precious in the sight of the Lord”** (Psalm 116:15). Luke will later write of the **“poor man...carried by the angels to Abraham’s side”** (Luke 16:22). It is recorded as **“paradise”** (Luke 23:43).

But there is a fearful expectation for those who willfully and continually resist that which they know to be true (Romans 1:18, 19). It is a judgment where the **“worm does not die and the fire is not quenched”** (Mark 9:48). The shame is everlasting (Daniel 12:2) and there is no rest day or night (Revelation 14:9-11).

The denial of God, the rejection of God, the resisting of the truth of Christ is a serious and eternal offense. It is my prayer that such a disposition is not found in any of you. And if I may, briefly, answer a common criticism. Christians do not seek to live a life of obedient faithfulness in order to pacify God and escape judgment. Christians seek to be obedient/faithful, because Christ has satisfied the judgment of God on our behalf.

## **Preacher**

Luke then records that John offered **“many other exhortations”** *parakalon* meaning that he came along side for the purpose of encouragement and **“he preached to the people,”** that is, he evangelized. Let us not lose sight that the means by which God redeems souls, is through the word preached. The passage then takes a bit of an odd turn, of which we will only briefly speak.

**But Herod the tetrarch, being rebuked by him concerning Herodias, his brother Philip’s wife, and for all the evils which Herod had done,<sup>20</sup> also added this, above all, that he shut John up in prison (Luke 3:19, 20).**

## **The Full Counsel**

I guess no one told John that he should not address the behavior of politicians in his sermons! Herod was a governor (tetrarch governs the fourth of a region), and he was involved in what amounted to be an incestuous

(Leviticus 18:16) and adulterous (Romans 7:2, 3) marriage. That John would not remain silent about this, cost him his head (Mark 6:14-29).

Don't be confused, generally speaking, those hostile to the gospel will allow you your quiet times, your prayer meetings, even your preaching of salvation found in Christ. Death comes to those who preach that there is a King of above whoever the current king, or tyrant, or senate, or congress, or court or congress is in their position of power. Interestingly, the recent Alabama court ruling regarding the protection of Embryo's, was called "terrifying" because they used a Bible verse in making their decision!

In a recent presbytery, a candidate was asked if he intended to preach on politics. The answer the questioner was looking for was 'no.' The answer given satisfied the questioner. But what if the text demands it? What if the text of Scripture address current political issues? Don't misunderstand, I am not suggesting that the pulpit become a mere political tool. At the same time, there should be nothing forbidden if the Scriptures demand it. John was addressing a major infraction happening in his era.

I fear many Reformed pastors are under the impression that the only message of Scripture is justification by faith alone. Truly, it is the central message. It is the critical message. It is the message that if your church doesn't preach it, is not a church. But it is not the only message.

A common mantra among many of my fellow pastors in their conviction to avoid addressing political or cultural issues is 'Where the Scriptures speak, we speak, where the Scriptures are silent, we remain silent.' And, certainly, we should not add to the Scriptures things not written in them. But are the Scriptures really silent about anything? The Westminster Confession, Chapter One, Of the Scriptures, says it well:

**The whole counsel of God concerning all things necessary for his own glory, man's salvation, faith *and life*, is either expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture (*italics mine*).**

If we have the wisdom to find it, the Scriptures are silent on nothing.

## Questions for Study

1. How is true peace with God found? What are some false ways people cling to (page 2)?
2. Explain how John responded when people thought he might be the Christ. How does this affect today's churches and pastors (pages 3, 4)?
3. What does it mean that Jesus will baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire (page 4)?
4. Does the breaking off of Israel in the New Covenant give a message to today's churches? Explain (page 5).
5. What happens on Judgment Day? How can you know it will be a blessing to you (pages 5, 6)?
6. Is it appropriate for preachers to address politics or the behavior of politicians? How can this be overdone (pages 6, 7)?