

From Nazareth to the River Jordan: “You Are My Son, the Beloved; with You I Am Well Pleased”

We have arrived at the last chapter of the first volume in this series. While we have not yet met the adult Jesus, we have received many clues about what he will look like. The foreshadowing events of Matthew’s and Luke’s birth narratives set the stage for what we can expect. Luke’s story of the how the boy Jesus began to live into his identity further develops who he will become as a man. Then Mark, in all his bluntness, comes forth with a specific declaration about who,

exactly, Jesus is. Using this technique, Mark compels us to dive into the heart of the good news, where Matthew and Luke have joined him after completing their extended introductions.

Here, we see our synoptic Gospels converge, like so many roads, upon the desert lands and flowing river where John the Baptist is preaching. What will John tell us about this Jesus? How will John be his forerunner? How will we react to John's interpretation of what is occurring?

By the time we get to the end of this chapter, the Gospels' introductory work will be complete. We will encounter the adult Jesus. And, as we come to the end, we will hear the voice of his Heavenly Father, echoing the words of the Psalmist from the distant past, proclaiming the time of God's favor resting on his people, and resonating through the ages, even to our own time.

† MARK 1:7–8 John Preaches about the Coming One, According to Mark

7[John] proclaimed,

"The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. ⁸I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

1. Much attention has been focused on John. Now, John himself points elsewhere. How do you think his redirection of attention is important to the story Mark is telling?
2. John distinguishes baptism by water from baptism by the Holy Spirit. What do you think this distinction means?

We have heard John's mighty proclamation calling his pilgrim audience toward repentance. Now, he shifts direction. John intentionally deflects attention away from himself, and points instead toward the higher purpose God intends for his ministry.

Fortunately, though, with this shift, John does not back down from his potent use of imagery and metaphor to make his points. The descriptions of himself and the "more powerful [one] coming after me" prepare us for a message, and a man, that are above and beyond John. And, given what we know of John already—committed, strong-willed, plain-spoken—his self-effacing words serve to catalyze the change all the more.

To illustrate just how much ground John is conceding to the coming one, Professor Barclay tells how slaves of antiquity had a duty to remove their masters' sandals. The heat and dust of Palestine made this task unpleasant, something John's and Mark's ancient audiences would have known well. By using the image of stooping and untying sandals, John the Baptist—the first prophetic Jewish voice to appear in centuries¹—offers a surprisingly stark comparison between himself and the one who is to follow. Despite the unique role John is playing, he considers himself to be so far beneath the dignity of the "more powerful one" that he shies away even from the role of slave, citing his own unfitness for service.

John's contrasts continue. The baptism he offers pales by comparison to the baptism the coming one offers. John "only" gives water—precious, cleansing, and valuable, but still a natural product widely available in the world. The coming one will baptize with the Holy Spirit.²

To Jews, the Holy Spirit was the wind, breath, and power of God. It brought Truth to God's people and enabled them to understand it. While the concept was not yet as fully developed as it became with the formulations of the Trinity in later centuries, the theological core was present. The power of the Holy Spirit is boundless.

The Old Testament prophet Joel, at chapter 2, verse 28 of his book, assured the people of God's promise:

I will pour out my spirit on all flesh;
your sons and your daughters shall prophesy

The power of the Spirit will infuse the world and become universally accessible. And the "coming one," who will baptize with that power, will bring the presence of God directly to the people, abundantly and gratuitously, without limit.

1. How do you respond to John's announcements about the coming one? How do you respond to the comparisons he makes between the baptisms he gives and the baptisms offered by Jesus?

¹It is not only Christians who have held John the Baptist in high regard. Josephus, the worldly and wary first-century Jewish historian who wrote extensively of his people's struggles (particularly with Rome), speaks of John in laudatory terms, if not always candid ones (See, e.g., Crossan, *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography*, at chapter 2).

²John's use of images like water and Spirit may reflect experience in the Qumran community (see *The New Interpreter's Bible* commentary on Mark, at 532–33). They are further evidence of a connection between John and the Essenes.

2. The Holy Spirit might well be considered the most elusive face of God. Yet, it remains our constant companion. Do these characteristics lead you to a sense of contradiction? Of paradox? Do they transcend definition and description for you?
3. How do you experience the presence of the Spirit in your life? In the lives of those around you, such as your family, neighbors, co-workers, friends, or church community?



† MATTHEW 3:11–12 John Preaches about the Coming One, According to Matthew

"[John said]

"I baptize you with water for repentance, but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. ¹²His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and will gather his wheat into the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire."

1. What do you notice about the similarities and differences between Mark's version and Matthew's? What might these signify?
2. Mark did not use the fire metaphor in his parallel. Do you think Matthew's use of it makes a difference to the meaning of his text?
3. Matthew's John speaks of being unworthy to "carry," rather than "untie," the sandals of the coming one. Is there a reason for this difference? What might it be?

In both Matthew and Luke, we see John the Baptist use fire as a metaphor for judgment. Fire awaits the trees not bearing fruit worthy of repentance (Matt. 3:10; Luke 3:10). Here, when coupled with the Holy Spirit and connected to baptism rather than to destruction, fire carries a different implication. It is, first and foremost, a force that illuminates and purifies.