

# The Baptism of Our Lord

## GREAT EXPECTATIONS, GREATER REVELATIONS

Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

### The Baptism of Our Lord

### Analysis by Kris Wright

15As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, 16John 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. 17His 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."

21Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, 22and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

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## DIAGNOSIS: Wrong Expectations

**Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem)** : *Expecting the Wrong Baptism*

When the people went out to meet John at the Jordan what baptism were they expecting? Or, better, what were they expecting from his baptism? Perhaps they went for some of the same reasons newcomers arrive at our churches asking for baptism: baptism as

insurance, baptism as ritual, baptism to please the grandparents. John's audience came to find out what they needed to do to save themselves from the wrath of God (vv. 10, 12, 14). But John's baptism couldn't fulfill their expectations. It was just a beginning, a preparation, a baptism for repentance. It was only water.

**Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : *Expecting the Wrong Messiah***

"The people were questioning in their hearts whether John might be the Messiah" (v. 15). He seemed to fit their idea of an Old Testament Messiah, who would inaugurate the day of the Lord and sort out the righteous from the unrighteous. The "righteous" were confident in the idea of this sorting, since they relied on the faith of their fathers to save them: "We have Abraham as our father" (v. 8). But could they trust their heritage to make them right with God?

**Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : *Unexpectedly Unworthy***

Imagine the people's surprise when John not only denies that he is the Messiah, but announces that even he is unworthy, inadequate, to "untie the sandals" of the coming One. And if John is unworthy, then who can escape the wrath of God? If the right heritage (Jewish, Lutheran, Baptist, Catholic) is inadequate, if John's baptism is inadequate, if good works are inadequate, who can save themselves? The answer, of course, is no one: "All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God" (Rom 3:12). The Lord comes with wind and unquenchable fire to destroy the unworthy and inadequate.

## **PROGNOSIS: Great Revelations**

**Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : *The Visible Sign and the Voice***

But even this bad news can be transformed by the more powerful

One who comes. “With many other exhortations [John] proclaimed the good news to the people” (v. 18). How can this be? Jesus comes to John to be baptized with water, and thus identifies himself with “all the people” (v. 21) who were also baptized. (The genealogy that immediately follows these verses reinforces this connection with “all the people.”) After Jesus’ baptism comes the visible sign; as he was praying the heaven opened and the Holy Spirit visibly descended on him. Is this dove reminiscent of the Noah story where the dove brings an olive branch as proof of new life, a new beginning? Is this a sign to say, “In this One is new life”? The voice from heaven confirms Jesus as Son of God, the Beloved, with whom God is well-pleased. Jesus is now the bridge, the connection between his Father and all the people. Even before the cross, in his baptism Jesus already begins to receive the winnowing, and endure the unquenchable fire, on behalf of those who share his baptism.

**Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) : *Baptism with Holy Spirit and Fire***

In Jesus, the Spirit’s work (even the Spirit’s purifying fire) become holy—set apart for God’s gracious purposes. Those who are baptized in Jesus are baptized by his Spirit and the fire of his love. He sanctifies our lives by blowing away the chaff of our sin and refining our lives with his Holy Spirit. As Eugene Peterson puts it in *The Message*: “He will ignite the kingdom life, a fire, the Holy Spirit within you...He’s going to clean house—make a clean sweep of your lives. He’ll place everything true in its proper place before God; everything false he’ll put out with the trash to be burned.” Thus freed, purified, made worthy, we are no longer “children of vipers” (v. 7) but children of God. As we confess in the Lutheran baptismal liturgy: “We are born children of a fallen humanity, but by water and the Holy Spirit we are reborn children of God” (Holy Baptism, Evangelical Lutheran Worship). In his baptism, Jesus

takes on the winnowing and fire we deserve, and in exchange he gives the gift of faith, transforming us from the inside out. And to this generous exchange we say a resounding “Amen!” And we are “filled with expectation” (v. 15) about what Christ will do in and with us next.

**Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : *Living the Well-Pleasing Life***

Now freed from our “captivity to sin,” sanctified, made worthy, we are free to live out our baptism in the mercy of God. We are free to do our good works not to save ourselves from the wrath of God, but in response to already being saved. We are also beloved of our Father, and we live as God’s people anointed with Spirit and fire to be light, food, and healing among the nations.