

The Promise of a Baptism of Fire

by William Arthur

The sermon explores the promise of a baptism of fire, which is a manifestation of God's power and presence, and how it is fulfilled through the ascension of Jesus and the sending of the Holy Spirit.

Scripture: John 14:16

Topics: "Holy Spirit", "Repentance"

Description

William Arthur preaches about John the Baptist's call to repentance and the anticipation of the Messiah's arrival, emphasizing the baptism of the Holy Ghost and fire as a symbol of new manifestations of God's power and presence. He discusses the disciples' journey with Jesus, the promise of the Holy Spirit, and the commission to spread the gospel to all nations. The sermon culminates in Jesus' ascension, showcasing his kingship over heaven and earth, and the assurance of his return for judgment.

Transcript

WHEN John the Baptist was going round Judea, shaking the hearts of the people with a call to repent, they said: "Surely this must be the Messiah for whom we have waited so long." "No," said the strong-spoken man, "I am not the Christ (John i. 20); but One mightier than I cometh, the latchet of whose shoes I am not worthy to unloose: he shall baptize you with the Holy Ghost and with fire." (Luke iii. 16.)

This last expression might have conveyed some idea of material burning to any people but Jews; but in their minds it would awaken other thoughts. It would recall the scenes when their father Abraham asked Him who promised that he should inherit the land wherein he was a stranger: "Lord, whereby shall I know that I shall inherit it?" The answer came thus: He was standing under the open sky at night, watching by cloven sacrifices, when "behold a smoking furnace and a burning lamp that passed between those pieces" of the victims. (Genesis xv. 17.) It would recall the fire which Moses saw in the bush, which shone and awed and hallowed even the wilderness, but did not consume; the fire which came in the day of Israel's deliverance, as a light on their way, and continued with them throughout the desert journey; the fire which descended on the tabernacle in the day in which it was reared up, and abode upon it continually, which shone in the Shekinah, which touched the lips of Isaiah, which flamed in the visions of Ezekiel, and which was yet again promised to Zion, not only in her public but in her family shrines, when "the Lord will create upon every dwelling place of Mount Zion, and upon all her assemblies, a cloud and smoke by day, and the shining of a flaming fire by night."

In the promise of a baptism of fire they would at once recognize the approach of new manifestations of the power and presence of God; for that was ever the purport of this appearance in "the days of the right hand of the Most High."

Among the multitude who flocked to John came one strange Man, whom he did not altogether know; yet he knew that he was full of grace and wisdom, and in favor with God and man. He felt that himself rather needed to be baptized of one so pure than to baptize him; but he waived his feeling, and fulfilled his ministry. As they returned from the water side, the heavens opened; a bodily shape, as of a dove, came down and rested on the stranger. At the same time a voice from the excellent glory said: "This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased: hear ye him."

John said: "I knew him not; but He that sent me to baptize with water, the same said unto me, Upon whom thou shalt see the Spirit descending, and remaining on him, the same is he which baptizeth with the Holy Ghost." Therefore, when he saw him walking, he pointed his own disciples to him, and said that this was He. They heard the word and pondered. The next day again John, seeing him at a distance, said: "Behold the Lamb of God!" Now, two of his followers went after the stranger, to seek at his hand the baptism which John could not give--the baptism of fire. They were joined by others. For months, for years, they companied with him. They saw his life--a life as of the Only Begotten Son of God. They heard his words--such words as "never man spake." They saw his works--signs and wonders and great miracles, before all the people. Yet they received not the baptism of fire!

He began to speak frequently of his departure from them, but his mode of describing it was strange. He was to leave them, and yet not to forsake them; to go away, and yet to be with them; to go, and yet to come to them. They were to be deprived of him, their Head, yet orphans they should not be. Another was to come, yet not another--a Comforter from the Father, from himself, whom, not as in his case, the world could neither know nor see, but whom they should know, though they could not see. (John xiv. 17.) His own presence with them was a privilege which no tongue could worthily tell. Blessed were their eyes for what they saw and their ears for what they heard. Better still than even this was to be the presence of the Holy Ghost, who would follow him as he had followed John.

"I tell you the truth," he said when about to utter what was hard to believe; "I tell you the truth: It is expedient for you that I go away." How could it be expedient? Would they not be losers to an extent which no man could reckon? The light of his countenance, the blessing of his words, the purity of his presence, the influence of his example--all to be removed. And this expedient for them! "It is expedient for you that I go away; for if I go not away, the Comforter will not come unto you." Well, but would they not be better with himself than with the Comforter? No; just the contrary. They would be better with the Comforter. He would lead them into all truth; whereas now they are constantly misapplying the plain words of Christ. He would bring all things to their remembrance; whereas now they often forget in a day or two the most remarkable teaching, or the most amazing miracles. He would take the things of Christ, the things of the Father, and reveal them unto them; whereas now they constantly misapprehended his relation to the Father, and that of the Father to him--misapprehended his person, his mission, and his kingdom. Again, he would convince the world of sin, of righteousness, and of judgment to come; and this is not as one teacher limited by a local personality, but as a Spirit diffused abroad throughout the earth. And he would abide with them forever, not for "a little while." Whatever, therefore, Christ's personal presence and teaching had been to them, the presence of the Spirit would be more.

Having thus strongly preoccupied their minds with the hope of a greater joy than even his own countenance, the Master laid down his life. Stunned, dispersed, and desolate, they felt themselves orphans indeed. Their Master ignominiously executed, and neither the word of John nor his own word fulfilled--no Comforter, no baptism, no fire! Soon he reappeared, and, as they were met together for the first time since his death, once more stood in the midst of them. He breathed upon them, and said: "Receive ye the Holy Ghost." With that word, doubtless, both peace and power were given; yet it was not the baptism of fire. During forty days he conversed with them on the things pertaining to the kingdom of God, assigning to them the work of proclaiming and establishing that kingdom to the ends of the earth. One injunction, however, he laid upon them which seemed to defer the effect of others: they were to go into all the world, yet not at once, or unconditionally. "Tarry ye in the city of Jerusalem till ye be indued with power from on high." Apparently more ready to interpret "power" as referring to the hopes of their nation than to the kingdom of grace, they asked: "Lord, wilt thou at this time restore again the kingdom to Israel?" (Acts i. 6.)

He had said nothing of a kingdom for Israel, or in Israel. His speech had been on a higher theme, and of a wider field--namely, "that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in his name among all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. And we are witnesses of these things." Such, in various forms, are the words we find him uttering concerning his kingdom during these forty days. When, therefore, they asked if he would at this time restore again the kingdom to Israel, he shortly turned aside their curiosity. What the Father's designs were as to Israel nationally, what the times when they might again be a kingdom, were points not for them. They had better work, and nearer at hand. "It is not for you to know the times or the seasons, which the Father hath put in his own power." (Acts i. 7.) "But," he continued, passing at once from curious questions about the future of Israel, and unfulfilled prophecy, to his own grand kingdom, "But ye shall receive power, after that the Holy Ghost is come upon you." What power? of princes or magistrates? Nay, quite another power, for an unearthly work: "And ye shall be witnesses unto me both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth."

In these words he traces the circles in which Christian sympathy and activity should ever run: First, Jerusalem, their chief city; next, Judea, their native land; then Samaria, a neighboring country, inhabited by a race nationally detested by their countrymen; and finally, "the uttermost part of the earth." They were neither to seek distant spheres first nor to confine themselves always at home, but to carry the gospel into all the world as each country could be reached. This was what he had before placed in their view--the filling all the earth with the news of grace, news that repentance and pardon were opened to men by the power of his atonement. We have no hint that he ever spake, during the forty days, of other kingdom, royalty, or reign. Not to rule over cities, not to speculate on the designs of the Father and the destinies of the Jew, but to go into the whole world, tell every creature the story of Christ, was to be their princely work. To found a kingdom not over men's persons, but "within" their souls; a kingdom not of provinces, but of "righteousness, and peace, and joy in the Holy Ghost"; a kingdom to be spread not by the arms of a second Joshua, but by the "witness" of the human voice; a kingdom the power of which would not lie in force or policy, or signs observed in heaven, but in a spiritual power imparted by the Holy Ghost and operating in superhuman utterance of heavenly truth--this was their embassy. For this were they to be indued with power from on high. But when was this power, so long spoken of, to come? Would John's word ever be fulfilled? The Master has not forgotten it. "John truly baptized with water, but ye shall be baptized with the Holy Ghost not many days hence." At length the promise is brought to a point, and its fulfillment near.

Already he had proclaimed himself King, and marked out the ministers and army, the weapon, the extent, the badge of citizenship, the statute law, the royal glory, and the duration of his kingdom. With his disciples around him, standing on a mountain top, heaven above and earth below, he thus proclaimed his kingdom: "All power is given to me in heaven and in earth": here was the King. "Go": here were the ministers and army, an embassy of peace. "Teach": here the weapon, the word of God. "All nations": here the extent. "Baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost": here the badge of citizenship. "Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you": here the statute law. "And, lo, I am with you": here the royal presence and glory of the kingdom. "Alway, unto the end of the world": here its duration. (Matthew xxviii. 19, 20.) Now again he is rising a hill, conversing with those who had heard this proclamation as to their part in the establishment of the kingdom. He has clearly promised that, before many days, the long-looked-for baptism of fire will come. That implies that before many days he will depart; for he ever said that he must first ascend. He has answered, or rather rebuked, their curious inquiry as to Israel; has turned their thoughts again to the descent of the Spirit; and is just telling them that, indued with this new power, they shall bear witness to his glory not only at home but abroad. "To the uttermost part of the earth" is the last word on his lips (Acts i. 8)--a startling word for his peasant auditors, accustomed to limit their range of thought within the Holy Land. But he had already said that all power was given to him "in heaven and in earth." Did not the faith of some disciple reel under the weight of these words?

"In Jerusalem, and in all Judea, and in Samaria, and to the uttermost part of the earth!" This word is on his lips; they are steadily watching him; he lifts his hands, he pronounces his blessing; and in the act (Luke xxiv. 50), lo, his body, which they know "has flesh and bones" like their own, begins to rise! No wing, no hand, no chariot of fire! Upward it moves by its own power; and that single action commands the homage of earth; for our globe has no law so universal and irreversible as that whereby it binds down all ponderous bodies to its surface. Here this law gives way, and thereby the whole mass of the globe yields to the power of Christ. This placid movement of that body, up from the surface of earth into the heights of the sky, is an open act of sovereignty over the highest physical law; whereby Christ "manifested forth his glory," as Lord and Maker of all physical laws. His proclamation of kingship is thus acknowledged by earth with its highest homage. Now the heaven adds its homage, stoops in luminous cloud, and robes him for his enthronement. The everlasting doors lift up their heads. The King of Glory enters in! The First Begotten from the dead, the Prince of the kings of the earth, sits down with the Father on his throne; and from him receives the word: "Thy throne, O God, is forever and ever: a scepter of righteousness is the scepter of thy kingdom!" And again: "Let all the angels of God worship him." Within the veil they worship the Lamb; and down they speed to his followers, and tell them that they need not gaze. As they have seen him go, so shall they see him come, even in the clouds, to judge that world, of which and of its princes he is King. Thus triply is his kingship owned. Earth permits him to rise, heaven bows, the angels add their testimony. All things own him. Unbelief is now impossible. Doubt vanishes away. His word shall not pass unfulfilled. The baptism of fire is at hand.

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