

***HISTORY OF JOHN THE BAPTIST
PREPARATION FOR BAPTISM
THE MYSTERY OF GODLINESS
A CROWN OF RIGHTEOUSNESS***

**Sunday before Epiphany
December 31, 2023
Revision C**

GOSPEL: John the Baptist's Message: Prepare to be Baptized
Eve of Sunday before Epiphany: Matthew 3:1-11
Sunday before Epiphany: Mark 1:1-8

EPISTLE:
Eve of Sunday before Epiphany: 1 Timothy 3:14-4:5
Knowing the True Church
Sunday before Epiphany: 2 Timothy 4:5-8
Goal: A Crown of Righteousness

In the West, today's Gospel reading from Matthew 3 is also used for the Sunday before Epiphany and sometimes for the Second Sunday in Advent. The Gospel reading from Mark 1 is occasionally also used for the Second Sunday in Advent. The Epistle readings from Timothy are not used in the West as often. When used, a portion of the 1 Timothy reading (3:14-17) is used for the Sunday before Advent and the 2 Timothy reading is used for the 25th Sunday after Pentecost.

The theme for today is one of preparation for baptism, where baptism itself will be the theme of Epiphany. In addressing John's preparation, we will use all four Gospel accounts together to piece together a history of the life of John. The Epistle lessons complement this by addressing three things one needs to know before being baptized: (1) What is one being baptized into? (2) How does one know the true church as opposed to some of the heresies current in the 1st century? (3) What is the reward and what will it cost us?

Gospels: History of John the Baptist

The following account pieces together the life of John the Baptist from references in all four Gospels. To clarify some events in his life, the Gospel accounts are supplemented by historical accounts.

The Birth of John

His Parents:

Zachariah was the Chief Priest of the 8th Lot (Luke 1:5, 1 Chronicles 24:10). This meant he was in charge of the 8th Lot priestly duties for one week, then went home for 23 weeks until his turn came up again. Elizabeth was a cousin of the Virgin Mary. This means John and Jesus were second cousins.

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The Announcement to Zachariah:

While Zachariah was offering incense to the Lord on the Altar of Incense (Exodus 30:1-9) in the Holy Place as part of the morning and evening continual burnt offering (Exodus 29:38-42), the Archangel Gabriel appeared at the right side of the Altar of Incense. This was a very fitting occasion since the incense represented the prayers of the saints (Revelation 5:8). Gabriel announced that Zachariah's and Elizabeth's prayers for a child had been heard, that they would have a son and that his name should be John. Zachariah was puzzled, since he and Elizabeth were already in their 70's (Luke 1:18). However, he shouldn't have been too puzzled since he had witnessed the birth of the Virgin Mary 14 years earlier to Joachim and Anna when they were also in their 70's. Because Zachariah doubted, he was made mute for 9 months. This caused quite a stir when he came out of the Holy Place to offer the Benediction and couldn't talk (Luke 1:21-22).

The Visit by the Virgin Mary:

When Elizabeth was in her 6th month, Gabriel also announced to the Virgin Mary concerning Jesus (Luke 1:26-35) and also told her about the conception of John (Luke 1:36-37). Mary immediately left Galilee for Elizabeth's house in the hill country of Judah (Luke 1:39), a three-day journey. On her arrival, John leaped in Elizabeth's womb as soon as Elizabeth heard

Mary's greeting (Luke 1:41). And Elizabeth prophesied concerning the "mother of my Lord" who had just begun her first month of pregnancy (Luke 1:42-45). Mary, in turn, spoke what we call the Magnificat: "My soul magnifies the Lord and my spirit has rejoiced in God my Savior. For He has regarded the lowly state of His maid servant..." (Luke 1:46-55). The name *Magnificat* comes from the first word of this passage in the Latin translation of the New Testament. Mary remained with Elizabeth for three months, leaving just before the birth of John (Luke 1:56).

John's Birth:

The occasion of John's birth brought great rejoicing among all their neighbors and relatives (Luke 1:58). Since Zachariah was a nationally known public figure, even Herod took note of these events. When it came time to circumcise John on the 8th day, Zachariah's muteness was finally released and he spoke praising God (Luke 1:63-79). Fear came upon all who dwelt around them and they wondered "what kind of child will this be?" (Luke 1:66).

John Growing Up

The Birth of Jesus:

Jesus was born just six months after John. This had a significant effect on John's father Zachariah because it came to be his week to serve as priest in charge of Temple services when the Virgin Mary came for the rites of purification after childbirth (Leviticus 12). This occurred 40 days after Jesus' birth and Zachariah treated Mary different from the other women who had just had babies. Zachariah had Mary stand in the place reserved for virgins where married women had no right to stand. (Zachariah was supported in this position by the midwives that attended Jesus' birth -- that Mary remained a virgin after childbirth.) Thus, Zachariah proclaimed the virgin birth¹. The Pharisees who witnessed this were as much bent out of shape by Zachariah as they were later by Jesus who referred to Himself as The Son of God (John 8:37-42) and as the Great I AM (John 8:58) who spoke to Moses at the burning bush (Exodus 3:14). The Pharisees then went to Herod to plot Zachariah's death.

The Massacre of the Holy Innocents:

John was about 18 months old when the Wise Men arrived. In today's terminology, Herod would be described as seriously mentally ill and he had a number of the members of his own family and his wives' families executed just on the suspicion that they were plotting his overthrow. When the Magi arrived from Persia with an air of royalty and with a small army, Herod came unglued when they said they came to worship the newborn King of the Jews (Matthew 2:1-8). When Herod then found out they double crossed him (Matthew 2:8, 12), he went ballistic and sent his troops out to massacre every boy two years old and under (Matthew 2:16-18).

Jesus had already left for Egypt with Joseph, Mary and Joseph's son James (Matthew 2:13-15). Zachariah, at the same time, sent Elizabeth out into the desert with the toddler John. Herod had suspected that John was the child the Magi were searching for and gave instructions to his troops to show no mercy to anyone. When Zachariah wouldn't tell where John was, the soldiers murdered him right in front of the Temple where he was serving. Zachariah's blood left permanent stains in the marble paving as a reminder of the treachery of the Pharisees². Thirty two years later, Jesus spoke to the scribes and Pharisees, "That on you may come all the righteous blood shed on

¹ For more details, see "[The Life of the Virgin Mary, The Theotokos](#)", Holy Apostles Convent, 1989, p. 236.

² Nikolai Velimirovic, [Prologue of Ochrid](#), June 24.

the earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zachariah, son of Berechiah, whom you murdered between the Temple and the Altar” (Matthew 23:35). Not only was Jesus accusing them of the murder of His uncle Zachariah, but He was also calling them sons of Cain!

Growing up in the Desert:

When Elizabeth took John to the desert (or the Wilderness of Judah just west of the Dead Sea - see Matthew 3:1), they hid in a cave during the massacre. Forty days after Zachariah’s death, Elizabeth (who was in her mid-70’s) also died leaving the toddler John alone in the wilderness. According to tradition³, John was fed and guarded by angels until his public appearances about 30 years later.

The Great Synaxaristes gives⁴ more details of Elisabeth taking John into the wilderness. These accounts come from the hymns of the Church, from iconography and from some apocryphal sources.

“One of the mothers who comprehended that her eighteen-month old child was in mortal danger was righteous Elisabeth. Her son, John, the first-born and only son of the high priest, was certainly a target for Herod’s soldiers. In the Protoevangelium of St James, as well as in Orthodox iconography, we learn that when the soldiers were searching for John, the elderly and venerable Elisabeth took the lad and went up into the hill-country. She kept looking for where she might conceal him; but there was no secret place to be found.”

“Going up into the mountains, the elderly Elisabeth groaned with a loud voice. She could not climb up and uttered, ‘O mountain of God, receive mother and child’. Immediately, the mountain cleaved and received Elisabeth and her son. A light then shone about them and an angel of the Lord was with them watching over them. This scene is confirmed in both the icons and the hymns of the Church.”

“St Andrew of Crete, borrowing from Apocryphal sources, chants: ‘The lawless Herod seized nursing infants from their mothers’ embraces. And Elisabeth, taking up John, prayed to God before a rock, saying, ‘Receive a mother with her child!’ And the mountain received the Forerunner⁵.”

“An angel of God was sent to minister to the nursing child, John, in the wilderness. Thus, he became not only a citizen of the desert, but also its fairest scion and ornament. The place where Elisabeth hid with John was a cave that had opened⁶. Then, by God’s power, a spring flowed there, and a fruit-bearing palm tree grew. St Elisabeth reposed early in the child’s life. Velimirovic notes that it was 40 days after the holy Zachariah reposed that his wife, the blessed Elisabeth, also entered into rest. The tiny lad in the wilderness, preserved by God’s providence, was fed by an angel who acted as his guardian. John continued in the desert, growing up to be the messenger preparing the way before Christ.”

“Thus, we chant, ‘O Baptist⁷, you have come forth as a messenger from a barren womb; and from your very swaddling clothes have gone to dwell in the wilderness. You were made the seal of the prophets: for the prophets saw Him

³ Nikolai Velimirovic, *Prologue of Ochrid*, September 5

⁴ Holy Apostles Convent, *The Great Synaxaristes of the Orthodox Church*, (Buena Vista, CO: Holy Apostles Convent, 2002), June 24, September 5.

⁵ December 29th, Vespers Doxastikon, Mode Plagal Four, by Saint Andrew of Crete

⁶ Nikolai Velimirovic, *Prologue of Ochrid*, June 24, September 5.

⁷ January 7th, Synaxis, Orthros Doxastikon, Mode Plagal Two

(Christ) in many forms and foretold dark sayings. But you were counted worthy to baptize Him in the Jordan”.

“We end our account here concerning how the beams of new grace shine forth radiantly on this day of St John’s birth. The ancient dark sayings and shadowy figures of the letter have begun to withdraw. The axe of John’s preaching is being prepared that would cut down the barrenness and fruitless ingratitude of the Jewish people⁸. John – messenger, minister, martyr, mediator – is the boundary of the Prophets and the beginning of the Apostles. Since he is the voice of the Word, it is his intercessions that we beg⁹, who even unto those in Hades he proclaimed the good tidings of the resurrection from the dead¹⁰.”

This may have a lot to do with why John was received so strongly for several reasons. First, John was not the only one to come out preaching some message. According to Gamaliel, Theudas in the 1st century B.C. and then Judas of Galilee about the time of the birth of John rose up claiming to be somebody. But they were killed and their followers were scattered (Acts 5:35-37). Second, John was not the only one living in the Wilderness of Judah. Much excavation has been done on Essene monastic communities in that area, where the most famous of these is the site of the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls. Some people today even claim that John and Jesus were Essenes. Church tradition has consistently denied this, however.

John Chrysostom spoke¹¹ of the life of John the Baptist as more ascetic than the life of Elijah. They may have dressed similarly, but John never lived in a city or a house like Elijah did (1 Kings 17:9-24). Even as a toddler, John grew up in the desert raised by angels, enduring the summer heat and the winter cold.

“It was a marvelous and strange thing to behold so great austerity in a human frame; which thing also particularly attracted the Jews, seeing in him the great Elijah. They were guided by what they then beheld, to the memory of that blessed man; or rather, even to a greater astonishment. For Elijah was brought up in cities and in houses, John dwelt entirely in the wilderness from his swaddling clothes¹². For it became the forerunner of Him, Who was to put away all the ancient ills, the labor, for example, the curse, the sorrow, the sweat; himself also to have certain tokens of such a gift, and to come at once to be above that condemnation. Thus, John neither plowed land, nor opened furrow; he didn’t eat his bread by the sweat of his face, but his table was hastily supplied, and his clothing more easily furnished than his table. His lodging was less troublesome than his clothing. For he needed neither roof, nor bed, nor table, nor any other of these things, but a kind of angel’s life in this our flesh did he exhibit. For this cause his garment was of camel’s hair, that by his dress he might instruct men to separate themselves from all things human, and to have nothing in common with the earth. It spoke that men should hasten back to their earlier nobleness, wherein Adam was before he needed

⁸ June 24th, Second Orthros Canon, Ode Three, Mode Four, by Saint George the Hymnographer.

⁹ June 24th, Lity Doxastikon, Mode Plagal One, by Saint Andrew of Crete

¹⁰ Hippolytus of Rome, “On Christ and Anti-Christ”, 45, Extant Works and Fragments, Part II, June 24th, Great Vespers Sticheron, Mode Four, by Saint Andrew of Crete

¹¹ John Chrysostom, Homilies on Matthew, X, 3.

¹² Nikolai Velimirovic, Prologue of Ochrid, June 24, September 5.

Holy Apostles Convent, The Great Synaxaristes of the Orthodox Church, (Buena Vista, CO: Holy Apostles Convent, 2002), June 24, September 5.

garments or robe. Thus, that clothing bore tokens of nothing less than a kingdom, and of repentance.”

“And do not say to me, ‘Why did he have a garment of camel’s hair and a leather belt, dwelling as he did in the wilderness?’ For if you make a difficulty of this, you will also inquire into more things besides; how in the winters, and how in the heats of summer, he continued in the wilderness, and this with a delicate body, and at an immature age as a toddler? How did the nature of his infant flesh endure such great inconstancy of weather¹³, and a diet so uncommon, and all the other hardships arising from the wilderness?”

When John began his public appearances, he is not recorded as performing any miracles (John 10:41). He may have done so since he came in the spirit and power of Elijah (Luke 1:17), but that was not his focus. However, if John had been raised and guarded by angels and everyone knew it (since that area was well traveled), then everyone would definitely start listening when John began speaking.

As John grew up, he “became strong in spirit” (Luke 1:80). He was filled with the Holy Spirit from his mother’s womb (Luke 1:15) and did not drink wine or strong drink at all. This means he was most likely a Nazarite similar to Samson (Judges 13) and the Prophet Samuel (1 Samuel 1), both of whom were also born to barren women. A Nazarite vow separated the individual to a monastic-like life for a period of service to the Lord. During his vow he neither cut his hair nor ate anything made from grapes (Numbers 6). Most Nazarite vows lasted less than three months, and the Apostle Paul took Nazarite vows often (Acts 18:18, 21:23-25). John’s Nazarite service lasted his entire life.

John was described as dressed in camel’s hair with a leather belt (Matthew 3:4). Clothing made of camel’s hair or goat’s hair (sometimes called sackcloth) resembled burlap today and was very scratchy and uncomfortable (compare Matthew 11:7-8). People sometimes wore this kind of clothing during times of mourning or repentance. John was doing both: mourning the sins of Israel and calling for her repentance. In later centuries, monks adapted a similar way of life as John the Baptist. For example, in the 4th century, John Chrysostom described¹⁴ his life as a monk:

“The monks lived in separate cells or huts, but according to a common rule and under the authority of an abbot. They wore coarse garments of camel’s hair or goat’s hair over their linen tunics. They rose before sunrise, and began the day by singing a hymn or praise and common prayer under the leadership of the abbot. Then they went to their allotted task, some to read, others to write, others to manual labor for the support of the poor. Four hours in each day were devoted to prayer and singing. Their only food was bread and water, except in case of sickness. They slept on straw couches, free from care and anxiety. There was no need of bolts and bars. They held all things in common, and the words of ‘mine and thine’, which cause innumerable strife in the world, were unknown among the brethren. If one died, he caused no lamentation, but thanksgiving, and was carried to the grave midst hymns of praise; for he was not dead, but ‘perfected’, and permitted to behold the face of Christ. For them to live was Christ, and to die was gain.”

¹³ This area can reach 100°F in the summer and freezing temperatures in the winter.

¹⁴ Philip Schaff, *The Life and Work of John Chrysostom*, Chapter 5, in *Post-Nicene Fathers, First Series*, v. 9, (Peabody, MA, Hendrickson Publishers, 1995).

The monks dress¹⁵ like those blessed angels, Elijah, Elisha, John the Baptist, like the Apostles. Their garments are made for them, some of goat's hair, some of camel's hair, and there are some for whom skins suffice alone, and these long worn. Then, after they have said those songs, they bow their knees, and entreat the God who was the object of their hymns for things, to the very thought of which some do not easily arrive. For they ask nothing of things present, for they have no regard for these, but that they may stand with boldness before the fearful judgment-seat, when the Only-Begotten Son of God is come to judge the living and the dead. They desire that no one may hear the tearful voice that says, 'I never knew you' (Matthew 7:23). And that with a pure conscience and many good deeds they may pass through this toilsome life, and sail over the angry sea with a favorable wind. He leads them in their prayers, who is their father, and their ruler.

John's food (Matthew 3:4) was described as locusts and wild honey. (Locusts are among the kosher foods in Leviticus 11 but may not be the most appetizing). He and his disciples were also described as fasting often (Luke 5:33).

In the following centuries, many monasteries were constructed in the Wilderness of Judea and farther south into the Sinai Peninsula, especially near Mt. Horeb and Mt. Sinai. Many of these were destroyed during the Moslem conquest of the 6th and 7th centuries, but some survived intact; others have been rebuilt and others are currently being excavated. The entire issue of an archaeology journal¹⁶ was devoted to these desert monasteries.

John's Ministry

John's Message:

Before John's birth, the Archangel Gabriel quoted Malachi 4:5 to Zachariah (Luke 1:17). The complete text from Malachi is, "Behold, I am going to send you Elijah the Prophet before the coming of the great and terrible day of the Lord. And he will restore the hearts of the fathers to their children and the hearts of the children to their fathers lest I come and smite the land with a curse" (Malachi 4:5-6). Gabriel added that this was to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.

John began his ministry in the region around the Jordan (that is, just north of the Dead Sea) preaching a baptism of repentance for the remission of sins (Luke 3:3). See Figure I for a map of the region where John was baptizing. All the Old Testament prophets also issued a call to repentance. And included in the Old Testament purification rites was washing in clean water. But Old Testament remission of sins was by blood sacrifice, not by water. Water just cleaned up the one who offered to qualify him to offer the sacrifice. John is thus preparing the people to worship God in spirit and truth (John 4:23-24) where there is no Temple to offer animal sacrifices at. The content of what John said can be broken down as follows:

- Repent, the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand (Matthew 3:2)
- Be baptized with confession of sins (Matthew 3:5-6, Luke 3:7, Mark 1:4-5)
- Clean up your life (Luke 3:10-14)
- Messiah is coming (Matthew 2:11-12, Mark 1:7-8, Luke 3:15-17)

¹⁵ John Chrysostom, Homilies on Matthew, LXVIII, 3.

¹⁶ Biblical Archaeology Review, Sept./Oct. 1995.

Figure I

Map of John's Movement Around the Jordan¹⁷



¹⁷ https://www.bible-history.com/maps/palestine_nt_times.html
1950

Repent, the Kingdom of Heaven is at Hand

The admonition: “Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand” (Matthew 3:2, Mark 1:3) applies equally to the first coming of Christ, the preaching of the Apostles (Matthew 10:7) and the Second Coming of Christ.

Clement of Alexandria stated¹⁸ that Christ’s message was “Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand!” Paul and the other Apostles repeated that call, pointing out to everyone not to come empty-handed.

“No one will be so impressed by the exhortations of any of the saints, as he is by the words of the Lord Himself, the lover of man. For this, and nothing but this, is His only work — the salvation of man. Therefore, He Himself, urging them on to salvation, cries, ‘Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand’ (Matthew 4:17). Those men that draw near through fear, He converts. Thus, Paul, beseeching the Macedonians, becomes the interpreter of the divine voice, when he says, ‘The Lord is at hand; take care that you are not apprehended empty’ (Philippians 4:5-6). But are you so devoid of fear, or rather of faith, as not to believe the Lord Himself, or Paul, who in Christ’s stead entreats: ‘Taste and see that Christ is God; blessed *is* the man *who* trusts in Him!’ (Psalm 34:8) Faith will lead you in; experience will teach you; Scripture will train you. For it says, ‘Come, you children, listen to me; I will teach you the fear of the Lord’. Then, as to those who already believe, it briefly adds, ‘Who *is* the man *who* desires life, and loves *many* days, that he may see good? What man is he that desires life, that loves to see good days?’” (Psalm 34:11-12)

John Chrysostom pointed out¹⁹ how the Jews reacted to John and to Christ. They never had a consciousness of their own sin. John tried to make them aware of this, and so did Christ, but most never did get there.

“The Jews were senseless, and had never any feeling of their own sins; but while they were justly accountable for the worst evils, they were justifying themselves in every respect. This more than anything caused their destruction, and led them away from the faith. For example, Paul himself was laying this to their charge, when he said, ‘They being ignorant of God’s righteousness, and seeking to establish their own righteousness, have not submitted to the righteousness of God’ (Romans 10:3). And again: ‘What shall we say then? That Gentiles, who did not pursue righteousness, have attained to righteousness, even the righteousness of faith. But Israel, pursuing the law of righteousness, has not attained to the law of righteousness. Why? Because *they did* not *seek it* by faith, but as it were, by the works of the law’” (Romans 9:30-32).

“Since this was the cause of their evils, John came, doing nothing else but bringing them to a sense of their own sins. This, among other things, his clothing declared, being that of repentance and confession. This was indicated also by what he preached, for nothing else did he say, but ‘Therefore bear fruits worthy of repentance’ (Matthew 3:8). Not condemning their own sins, as Paul also explained, made them hostile to Christ, while their coming to a sense thereof would set them on longing to seek after their Redeemer, and to desire remission. John came to

¹⁸ Clement of Alexandria, Exhortation to the Heathen, IX

¹⁹ John Chrysostom, Homilies on Matthew, X, 2.

bring this about, and to persuade them to repent, not in order that they might be punished, but that becoming humbler by repentance, and condemning themselves, they might hasten to receive remission.”

Tertullian of Carthage stated²⁰ that we, as Christians, are often subverted and fall into sin. Christ is the only One who was not. We judge by outward appearance; Christ looks on the heart, and He will thoroughly clean His threshing floor.

“It is an extraordinary thing, that one who has been approved should afterwards fall back. Saul, who was good beyond all others, was afterwards subverted by envy (1 Samuel 18:8-9). David, a good man ‘after the Lord’s own heart’ (1 Samuel 13:14), was guilty afterwards of murder and adultery (2 Samuel 11). Solomon, endowed by the Lord with all grace and wisdom, was led into idolatry, by women (1 Kings 11:4). For to the Son of God alone was it reserved to persevere to the last without sin (Hebrews 4:15). But what if a bishop, if a deacon, if a widow, if a virgin, if a doctor, if even a martyr, have fallen from the rule of faith; will heresies on that account appear to possess the truth? Do we prove the faith by the persons, or the persons by the faith? No one is wise, no one is faithful, no one excels in dignity, but the Christian; and no one is a Christian but he who perseveres even to the end (Matthew 10:22). You, as a man, know any other man from the outward appearance. You think as you see. And you see only as far as you have eyes. But the Scripture says, ‘the eyes of the Lord *are* open to all the ways of the sons of men’ (Jeremiah 32:19). ‘Man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart’ (1 Samuel 16:7). ‘The Lord knows those who are His’ (2 Timothy 2:19); and ‘Every plant which My heavenly Father has not planted will be uprooted’ (Matthew 15:13). ‘The last will be first, and the first last’ (Matthew 20:16); and He carries ‘His winnowing fan *is* in His hand, and He will thoroughly clean out His threshing floor’ (Matthew 3:12). Let the chaff of a fickle faith fly off as much as it will at every blast of temptation, all the purer that heap of grain will be which shall be laid up in the garner of the Lord. Did not certain of the disciples²¹ turn back from the Lord Himself, when they were offended? (John 6:66) Yet, the rest did not therefore think that they must turn away from following Him, but because they knew that He was the Word of Life, and was come from God (John 6:68; 16:30). They continued in His company to the very last, after He had gently inquired of them whether they also would go away (John 6:67). It is a comparatively small thing, that certain men, like Phygellus, Hermogenes, Philetus, and Hymenaeus deserted Paul (2 Timothy 1:15; 2:17; 1 Timothy 1:20): the betrayer of Christ, Judas, was himself one of the Apostles. We are surprised at seeing His churches forsaken by some men, although the things which we suffer after the example of Christ Himself, show us to be Christians. ‘They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us’” (1 John 2:19).

Be Baptized with Confession of Sins

The site where John was baptizing, called “Bethabara” (John 1:28), or “Bethany Beyond the Jordan”, was located about halfway between Jericho and the Dead Sea, on the East side of the

²⁰ Tertullian of Carthage, The Prescription against Heretics, II, i, 3.

²¹ Two of these disciples were Mark and Luke, the Gospel writers. They returned a little while later.

Jordan. This was the same location for the crossing of the Jordan by Joshua during the Conquest of Canaan²². And this is also the same site where Elijah and Elisha crossed the Jordan to get to the hill²³, named Jabal Mar Elias, or “Hill of Prophet Elijah”, where Elijah was taken up into heaven (2 Kings 2:8-14). This site has seen many buildings (monasteries, churches, etc.) built and then destroyed over the centuries.

Jerome of Bethlehem stated²⁴ that Baptism and Confession are a part of the everyday life of a Christian. He uses many illustrations of this from the Scriptures. We may fall into great sin, but with our Confession, the angels in heaven rejoice.

“The Lord tells us in the gospel, ‘The men of Nineveh will rise up in the judgment with this generation and condemn it, because they repented at the preaching of Jonah; and indeed, a greater than Jonah *is* here’ (Matthew 12:41). Again, He says, ‘I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners, to repentance’ (Matthew 9:13). The lost piece of silver is sought for until it is found in the mire (Luke 15:8-10). So also, the ninety-nine sheep are left in the wilderness, while the shepherd carries home on his shoulders the one sheep which has gone astray (Luke 15:4-7). Also ‘there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents’ (Luke 15:10). What a blessed thought it is that heavenly beings rejoice in our salvation! For it is of us that the words are said: ‘Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!’ (Matthew 3:2). Death and life are contrary the one to the other; there is no middle term. Yet penitence can knit death to life. The prodigal son, we are told, wasted all his substance, and in the far country away from his father ‘he would gladly have filled his stomach with the pods that the swine ate’. Yet, when he comes back to his father, the fatted calf is killed, a robe and a ring are given to him (Luke 15:11-24). That is to say, he receives again Christ’s robe which he had before defiled, and hears to his comfort the injunction: ‘Let your garments always be white, and let your head lack no oil’ (Ecclesiastes 9:8). He receives the signet²⁵ of God and cries to the Lord: ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and in your sight’ (Luke 15:21); and receiving the kiss of reconciliation, he says to Him: ‘Now is the light of Your countenance sealed upon us, O Lord’” (Psalm 4:6).

Ambrose of Milan stated²⁶ that God gives us more than sufficient opportunity to repent. Why do we put it off? To sin more? We should mourn for our sins and fall down before God! To not do so, we make ourselves like Absalom! When Absalom died, there was nothing that his father David could do but mourn without relief.

“The Lord has given a sufficient warning to those who put off repentance, when He says: ‘Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand’ (Matthew 4:17). We know not at what hour the thief will come; we know not whether our soul may be required of us this next night. God cast Adam out of Paradise immediately after his fault; there was no delay. At once the fallen were severed from all their enjoyments

²² See <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Al-Maghtas>.

²³ See <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Al-Maghtas>.

²⁴ Jerome of Bethlehem, Letter to Rusticus, CXXII, 3.

²⁵ “The allusions throughout are to the ritual practiced in Jerome’s day in connection with the reception of penitents”. See footnote 9 on page 228 of Post-Nicene Fathers, Second Series, v. 6 (Peabody, MA, Hendrickson Publishers, 1995).

²⁶ Ambrose of Milan, Two Books Concerning Repentance, II, 11, 99-100.

that they might do penance; at once God clothed them with garments of skins, not of silk (Genesis 3:21, 24).

What reason is there for putting off? Is it that we may sin yet more? Then because God is good, we are evil, and ‘despise the riches of His goodness, forbearance, and longsuffering, not knowing that the goodness of God leads us to repentance’ (Romans 2:4). Therefore, holy David says to all: ‘Come, let us worship and fall down before Him, and mourn before our Lord Who made us’ (Psalm 95:6 LXX). But for a sinner who has died without repentance, because nothing remains but to mourn grievously and to weep, you find David groaning and saying: ‘O my son Absalom -- my son, my son Absalom!’ (2 Samuel 18:33). For him who is wholly dead, mourning brings no relief.”

Tertullian of Carthage pointed out²⁷ the similarity of the work of John the Baptist to Baptism today. John baptized for the forgiveness of sins as the Lord’s Forerunner so that the Church might be prepared to receive the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. Today a person experiences forgiveness of sins in the Baptismal Font and is then chrismated (sealed) to receive the Holy Spirit.

Clean Up Your Life

Jerome of Bethlehem stated²⁸ that a sea change took place with the Resurrection of Christ. Before that, Lazarus was in Hades with Abraham; after that, even the thief was in Paradise. We don’t struggle according to the flesh; our citizenship is in heaven. This is cleaning up our lives.

“Even if Lazarus is seen in Abraham’s bosom and in a place of refreshment, still the lower regions cannot be compared with the kingdom of heaven. Before Christ’s coming Abraham is in the lower regions; after Christ’s coming even the robber is in paradise. Therefore, at His rising again ‘many bodies of the saints which slept arose, and were seen in the heavenly Jerusalem’ (Matthew 27:52-53). Then was fulfilled the saying: ‘Awake, you who sleep, arise from the dead, and Christ will give you light.’ (Ephesians 5:14). John the Baptist cries in the desert: ‘Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!’ (Matthew 3:2). For ‘from the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven suffers violence, and the violent²⁹ take it by force’ (Matthew 11:12). The flaming sword that guards the way to paradise and the cherubim that are stationed at its doors (Genesis 3:24) are alike quenched and unloosed by the blood of Christ. It is not surprising that this should be promised us in the resurrection: ‘For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war according to the flesh’ (2 Corinthians 10:3). We have our citizenship in heaven (Philippians 3:20), and while we are still here on earth, we are told that ‘the kingdom of heaven is within us’” (Luke 17:21).

John Cassian, quoting Abbot Pinufius, pointed out³⁰ that there are many paths to cleaning up our lives. Besides baptism, repentance and martyrdom, there is showing love to the brethren, almsgiving, shedding tears for someone, afflicting our heart, delivering the orphan, widow and the suffering, and praying for the brethren.

²⁷ Tertullian of Carthage, On Baptism, III, ii, 6.

²⁸ Jerome of Bethlehem, Letter to Heliodorus, LX, 3.

²⁹ John Chrysostom, Homilies on Matthew, XXXVII, 4 states that this includes all who approach it with earnestness of mind.

³⁰ John Cassian, Conference of Abbot Pinufius, III, 20, 8.

“After that grace of baptism which is common to all, and that most precious gift of martyrdom which is gained by being washed in blood, there are many fruits of penitence by which we can succeed in expiating our sins. For eternal salvation is not only promised to the bare fact of penitence, of which the Apostle Peter says: ‘Repent therefore and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out’ (Acts 3:19). John the Baptist and the Lord Himself said, ‘Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand’ (Matthew 3:2). But also, by the affection of love is the weight of our sins overwhelmed, for ‘love will cover a multitude of sins’ (1 Peter 4:8). In the same way also by the fruits of almsgiving a remedy is provided for our wounds, because ‘Water extinguishes a blazing fire; so, almsgiving atones for sin’ (Ecclesiasticus 3:30 LXX). So also, by the shedding of tears is gained the washing away of offenses, for ‘I am wearied with my groaning; I shall wash my bed every night; I shall water my couch with tears’ (Psalm 6:6 LXX). Finally, to show that they are not shed in vain, he adds: ‘Depart from me, all ye that work iniquity; for the Lord has heard the voice of my weeping’ (Psalm 6:8 LXX). Moreover by means of confession of sins, their absolution is granted: for ‘I acknowledged my sin, and hid not my iniquity: I said, I will confess my iniquity to the Lord against myself; and You forgave the ungodliness of my heart’ (Psalm 32:5 LXX). And again: ‘first confess your transgressions, that you may be justified’ (Isaiah 43:26 LXX). By afflicting the heart and body also is forgiveness of sins committed in like manner obtained; for he says: ‘Look upon my affliction and my trouble; and forgive all my sins’ (Psalm 25:18 LXX). And more especially by amendment of life: ‘Wash and be clean; remove your iniquities from your souls before my eyes; cease from your iniquities. Learn to do well; diligently seek judgement, deliver him that is suffering wrong, plead for the orphan, and obtain justice for the widow. And come, let us reason together, says the Lord: and though your sins be as purple, I will make them white as snow; and though they be as scarlet, I will make *them* white as wool’ (Isaiah 1:16-18 LXX). Sometimes the pardon of our sins is obtained by the intercession of the saints, for ‘If anyone sees his brother sinning a sin *which does not lead* to death, he will ask, and He will give him life for those who commit sin not *leading* to death’ (1 John 5:16). And again: ‘Is anyone among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise him up. And if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven’ (James 5:14-15). Sometimes too by the virtue of compassion and faith the stains of sin are removed, ‘By alms and by faithful dealings sins are purged away’ (Proverbs 15:27 LXX). And often by the conversion and salvation of those who are saved by our warnings and preaching: ‘For he who turns a sinner from the error of his way will save a soul from death and cover a multitude of sins’ (James 5:20). Moreover, by pardon and forgiveness on our part we obtain pardon of our sins: ‘For if you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you’ (Matthew 6:14). You see then what great means of obtaining mercy the compassion of our Savior has laid open to us, so that no one when longing for salvation need be crushed by despair, as he sees himself called to life by so many remedies.”

Athanasius the Great said³¹ that we should be doers of the Commandments, not just hearers, and we should imitate the behavior of the saints. Those who don't do this are what John the Baptist called a generation of vipers, and can be compared to beasts without understanding.

“Let us then, as is becoming, as at all times, yet especially in the days of Pascha, be not hearers only, but doers of the commandments of our Savior. Having imitated the behavior of the saints, we may enter together into the joy of our Lord which is in heaven, which is not transitory, but truly abides. Evildoers have deprived themselves of this; there remains to them as the fruit of their ways, sorrow and affliction, and groaning with torments. Let a man see what these become like, that they bear not the likeness of the conversation of the saints, nor of that right understanding, by which man at the beginning was rational, and in the image of God. But they are compared in their disgrace to beasts without understanding, and becoming like them in unlawful pleasures, they are spoken of as wanton horses, each neighing after his neighbor's wife (Jeremiah 5:8). Also, for their craftiness, errors, and sin laden with death, they are called a ‘generation of vipers’, as John the Baptist said. Now having thus fallen, and groveling in the dust like the serpent, having their minds set on nothing beyond visible things, they esteem these things good, and rejoicing in them, serve their own lusts and not God.”

John Chrysostom stated³² that John the Baptist was eloquent about preparation for Baptism, but another preparation is also needed: so that we may do nothing unworthy of the “Peace of God”. We should not be backward to embrace this Peace!

What is the ‘preparation of the Gospel?’ Let us listen to what John said, ‘Prepare the way of the Lord; make His paths straight’ (Matthew 3:3). But again, there is need also of another ‘preparation’ after baptism, so that we may do nothing unworthy of ‘peace’. Since the feet are usually a token of the way of life, Paul is constantly exhorting in this language, ‘See then that you walk circumspectly, not as fools but as wise’ (Ephesians 5:15). On this account, he would say, let us exhibit a practice and example worthy of the Gospel; that is, make our life and conduct pure. The good tidings of peace have been proclaimed to you, give to these good tidings a ready way; since if you again become enemies, there is no more ‘preparation of peace’. Be ready, don't be backward to embrace this peace. As you were ready and disposed for peace and faith, so also continue. The shield is that which first receives the assaults of the adversary, and preserves the armor uninjured. So long as faith is right and the life is right, the armor remains uninjured.

Athanasius the Great also stated³³ that virtue is already in us as a result of our baptism. If we are willing, we can keep this part of our soul as it was created, and not turn away from this natural state. We have received this as a deposit, and we need to preserve it.

“Virtue needs our willingness alone, since it is in us and is formed from us. When the soul has its spiritual faculty in a natural state, virtue is formed. And it is in a natural state when it remains as it came into existence. When it came into existence it was fair and exceedingly honest. For this reason, Joshua, the son of Nun, in his exhortation said to the people, ‘Set your heart right toward the Lord God of Israel’ (Joshua 24:23 LXX); and John said, ‘Make His paths straight’

³¹ Athanasius the Great, Festal Letters, II, 2.

³² John Chrysostom, Homilies on Ephesians, XXIV, v. 22.

³³ Athanasius of Alexandria, The Life of Antony, 20.

(Matthew 3:3). For rectitude of soul consists in it having its spiritual part in its natural state as created. On the other hand, when it swerves and turns away from its natural state, that is called vice of the soul. Thus, the matter is not difficult. If we remain as we have been made, we are in a state of virtue; but if we think of ignoble things, we shall be accounted evil. If, therefore, this thing had to be acquired from without, it would be difficult in reality; but if it is in us, let us keep ourselves from foul thoughts. And as we have received the soul as a deposit, let us preserve it for the Lord, that He may recognize His work as being the same as He made it.”

Ambrose of Milan stated³⁴ that when John the Baptist said that Christ would baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire, this refers to the tongues of fire at Pentecost. It also refers to the grace that works in our lives to cleanse us from sin. Christ later said that He came to send fire on the earth as well as to supply rivers of living water.

“We form the congregation of the Lord. We recognize the propitiation of our Lord God, which our Propitiator wrought in His passion. I think, too, we cannot leave out of sight that fire when we read that the Lord Jesus baptizes with the Holy Spirit and with fire (Matthew 3:11). Rightly was the sacrifice consumed, for it was for sin. But that fire was a type of the Holy Spirit Who was to come down after the Lord’s ascension, and forgive the sins of all, and Who like fire inflames the mind and faithful heart. Wherefore Jeremiah, after receiving the Spirit, says: ‘It was a burning fire flaming in my bones, and I am utterly weakened on all sides, and cannot bear *up*’ (Jeremiah 20:9). In the Acts of the Apostles, also, when the Holy Spirit descended upon the apostles and those others who were waiting for the Promise of the Father, we read that tongues as of fire were distributed among them (Acts 2:3). The soul of each one was so uplifted by His influence that they were thought to be full of new wine (Acts 2:13), who instead had received the gift of a diversity of tongues.”

“What else can this mean — namely, that fire became water and water called forth fire — but that spiritual grace burns out our sins through fire, and through water cleanses them? For sin is washed away and it is burnt away. Therefore, Paul says: ‘The fire will test each one’s work, of what sort it is’ (1 Corinthians 3:13). And further on: ‘If anyone’s work is burned, he will suffer loss; but he himself will be saved, yet so as through fire’” (1 Corinthians 3:15).

“This, then, we have stated, so as to prove that sins are burned out by means of fire. We know now that this is in truth the sacred fire which then, as a type of the future remission of sins, came down upon the sacrifice.”

“This fire is hidden in the time of captivity, during which sin reigns, but in the time of liberty it is brought forth. And though it is changed into the appearance of water, yet it preserves its nature as fire so as to consume the sacrifice. Do not wonder when you read that God the Father said: ‘I am a consuming fire’ (Deuteronomy 4:24). And again: ‘They have forsaken Me, the fountain of living waters’ (Jeremiah 2:13). The Lord Jesus, too, like a fire inflamed the hearts of those who heard Him, and like a fountain of waters cooled them. For He Himself said in His Gospel that He came to send fire on the earth (Luke 12:49) and to supply rivers of living water to those who thirst” (John 7:37-38).

³⁴ Ambrose of Milan, Duties of the Clergy, III, xviii, 102-105.

Messiah is Coming!

Cyprian of Carthage stated³⁵ that the Second Coming of Christ is also called “The Day of the Lord”, and it is at hand.

“How great are those things which in the meantime are happening on our behalf! Something is given for an example, that the anger of an avenging God may be known. But the day of judgment is still future which the Holy Scripture denounces, saying, ‘Howl, for the day of the Lord is at hand, and destruction from God shall come. For behold! the day of the Lord is coming which cannot be escaped; a day of wrath and anger, to make the world desolate, and to destroy the sinners out of it’ (Isaiah 13:6-9 LXX). And again: ‘Behold, the day of the Lord comes, burning as an oven; and all the aliens and all that do wickedly shall be as stubble, and the day that comes shall burn them up, saith the Lord’ (Malachi 4:1 LXX). The Lord prophesies that the aliens shall be burned up and consumed; that is, aliens from the divine race, and the profane, those who are not spiritually new-born, nor made children of God. Only those can escape who have been new-born and signed with the sign³⁶ of Christ”.

Cyprian of Carthage also stated³⁷ that we will know when the Second Coming of Christ is about to occur by the events He foretold. This He said was “The Kingdom of God being at hand”. Events in the early 3rd century looked like the Kingdom would come soon, but then these events went away.

Christ predicted that wars, famines, earthquakes and pestilences would arise in each place; and lest an unexpected and new dread of mischiefs should shake us, He previously warned us that adversity would increase more and more in the last times. Behold, the very things are occurring now which were spoken; and since those occur which were foretold before, whatever things were promised will also follow. As the Lord Himself promises, ‘But when you see these things happening, know that the kingdom of God is at hand’ (Luke 21:31). The kingdom of God, beloved brethren, is beginning to be at hand! The reward of life, the rejoicing of eternal salvation, and the perpetual gladness and possession of paradise lost, are now coming, with the passing away of the world. Already heavenly things are taking the place of earthly, and great things of small, and eternal things of things that fade away. What room is there here for anxiety and solicitude? Who, in the midst of these things, is trembling and sad, except he who is without hope and faith? For it is for him to fear death who is not willing to go to Christ. It is for him to be unwilling to go to Christ who does not believe that he is about to reign with Christ.

John’s message really struck a resonant chord and everyone was coming to him to be baptized (Matthew 3:5, Mark 1:5). Even the scribes and Pharisees came out to be baptized. [Could the Apostle Paul have been among them?] These were the same people and their descendants who had orchestrated John’s father, Zachariah’s murder about 30 years earlier. To them, John said, “Brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?” (Matthew 3:7). John went on to tell them to bring forth fruit in keeping with their supposed repentance and that the ax is

³⁵ Cyprian of Carthage, Treatises, V, 22.

³⁶ The “sign” of Christ is the Cross!

³⁷ Cyprian of Carthage, Treatises, VII, 2.

already laid to the root of the trees that don't bear fruit. They will be cut down and thrown in the unquenchable fire (Matthew 3:8-12). And John refused to baptize them (Luke 7:30)!!

Clement of Alexandria emphasized³⁸ that both Jesus and John the Baptist showed humility. Both offered an invitation to salvation and the inheritance of the heavens. To refuse their invitation is monstrous!

“But if you do not believe the prophets, but suppose both the men and the fire a myth, the Lord Himself shall speak to you. ‘He, being in the form of God, did not consider it robbery to be equal with God, but emptied Himself, taking the form of a slave, *and* coming in the likeness of men’ (Philippians 2:6-7) — He, the merciful God, exerting Himself to save man. And now the Word Himself clearly speaks to you, shaming your unbelief; yea, I say, the Word of God became man, that you may learn from man how man may become God. Is it not then monstrous, my friends, that while God is ceaselessly exhorting us to virtue, we should spurn His kindness and reject salvation?”

“Does not John also invite to salvation, and is he not entirely a voice of exhortation? Let us then ask him, ‘Who of men are you, and from where?’ He will not say Elijah! He will deny that he is Christ, but will profess himself to be ‘a voice crying in the wilderness’ (John 1:23). Who, then, is John? In a word, we may say, ‘The voice of one crying in the wilderness, Prepare the way of the Lord, make straight the paths of our God’ (Isaiah 40:3 LXX). John is the forerunner, and that voice the precursor of the Word. It is an inviting voice, preparing for salvation, — a voice urging men on to the inheritance of the heavens, and through which the barren and the desolate is childless no more.”

Tertullian stated³⁹ that with John the Baptist, the Law was about to be fulfilled, not terminated. Heaven and earth would pass away before any part of the Law would be eliminated.

‘It is easier for heaven and earth to pass away than for part of one letter of the law and the prophets to fail’ (Luke 16:17). ‘For, as says Isaiah, ‘the grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God stands forever’ (Isaiah 40:8). Since even *then* by Isaiah it was Christ, the Word and Spirit of the Creator, who prophetically described John as ‘The voice of one crying in the wilderness: “Prepare the way of the Lord; make straight in the desert a highway for our God”’ (Isaiah 40:3). This was about to come for the purpose of terminating the course of the law and the prophets; by their fulfillment and not their extinction, and in order that the kingdom of God might be announced by Christ. He therefore purposely added the assurance that the elements would more easily pass away than His words fail. He affirmed, as He did, the further fact, that what He had said concerning John had not fallen to the ground.

John of Damascus described⁴⁰ what happened at Christ's crucifixion. Jesus was not subject to death, since He was without sin; He took on death voluntarily on our behalf. Yet His Divinity was not separated from His soul; as He entered Hades, death swallowed up His soul as a bait, and thus was transfixed on the hook of His divinity.

³⁸ Clement of Alexandria, Exhortation to the Heathen, 1.

³⁹ Tertullian, The Five Books Against Marcion, II, ii, 4, 33.

⁴⁰ John of Damascus, Exposition of the Orthodox Faith, III, 27.

“Since our Lord Jesus Christ was without sin, for He committed no sin, He Who took away the sin of the world, nor was there any deceit found in His mouth. He was not subject to death, since death came into the world through sin. He dies, therefore, because He took on Himself death on our behalf, and He makes Himself an offering to the Father for our sakes. For we had sinned against Him, and it was meet that He should receive the ransom for us, and that we should thus be delivered from the condemnation. God forbid that the blood of the Lord should have been offered to the tyrant. As death approached, swallowing up the body as a bait, it is transfixed on the hook of divinity, and after tasting of a sinless and life-giving body, perishes, and brings up again all whom of old he swallowed up. For just as darkness disappears on the introduction of light, so is death repulsed before the assault of life, and brings life to all, but death to the destroyer.”

“Wherefore, although He died as man and His Holy Spirit was severed from His immaculate body, yet His Divinity remained inseparable from both. I mean, His Divinity remained inseparable from His soul and His body, and so even thus His one hypostasis was not divided into two hypostases. For body and soul received simultaneously in the beginning their being in the subsistence of the Word, and although they were severed from one another by death, yet they continued, each of them, having the one subsistence of the Word. So that the one subsistence of the Word is alike the subsistence of the Word, and of soul and body. For at no time had either soul or body a separate subsistence of their own, different from that of the Word, and the subsistence of the Word is forever one, and at no time two. So that the subsistence of Christ is always one. For, although the soul was separated from the body topically, yet hypostatically they were united through the Word.”

In iconography, John is pictured as having wings like an angel. This is a reference to Malachi 3:1 (quoted in Matthew 11:10, Mark 1:2, Luke 7:27), “Behold, I am going to send my messenger (literally my angel), and he will clear the way before Me”. In Hebrew, *Malachi* means “my angel”.

John’s Methods:

John was a very humble man who knew his place. He stated, concerning Jesus, that he was not worthy even to carry or untie Jesus’ sandals (Matthew 3:11, Mark 1:7, Luke 3:16). John stated that while he baptized with water, the One coming after him who was mightier than him would baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire (Matthew 3:11, Mark 1:7-8, Luke 3:16-17, Acts 2:2-4). John stated that he is but the friend of the Bridegroom (i.e. Jesus) who stands by and hears Him and greatly rejoices because of the Bridegroom’s voice. This was John’s joy and he stated: “He must increase but I must decrease” (John 3:29-30).

In this regard, John pointed out Jesus, “Behold! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world” (John 1:29, 36). When John did this, some of his devoted followers began to follow Jesus instead. Among those doing so were Peter, Andrew, James and John Zebedee, Philip and Nathanael from among the Twelve, plus probably many others (John 1:36-45).

Children of Abraham

John the Baptist stated to the Pharisees and Sadducees:

“But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to his baptism, he said to them, ‘Brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Therefore, bear fruits

worthy of repentance, and do not think to say to yourselves, “We have Abraham as *our* father”. For I say to you that God is able to raise up children to Abraham from these stones” (Matthew 3:7-9). What does it mean to be children of Abraham? And how are they raised up from stones?

Justin Martyr stated⁴¹ that many sects in his day claimed to be children of Abraham, but were not even close to being Christians; they blaspheme God and hold to strange doctrines.

“I choose to follow not men or men’s doctrines, but God and the doctrines delivered by Him. You may have fallen in with some who are called Christians, but who do not admit the resurrection, and venture to blaspheme the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob. They say there is no resurrection of the dead, and that their souls, when they die, are taken to heaven; do not imagine that they are Christians. No Christian would admit that the Sadducees, or similar sects of Genistae⁴², Meristae⁴³, Galileans⁴⁴, Hellenists, Pharisees, Baptists, are Jews, but are only called Jews and children of Abraham. They worship God with the lips, as God Himself declared, but the heart is far from Him. But I and others, who are right-minded Christians on all points, are assured that there will be a resurrection of the dead, and a thousand years in Jerusalem (Revelation 20:2-7), which will then be built, adorned, and enlarged, as the prophets Ezekiel and Isaiah and others declare.”

Justin Martyr also stated⁴⁵ that God gives the same calling to us that He gave to Abraham. In response we have left behind our former life of sin to inherit the same land Abraham sought.

“What larger measure of grace, then, did Christ bestow on Abraham? This, namely, that He called him with His voice by the same calling, telling him to leave the land where he dwelt. He has called all of us by that same voice, and we have left the way of living in which we used to spend our days, passing our time in evil after the fashions of the other inhabitants of the earth. Along with Abraham we shall inherit the holy land, when we shall receive the inheritance for an endless eternity, being children of Abraham through the like faith. For as he believed the voice of God, and it was imputed to him for righteousness, in like manner we having believed God’s voice spoken by the apostles of Christ, and promulgated to us by the prophets, have renounced even to death all the things of the world. Accordingly, He promises to him a nation of similar faith, God-fearing, righteous, and delighting the Father; but it is not you, Trypho, in whom is no faith.”

Irenaeus of Lyons stated⁴⁶ that there was a reciprocal rejoicing at the coming of Christ: the new believers rejoiced at their new-found inheritance, and Abraham rejoiced at seeing this happen.

⁴¹ Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho*, 80.

⁴² An ancient sect of the Jews who claimed to be pure-blooded descendants of Abraham, who refrained from taking non-Jewish wives during the Babylonian captivity. See <https://www.lexico.com/definition/genist>.

⁴³ The Meristae were a sect of the Jews at the time of Christ. They believed that not all the Scriptures were inspired by God and that God was not a single being. See <https://www.lexico.com/definition/merist>.

⁴⁴ The Galileans was another name for the Jewish Zealots, who were followers of Judas of Galilee (Acts 5:37). Their motto was “better dead than Roman”, and they resorted to violence and assassination to achieve their goals. Joseph refers to the Zealots as ruling Jerusalem during the siege by the Romans, where they assassinated anyone who disagreed with them.

⁴⁵ Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho*, 119.

⁴⁶ Irenaeus of Lyons, *Against Heresies*, IV, vii, 1-2.

All who have known God from the beginning had foretold the coming of Christ; and Christ was able to raise up children to Abraham from the religions of stones.

“Mary said, ‘My soul doth magnify the Lord, and my spirit hath rejoiced in God my Savior’ (Luke 1:46-47). This was the rejoicing of Abraham descending upon those who sprang from him, — those, namely, who were watching, and who beheld Christ, and believed in Him. While, on the other hand, there was a reciprocal rejoicing which passed backwards from the children to Abraham, who did also desire to see the day of Christ’s coming. Rightly, then, did our Lord bear witness to him, saying, ‘Your father Abraham rejoiced to see my day; and he saw it, and was glad’” (John 8:56).

“It was not for Abraham’s sake that Christ said these things. He also pointed out how all who have known God from the beginning, and have foretold the advent of Christ, have received the revelation from the Son Himself. In the last times Christ was made visible and passable, and spoke with the human race, that He might from the stones raise up children to Abraham. Christ fulfilled the promise which God had given Abraham, that He might make his seed as the stars of heaven (Genesis 15:5). As John the Baptist said: ‘For God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham’ (Matthew 3:9). Now, this Jesus did by drawing us off from the religion of stones, and bringing us over from hard and fruitless cogitations, and establishing in us a faith like Abraham’s. As Paul testifies, saying that we are children of Abraham because of the similarity of our faith, and the promise of inheritance (Romans 4:12, Galatians 4:28).”

Irenaeus of Lyons also stated⁴⁷ that God promised the land of Israel, from the Nile River to the Euphrates, to Abraham’s Seed (singular). But Abraham and his Seed never received that; thus, this applies to the Resurrection of the Just. In this way, all nations of the earth are blessed in Abraham.

“Abraham await patiently the promise of God, and was unwilling to appear to receive from men, what God had promised to give him, when God said to him: ‘I will give this land to your seed, from the (Nile) river of Egypt even to the great river Euphrates’ (Genesis 15:18). If, then, God promised him the inheritance of the land, yet he did not receive it during all the time of his sojourn there, it must be, that together with his seed, that is, those who fear God and believe in Him, he shall receive it at the resurrection of the just. For his seed is the Church, which receives the adoption to God through the Lord, as John the Baptist said: ‘God is able to raise up children to Abraham from these stones’ (Luke 3:8). Thus, Paul also says: ‘Now we, brethren, as Isaac *was*, are children of promise’ (Galatians 4:28). And again, Paul plainly declares that they who have believed in Christ do receive Christ, the promise to Abraham. ‘Now to Abraham and his Seed were the promises made. He does not say, “And to seeds”, as of many, but as of one, “And to your Seed”, who is Christ’ (Galatians 3:16). And again, confirming his former words, he says, ‘Just as Abraham “believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness”. Therefore, know that *only* those who are of faith are sons of Abraham. And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel to Abraham beforehand, saying, “In you all the nations shall be blessed”. So then those who *are* of faith are blessed with believing Abraham’ (Galatians 3:6-

⁴⁷ Irenaeus of Lyons, Against Heresies, V, xxxii, 2.

9). Thus, then, they who are of faith shall be blessed with faithful Abraham, and these are the children of Abraham. Now God made promise of the earth to Abraham and his seed; yet neither Abraham nor his seed, that is, those who are justified by faith, do now receive any inheritance in it; but they shall receive it at the resurrection of the just. For God is true and faithful; and on this account He said, ‘Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth’” (Matthew 5:5).

Cyril of Jerusalem stated⁴⁸ that the sons of God are led by the Spirit of God; without works, it profits us nothing. If we love the world, the love of the Father is not in us. On the other hand, our works, like Abraham, glorify our Father in heaven.

“Let us walk spiritually, that we may be counted worthy of God’s adoption. ‘For as many as are led by the Spirit of God, these are sons of God’ (Romans 8:14). For it profits us nothing to have gained the title of Christians, unless the works also follow; lest to us also it be said, ‘If you were Abraham’s children, you would do the works of Abraham’ (John 8:39). ‘If you call on the Father, who without partiality judges according to each one’s work, conduct yourselves throughout the time of your stay *here* in fear’ (1 Peter 1:17). ‘Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him’ (1 John 2:15). Wherefore, my beloved children, let us by our works offer glory to our Father which is in heaven, ‘that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven’ (Matthew 5:16). ‘Let us ‘cast all our care upon Him, for He cares for us’ (Matthew 6:8), ‘for your Father knows the things you have need of before you ask Him’” (1 Peter 5:7).

John most likely had a loud voice that carried well outdoors. Not everyone can speak to 5,000 men plus women and children outdoors and still be heard over the disruptive noise of squirming children as Jesus did (Matthew 14:13-21). John had probably a similar kind of “presence” when he spoke.

John was also very outspoken. To call the religious leaders of his day a bunch of snakes and tell them they were going to hell took courage (Matthew 3:7-12, Luke 3:7-9). John did not confine his outspokenness to religious leaders. He also publicly criticized Herod the Tetrarch (the son of his father’s murderer) for the incest of marrying his brother Philip’s wife Herodias (Matthew 14:3-4). This landed John in prison where Herodias later arranged to have John beheaded and his head brought to her party on a platter (Matthew 14:6-11). According to tradition, John then continued his announcement of the coming of Messiah to souls in Hades, (compare Ephesians 4:8-10, John 20:15-17, 1 Peter 3:18-20) and the hymns of the Feast celebrate that John is considered a forerunner there as well as on earth⁴⁹.

How Much Did John Know About Christ?

John the Baptist was filled with the Holy Spirit even in his mother’s womb. When the Virgin Mary came to visit Elizabeth when Elizabeth was in her 6th month, John leaped in his mother’s womb at the announcement that Mary had arrived – and Mary was just in her 1st month

⁴⁸ Cyril of Jerusalem, Catechetical Lectures, VII, 13.

⁴⁹ Holy Apostles Convent, The Great Synaxaristes of the Orthodox Church, ([Buena Vista, CO: Holy Apostles Convent, 2002](#)), August 29.

Gregory the Theologian, Panegyric on St Basil, 75

of pregnancy. Thus, John had some insight into Who Jesus was that most other people had no idea about.

The people coming to John for baptism may not have known much about what was going on, but they came to John with great fear and trembling. This respect for John was so strong that the chief priests, scribes and elders mentioned that if they said that John's baptism was from men, all the people would stone them for blasphemy (Luke 20:1-7).

Gregory the Theologian stated⁵⁰ that not only did John the Baptist know Who Jesus was, but he was aware of his own coming martyrdom, and that Jesus would follow him to Hades. Gregory explains some of the illustrations: the fan, the fire, the axe, the sword, the latchet of the sandal.

“John the Baptist said, ‘I need to be baptized by You’; add to this ‘and for You’. He knew that he would be baptized by Martyrdom, or, like Peter, that he would be cleansed not only as to his feet (John 13:9). ‘And are You coming to me?’ (Matthew 3:14) This also was prophetic; for he knew that after Herod would come the madness of Pilate, and so when he had gone before, Christ would follow him to Hades. But what said Jesus? ‘Permit *it to be so* now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness’ (Matthew 3:15), for this is the time of His Incarnation; for He knew that yet a little while and He should baptize the Baptist. And what is the ‘Winnowing Fan?’ (Matthew 3:12) The Purification. And what is the ‘Unquenchable Fire?’ (Matthew 3:12) The consuming of the chaff, and the heat of the Spirit. And what the ‘Axe?’ (Matthew 3:10) The excision of the soul which is incurable even after it is fertilized (Luke 13:8). And what the Sword? The cutting of the Word, which separates the worse from the better (Hebrews 4:12), and makes a division between the faithful and the unbeliever (Matthew 10:35). It also stirs up the son and the daughter and the bride against the father and the mother and the mother in law (Micah 7:6), the young and fresh against the old and shadowy. And what is the latchet of the shoe, which you John who baptized Jesus may not loosen? (John 1:27) You are of the desert, and have no food, the new Elijah (Luke 7:26-28), the more than Prophet, inasmuch as you saw Him of Whom you prophesied, you are the Mediator of the Old and New Testaments. What is this? Perhaps the Message of the Advent, and the Incarnation, of which not the least point may be loosed, I say not by those who are yet carnal and babes in Christ, but not even by those who are like John in spirit.”

John Chrysostom stated⁵¹ that even though Jesus would later come as the Judge of the living and the dead, He first came along with servants and criminals to be baptized by John. The amazing thing is that Christ took on human flesh; being baptized by John is just another part of His humanity. John recognized Who Jesus was and suggested that he needed to be baptized by Jesus.

“Along with the servants and with criminals, the Judge, Himself, comes to be baptized. But don't be troubled; for in these humiliations His exaltation most shines forth. For He granted Himself to be born and to stay so long in a Virgin's womb, to come forth with our nature, and to be struck with rods, crucified, and to

⁵⁰ Gregory the Theologian, Oration on the Holy Lights, XXXIX, 15.

⁵¹ John Chrysostom, Homilies on Matthew, XII, 1.

suffer all the rest which He suffered. Why do we marvel if He also granted to be baptized, and to come with the rest to His servant, John? For the amazement lay in that one thing, that being God, He would be made Man; but the rest all follows in course of reason.”

“For this cause, let me add, John also by way of anticipation said all that he had said before, that he ‘was not worthy to loosen His sandal strap’ (Luke 3:16) and all the rest. For instance, that He is Judge, and rewards every man according to his desert, and that He will bestow His Spirit abundantly on all. In order that when we see Him coming to the baptism, we might not suspect anything common. Therefore, John forbids Him, even when He came, saying.”

“‘I need to be baptized by You, and are You coming to me?’ (Matthew 3:14). For, because the baptism was ‘of repentance’ (Matthew 3:11), and led men to accuse themselves for their offenses, lest anyone should suppose that He too ‘comes to Jordan’ in this sort of mind, John sets it right beforehand, by calling Him both Lamb, and Redeemer from all the sin that is in the world. Since He that was able to take away the sins of the whole race of men, much more was He Himself without sin. For this cause then John didn’t say, ‘Behold, He that is without sin’, but what was much more, ‘Behold! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!’ (John 1:29). John said this in order that together with this truth we might receive that other with all assurance, and having received it might perceive, that in the conduct of some further economy He comes to the baptism.”

John the Baptist stated that he did not know Jesus before Jesus came to him for baptism. He said that Jesus was revealed to him by the Holy Spirit descending as a dove and remaining on Jesus. John Chrysostom stated⁵² that if John came preaching but not baptizing, not nearly as many people would have come to him. John said:

“And John bore witness, saying, ‘I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and He remained upon Him. I did not know Him, but He who sent me to baptize with water said to me’: ‘Upon whom you see the Spirit descending, and remaining on Him, this is He who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.’ And I have seen and testified that this is the Son of God” (John 1:32-34).

But Jesus came back to see John the Baptist the next day. The Apostle John gives more details of this than Matthew gives. On this second day, John further testified of Jesus and some of John’s disciples began to follow Jesus.

“Again, the next day, John stood with two of his disciples. And looking at Jesus as He walked, he said, ‘Behold the Lamb of God!’ The two disciples heard him speak, and they followed Jesus” (John 1:35-37).

Gregory the Wonder-Worker stated⁵³ very eloquently what Christ was doing by being baptized by John. Christ came very humbly and did not need to be baptized since He had no sin. John recognized Him, just as he recognized Him in his mother’s womb before he was born, and was aghast that Christ wanted to be baptized by him.

“Notice John the Baptist as he baptizes One who needs no baptism, and yet submits to the rite in order that He may bestow freely upon us the grace of baptism.

⁵² John Chrysostom, Homilies on John, XVII, 1.

⁵³ Gregory the Wonder-Worker, Four Homilies, IV, On the Holy Theophany. Modern editors suspect that the eloquence of these homilies suggest that the work has been edited and interpolated over the centuries.

Come, let us view the image of our regeneration, as it is emblematically presented in these waters. ‘Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan to be baptized by him’ (Matthew 3:13). O how vast is the humility of the Lord! O how vast His condescension! The King of the heavens hastened to John, His own forerunner, without setting in motion the armies of His angels, without dispatching beforehand the incorporeal powers as His precursors. He presented Himself in utmost simplicity, in soldier-like form; He comes to His own servant. He approached him as one of the multitudes, and humbled Himself among the captives though He was the Redeemer, and ranged Himself with those under judgment though He was the Judge. He joined Himself with the lost sheep though He was the Good Shepherd who on account of the straying sheep came down from heaven. Yet He did not forsake His heavens, and was mingled with the tares though He was that heavenly grain that springs unsown. And the Baptist John then saw Him, recognizing Him whom before in his mother’s womb he had recognized and worshipped (Luke 1:41). John discerned clearly that this was He on whose account, in a manner surpassing the natural time, he had leaped in the womb of his mother in violation of the limits of nature. John drew his right hand within his double cloak, and bowing his head like a servant full of love to his master, addressed Him in these words: ‘I need to be baptized by You, and are You coming to me?’ (Matthew 3:14) What is this You are doing, my Lord? Why do You reverse the order of things? Why do You seek along with the servants, at the hand of Your servant, the things that are proper to servants? Why do You desire to receive what You don’t require? Why do You burden me, Your servant, with Your mighty condescension? ‘I need to be baptized by You, but You have no need to be baptized by me’”.

John Chrysostom stated⁵⁴ that John the Baptist pointed so strongly to Christ that no one questioned what he was doing. John did not speak at length about this because he could see that the people who he was dealing with were not sensible about this. Anyone who received what he said, such as the Twelve Apostles and most of the Seventy would be quickly brought in once they heard Christ themselves.

“Notice John the Baptist had said, ‘He who comes after me is preferred before me’ (John 1:15, 27, 30); and that ‘His sandal strap I am not worthy to loosen’ (John 1:27). Also, that ‘He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit, and with fire’ (Matthew 3:11); and that he ‘saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and He remained upon Him.’ (John 1:32-33), and he ‘has seen and testified that this is the Son of God’ (John 1:34). No one paid attention, nor asked, nor said, ‘Why do you say these things? On whose behalf? For what reason?’ Again, he had said, ‘Behold the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world’ (John 1:29, 36); yet not even so did he touch their insensibility. Therefore, after this he is compelled to repeat the same words again, as if softening by tillage some hard and stubborn soil, and by his word as by a plow, disturbing the mind which had hardened into clods, so as to put in the seed deep. For this reason, he does not make his discourse a long one either; because he desired one thing only, to bring them over and join them to Christ. John knew that as soon as they had received this saying, and had been persuaded, they would not afterwards need one to bear witness to Christ. And this also came to pass. For, the Samaritans said to the woman after hearing Him,

⁵⁴ John Chrysostom, Homilies on John, XVIII, 1.

‘Now we believe, not because of what you said, for we ourselves have heard *Him* and we know that this is indeed the Christ, the Savior of the world’ (John 4:42). The disciples would be much more quickly subdued, as was the case. For when they had come and heard Him but one evening, they returned no more to John, but were so nailed to Him, that they took upon them the ministry of John, and themselves proclaimed Him. For, the Apostle John said, ‘Andrew first found his own brother Simon, and said to him, "We have found the Messiah" (which is translated, the Christ)’” (John 1:41).

John Chrysostom also pointed out⁵⁵ that people coming to John the Baptist came with great fear and were not concerned with the things of this life. This was similar to the 4000 men Jesus fed, where they listened to Him for three days without food, and were on the verge of fainting.

“John was waiting in the wilderness by Jordan, where all came to his baptism with great fear, and caring little at that time for the things of this life. It was similar to the 4000 men who were listening to Christ who continued with Christ three days, and had nothing to eat (Matthew 15:32). This is the part of a zealous herald and a careful husbandman, not to desist before he sees that the planted seed has got a firm hold. ‘Why then did he not go about all the parts of Judaea preaching Christ, rather than stand by the river waiting for Him to come, that he might point Him out when He came?’ Because he wished that this should be affected by His works; his own object being in the meantime only to make Him known, and to persuade some to hear of eternal life. But to Christ, John leaves the greater testimony, that of works, as Christ said, ‘I do not receive testimony from man, but I say these things that you may be saved. The works which the Father has given Me to finish -- the very works that I do -- bear witness of Me, that the Father has sent Me’ (John 5:34, 36). Observe how much more effectual this was; for when John had thrown in a little spark, at once the blaze rose up. For they who before had not even paid attention to John’s words, afterwards say, ‘John performed no sign, but all the things that John spoke about this Man were true’” (John 10:41).

John Chrysostom further pointed out⁵⁶ that the Prophets before Christ and the Apostles after the Ascension all preached Christ, while He was not present. Only John the Baptist preached Christ while He was present.

“The Prophets and Apostles all preached Christ when He was absent; the Prophets before His coming according to the flesh, the Apostles after His Ascension. John the Baptist alone proclaimed Him when He was present. Therefore, John calls himself the ‘friend of the Bridegroom’ (John 3:29), since he alone was present at the marriage; he it was that did and accomplished all; he made a beginning of the work. ‘Looking at Jesus as He walked, he said, Behold the Lamb of God’ (John 1:36). Not by voice alone, but with his eyes also he bore witness to, and expressed his admiration of, Christ, rejoicing and glorying. Nor does he for a while address any word of exhortation to his followers, but only shows wonder and astonishment at Him who was present, and declares to all the Gift which He came to give, and the manner of purification. For ‘the Lamb’ declares both these things. John didn’t say, ‘Who shall take’, or ‘Who has taken’; but, ‘who takes away the sin

⁵⁵ John Chrysostom, Homilies on John, XVIII, 2.

⁵⁶ John Chrysostom, Homilies on John, XVIII, 2.

of the world' (John 1:29); because this He ever does. He took them away not then only when He suffered, but from that time even to the present. He is not repeatedly crucified, (for He offered One Sacrifice for sins,) but by that One continually purging them.”

Clement of Alexandria pointed out⁵⁷ that John the Baptist brought the Old Testament era to a close, and announced the Kingdom of God. Christ had been prophesied for many generations, but was now present!

“The law and the prophets *were* until John. Since that time the kingdom of God has been preached, and everyone is pressing into it' (Luke 16:16). John, though speaking more clearly and no longer prophesying, but pointing out as now present, Him, who was proclaimed symbolically from the beginning, nevertheless said: 'There comes One after me who is mightier than I, whose sandal strap I am not worthy to stoop down and loose' (Mark 1:7). For John confessed that he is not worthy to baptize so great a Power; for it behooves those, who purify others, to free the soul from the body and its sins, as the foot from the thong. Perhaps also this signified the final exertion of the Savior's power toward us — the immediate, I mean — that by His presence, concealed in the enigma of prophecy. John pointed out to sight Him that had been prophesied, and indicated the Presence which had come, walking forth into the light, loosed the sandal strap of the oracles of the old economy, by unveiling the meaning of the symbols.

Ambrose of Milan compared⁵⁸ the Baptism of John with that of Christ and the Apostles. John baptized for the remission of sins in the Name of the coming Christ, where the Holy Spirit was not given. The baptism of the Apostles included the giving of the Holy Spirit.

“The Ethiopian eunuch of Queen Candace, when baptized in Christ, obtained the fullness of the sacrament (Acts 8:27-39). And they who said that they knew not of any Holy Spirit, although they said that they had been baptized with John's baptism, were baptized afterwards, because John baptized for the remission of sins in the Name of the coming Jesus, not in his own (Acts 19:1-7). They knew not the Spirit, because in the form in which John baptized, they had not received baptism in the Name of Christ. For John, though he did not baptize in the Spirit, nevertheless he preached Christ and the Spirit. And then, when he was questioned whether he were himself the Christ, he answered: 'I baptize you with water, but a stronger than I shall come, Whose shoes I am not worthy to bear, He shall baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire' (Matthew 3:11, Luke 4:16, John 1:26-27). They therefore, because they had been baptized neither in the Name of Christ nor with faith in the Holy Spirit, could not receive the sacrament of baptism.”

“So, they were baptized in the Name of Jesus Christ, and baptism was not repeated in their case, but administered differently, for there is but one baptism. But where there is not the complete sacrament of baptism, there is not considered to be a commencement nor any kind of baptism. But baptism is complete if one confesses the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. If you deny One you overthrow the whole.”

⁵⁷ Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata*, V, 8.

⁵⁸ Ambrose of Milan, *On the Holy Spirit*, I, iii, 41-42.

Jewish Resistance to John the Baptist

“Then Jerusalem, all Judea, and all the region around the Jordan went out to him, and were baptized by him in the Jordan, confessing their sins” (Matthew 3:5-6). These were the common folks, not the Jewish leaders; John refused to baptize the Jewish leaders, calling them a brood of vipers.

John Chrysostom spoke⁵⁹ of the deceitful approach of the Pharisees to John the Baptist, wanting to trap him into saying something that they could use against him. But John was very kind to them, first denying that he was the Christ, then denying that he was Elijah, then denying that he was “That Prophet” predicted by Moses. John simply stated to them that he just baptizes with water to prepare for someone that they don’t know yet. The Pharisees had no excuse from this not to believe Christ, but yet they didn’t.

“When the priests and Levites asked John, ‘Who are you?’ (John 1:19), he did not at once give them what would have been the direct answer, ‘I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness’ (John 1:23). But what did he? He removed the suspicion they had formed; for, being asked, ‘Who are you?’ ‘He confessed, and did not deny, but confessed, “I am not the Christ”’ (John 1:20). The Apostle John notes that this is the part of an honest servant, not only not to take to himself his master’s honor, but also to reject it when given to him by the many. But the multitudes arrived at this supposition from simplicity and ignorance; these questioned him from an ill intention, expecting to draw him over to their purpose by their flattery. Had they expected this, they would have proceeded immediately to another question, and would have been angry with him for having given them an answer foreign to their inquiry. They would have said, ‘Why, did we suppose that? Did we come to ask you that?’ But now as taken and detected in the fact, they proceed to another question, and say,”

“‘What then? Are you Elijah?’ He said, ‘I am not’ (John 1:21). For they expected that Elijah also would come, as Christ declares; for when His disciples inquired, ‘Why then do the scribes say that Elijah must come first?’ (Matthew 17:10) He replied, ‘Elijah is coming first and will restore all things’ (Matthew 17:11). Then they ask, ‘Are you the Prophet?’ And he answered, ‘No’ (John 1:21). Yet surely, he was a prophet. Why then does he deny it? Because again he looks to the intention of his questioners. For they expected that some special prophet should come, because Moses said, ‘The Lord your God will raise up for you a Prophet like me from your midst, from your brethren. Him you shall hear’ (Deuteronomy 18:15). Now this was Christ. Why do they not say, ‘Are you a prophet?’, meaning thereby one of the ordinary prophets? But the expression, ‘Are you the prophet?’ with the addition of the article, means, ‘Are you that Prophet who was foretold by Moses?’, and therefore he didn’t deny that he was a prophet, but that he was ‘that Prophet’”.

“‘Then they said to him, “Who are you, that we may give an answer to those who sent us? What do you say about yourself?”’ (John 1:22) Notice them pressing him more vehemently, urging him, repeating their questions, and not desisting; while he first kindly removes false opinions concerning himself, and then sets before them one which is true. He said: ‘I am the voice of one crying in the

⁵⁹ John Chrysostom, Homilies on John, XVI, 2-3.

wilderness: Make straight the way of the Lord', as the prophet Isaiah said" (John 1:23).

"Now those who were sent were from the Pharisees. And they asked him, saying, "Why then do you baptize if you are not the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet?" (John 1:24-25) Do you see not without reason that they wished to bring him to this? The reason why they did not at first say so was, lest they should be detected by all men. And then when he said, 'I am not the Christ', they, being desirous to conceal what they were plotting within, go on to 'Elijah', and 'that Prophet'. But when he said that he was not one of these either, after that, in their perplexity, they cast aside the mask, and without any disguise show clearly their treacherous intention, saying, "Why baptizes thou then, if thou be not that Christ?" And then again, wishing to throw some obscurity over the thing, they add the others also, "Elias," and "that Prophet." For when they were not able to trip him by their flattery, they thought that by an accusation they could compel him to say the thing that was not."

"What folly, what insolence, what ill-timed officiousness! You were sent to learn who and from where he might be, not to lay down laws for him also. This was the conduct of men who would compel him to confess himself to be the Christ. Still not even now is he angry, nor does he, as might have been expected, say to them anything of this sort, 'Do you give orders and make laws for me?' But again, he shows great gentleness towards them. 'I baptize with water, but there stands One among you whom you do not know. It is He who, coming after me, is preferred before me, whose sandal strap I am not worthy to loosen'" (John 1:26-27)."

"What could the Jews have left to say to this? For even from this, the accusation against them cannot be evaded, the decision against them admits not of pardon, they have given sentence against themselves. How? In what way? They deemed John worthy of credit, and so truthful, that they might believe him not only when he testified of others, but also when he spoke concerning himself. For had they not been so disposed, they would not have sent to learn from him what related to himself. Because you know that the only persons whom we believe, especially when speaking of themselves, are those whom we suppose are more truthful than any others. And it is not this alone which closes their mouths, but also the disposition with which they had approached him; for they came to him at first with great eagerness, even though afterwards they altered. Both which things Christ declared, when He said, 'He was the burning and shining lamp, and you were willing for a time to rejoice in his light' (John 5:35). Moreover, his answer made him yet more worthy of credit. For Christ said, 'He who speaks from himself seeks his own glory; but He who seeks the glory of the One who sent Him is true, and no unrighteousness is in Him' (John 7:18). Now John did not seek his own glory, but refers the Jews to another. And those who were sent were of the most trustworthy among them, and of the highest rank, so that they could have in no way any excuse for the unbelief which they exhibited towards Christ."

What Did Christ Really Do in Baptism

Mankind was not interested in redemption by Christ; He came anyway out of love for His creation and treated her very kindly. Christ Himself was baptized, not because He needed to be, but to set a model for us. By His doing so, the demons were not sure who He was. The bystanders all thought that John was greater than Jesus.

John Chrysostom summarized⁶⁰ what Christ did in Baptism. Human nature was like a harlot, brutalized and oppressed with sin, not wanting anything to do with Him. He came to her anyway, not as a judge, but as a physician, out of love. He took the sinner and espoused her to Himself, sealing her, anointing her and carrying her in Himself. He remodeled her with Baptism and submitted her to fire to harden her against sin.

“Although Christ finds the harlot, i.e. human nature, full of sores, brutalized, and oppressed by demons, how does He act? He draws near to her. She sees Him and flees away. He calls the wise men saying ‘Why are you afraid? I am not a judge, but a physician’. ‘I did not come to judge the world but to save the world’ (John 12:47). Immediately He calls the wise men. Oh! New and strange event! The immediate first-fruits of His coming are wise men. He who upholds the world lies in a manger, and He who cares for all things is a nursling in swaddling bands. The temple is founded and the God dwells therein. And wise men come and immediately worship Him: the publican (Matthew) comes and is turned into an evangelist: the harlot comes and is turned into a maiden: the Canaanite woman comes and partakes of his lovingkindness. This is the mark of one who loves, to refrain from demanding an account of sins, and to forgive transgressions and offenses. And how does He act? He takes the sinner and espouses her to himself. What does He give her? A signet ring. Of what nature? The Holy Spirit. Paul said ‘Now He who establishes us with you in Christ and has anointed us *is* God, who also has sealed us and given us the Spirit in our hearts as a guarantee’ (2 Corinthians 1:21-22). The Spirit then He gives her. Next, He said ‘Did not I plant you in a garden?’ She said ‘yes?’ And how did you fall from there? ‘The devil came and cast me out of the garden’. You were planted in the garden and he cast you out: behold I plant you in myself, I uphold you. How? The devil dares not approach me. Neither do I take you up into Heaven; but something greater than Heaven is here: I carry you in Myself who am the Lord of Heaven. The shepherd carries you and the wolf no longer comes: or rather I permit him to approach. And so, the Lord carries our nature: and the devil approaches and is beaten. ‘I have planted you in myself’. Therefore, He said, ‘I am the vine, you *are* the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for without Me you can do nothing’ (John 15:5); so, He planted her in Himself. ‘But’, she said, ‘I am a sinner and unclean’. ‘Let this not trouble you, I am a physician. I know my vessel; I know how it was perverted. It was formerly a vessel of clay, and it was perverted. I remodel it by means of the laver of regeneration and I submit it to the action of fire’. For observe: He took dust from the earth and made the man; He formed him. The devil came, and perverted him. Then the Lord came, took him again, and remolded, and recast him in baptism, and He didn’t allow his body to be of clay, but made it of a harder ware. He subjected the soft clay to the fire of the Holy Spirit. ‘He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire.’ (Matthew 3:11). He was baptized with water that he might be remodeled, with fire that he might be hardened. Therefore, the Prophet speaking beforehand under divine guidance declared, ‘You shall dash them to pieces like a potter’s vessel.’ (Psalm 2:9). He did not say like vessels of earthenware which everyone possesses: for by a potter’s vessels are meant those which the potter is fashioning on the wheel. Now the

⁶⁰ John Chrysostom, Two Homilies on Eutropius, II, 11.

potter's vessels are of clay, but ours are of harder ware. Speaking beforehand therefore of the remolding which is wrought by means of baptism he said, 'You shall dash them to pieces like a potter's vessel' — He means that He remodels and recasts them. I descend into the ware of baptism, and the fashion of my nature is remolded, and the fire of the Spirit recasts it, and it is turned into a harder ware. And that my words are not empty boast hear what Job says, 'You have made me like clay' (Job 10:9), and Paul says, 'But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellence of the power may be of God and not of us'" (2 Corinthians 4:7).

Gregory the Wonder-Worker pointed out⁶¹ what Jesus meant when He asked John the Baptist to permit His baptism to fulfill all righteousness. Jesus was concealing His Divinity from the devil so that He could lead the devil into a trap where the devil might receive a mortal wound.

"Jesus answered John at His baptism: 'Permit *it to be so* now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness' (Matthew 3:15). Allow it to be so now; grant the favor of silence, O Baptist, to the season of My economy. Learn to will whatever is My will. Learn to minister to Me in those things on which I am bent, and do not pry curiously into all that I wish to do. Allow it to be so now; do not yet proclaim My Divinity; do not yet herald My kingdom with thy lips, in order that the tyrant may not learn the fact and give up the counsel he has formed with respect to Me. Permit the devil to come upon Me, and enter the conflict with Me as though I were but a common man, and receive thus his mortal wound. Permit Me to fulfill the object for which I have come to earth. It is a mystery that is being gone through this day in the Jordan. My mysteries are for Myself and My own. There is a mystery here, not for the fulfilling of My own need, but for the designing of a remedy for those who have been wounded. There is a mystery, which gives in these waters the representation of the heavenly streams of the regeneration of men. Allow it to be so now; when you see Me doing what seems to Me good among the works of My hands, in a manner befitting divinity, then attune your praises to the acts accomplished."

John Chrysostom explained⁶² what Christ meant by saying to John the Baptist, "thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness". By "righteousness", Christ meant the full performance of all the commandments.

"After His baptism Christ was to do away with the law: wherefore, even until this age, which admits of all sins, He continues fulfilling it all. That no one might say, that because He Himself could not fulfill it, He did it away. For neither do all passions assail us at all times; but while in the first age of life there is much thoughtlessness and timidity, in that which comes after it, pleasure is more vehement, and after this again the desire of wealth. For this cause, he awaits the fullness of His adult age, and throughout it all fulfills the law, and so comes to His baptism, adding it as something which follows upon the complete keeping of all the other commandments."

"To prove that this was to Him the last good work of those enjoined by the law, hear His own words: 'Permit *it to be so* now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness' (Matthew 3:15). Now what He saith is like this: "We have

⁶¹ Gregory the Wonder-Worker, Four Homilies, IV, On the Holy Theophany. Modern editors suspect that the eloquence of these homilies suggest that the work has been edited and interpolated over the centuries.

⁶² John Chrysostom, Homilies on Matthew, X, 1.

performed all the duties of the law; we have not transgressed so much as one commandment. Since therefore this only remains, this too must be added, and so shall we ‘fulfill all righteousness’. For He here calls by the name of ‘righteousness’ the full performance of all the commandments.”

John of Damascus stated⁶³ that Christ endured His passion and offered up prayer to His Father to guide us in how to live our lives. This was part of Christ “fulfilling all righteousness”.

“Prayer is an uprising of the mind to God or a petitioning of God for what is fitting. How then did it happen that our Lord offered up prayer in the case of Lazarus, and at the hour of His passion? For His holy mind was in no need either of any uprising towards God, since it had been once and for all united in subsistence with the God Word, or of any petitioning of God. For Christ is one. But it was because He appropriated to Himself our personality and took our impress on Himself, and became an example for us, and taught us to ask of God and strain towards Him, and guided us through His own holy mind in the way that leads up to God. For just as He endured the passion, achieving for our sakes a triumph over it, so also, He offered up prayer, guiding us, as I said, in the way that leads up to God, and ‘fulfilling all righteousness’ (Matthew 3:15). He did this on our behalf, as He said to John, reconciling His Father to us, and honoring Him as the beginning and cause, and proving that He is no enemy of God. He said in connection with Lazarus, ‘Father, I thank You that You have heard Me. And I know that You always hear Me, but because of the people who are standing by I said *this*, that they may believe that You sent Me’ (John 11:41-42). Is it not most manifest to all that He said this in honor of His Father as the cause even of Himself, and to show that He was no enemy of God?”

Gregory the Wonder-Worker also stated⁶⁴ that John obeyed Jesus’ command to baptize Him, while all the onlookers thought that John was greater than Jesus. God the Father tried to correct their erroneous imagination by speaking from heaven “This is My Beloved Son”; people heard His words in thunder, but they don’t seem to have understood.

“On hearing these words, the Baptist directed his mind to the object of the salvation, and comprehended the mystery which he had received, and discharged the divine command. For he was at once pious and ready to obey. Stretching forth slowly his right hand, which seemed both to tremble and to rejoice, he baptized the Lord. Then the Jews who were present, with those in the vicinity and those from a distance, reasoned together, and spoke thus with themselves and with each other. Was it, then, without cause that we imagined John to be superior to Jesus? Was it without cause that we considered John to be greater than Jesus? Does not this very baptism attest the Baptist’s pre-eminence? Is not he who baptizes presented as the superior, and he who is baptized as the inferior? They, in their ignorance of the mystery of the economy, babbled in such wise with each other. He who alone is Lord, and by nature the Father of the Only-begotten, He who alone knows perfectly Him whom He alone in passionless fashion begat, attempted to correct the erroneous imaginations of the Jews. He opened the gates of the heavens, and sent down the Holy Spirit in the form of a dove, lighting upon the head of Jesus, pointing

⁶³ John of Damascus, Exposition of the Orthodox Faith, III, 24.

⁶⁴ Gregory the Wonder-Worker, Four Homilies, IV, On the Holy Theophany. Modern editors suspect that the eloquence of these homilies suggest that the work has been edited and interpolated over the centuries.

out thereby the new Noah, yea the maker of Noah, and the good pilot of the nature which is in shipwreck. He Himself called with clear voice out of heaven, and said: 'This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased' (Matthew 3:17). He spoke of Jesus, and not the John; the one baptized, and not the one baptizing; He who was begotten of Me before all periods of time and not he who was begotten of Zacharias. He who was born of Mary after the flesh, and not he who was brought forth by Elisabeth beyond all expectation; He who was the fruit of the virginity yet preserved intact, and not he who was the shoot from a sterility removed. He who has had His conversation with You, and not he who was brought up in the wilderness. This is My Beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased: My Son, of the same substance with Myself, and not of a different. He is of one substance with Me according to what is unseen, and of one substance with you according to what is seen, yet without sin. This is He who along with Me created man. This is My Beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased."

Athanasius of Alexandria explained⁶⁵ why Arius was declared a heretic at the Council of Nicaea, citing the Scriptures discussed at the Council. The Arians ignored the statement from the Father at Christ's baptism, "This is My Beloved Son". They go on to say that Christ is a creature and is only called God, as are other creatures, due to His participation in the divine nature. The Arians are unable to see the absurdity of what they say.

"The Bishops who assembled from all parts at the Council of Nicaea, began to hold their ears at the Arian statements. All with one voice condemned this heresy on account of them, and anathematized it, declaring it to be alien and estranged from the faith of the Church. It was no compulsion which led the judges to this decision, but they all deliberately vindicated the truth: and they did so justly and rightly. For infidelity is coming in through these men, or rather a Judaism counter to the Scriptures, containing Gentile superstition, so that he who holds these opinions can no longer be even called a Christian, for they are all contrary to the Scriptures. John, for instance, said, 'In the beginning was the Word' (John 1:1); but these men say, 'He was not, before He was begotten'. And again, he wrote, 'And we are in Him who is true, in His Son Jesus Christ. This is the true God and eternal life' (1 John 5:20). But these men, as if in contradiction to this, allege that Christ is not the true God, but that He is only called God, as are other creatures, in regard to His participation in the divine nature. Paul blames the Gentiles, because they worship the creatures, saying, 'They worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator' (Romans 1:25). But if these men say that the Lord is a creature, and worship Him as a creature, how do they differ from the Gentiles? If they hold this opinion, is not this passage also against them; and does not the blessed Paul write as blaming them? The Lord also says, 'I and My Father are One' (John 10:30); and 'He who has seen Me has seen the Father' (John 14:9). Paul the Apostle who was sent by Him to preach, writes, 'Who being the brightness of *His* glory and the express image of His person' (Hebrews 1:3). But these men dare to separate them, and to say that He is alien from the essence and eternity of the Father; and impiously to represent Him as changeable, not perceiving, that by speaking thus, they make Him to be, not one with the Father, but one with created things. Who does not see, that the brightness cannot be separated from the light, but that it is by

⁶⁵ Athanasius of Alexandria, To the Bishops of Egypt, 13.

nature proper to it, and co-existent with it, and is not produced after it? Again, when the Father says, ‘This is My Beloved Son’ (Matthew 3:17), and when the Scriptures say that ‘He is the Word’ of the Father, ‘By the word of the Lord the heavens were made’ (Psalm 33:6), and in short, ‘All things were made through Him, and without Him nothing was made that was made’ (John 1:3). These inventors of new doctrines and fictions represent that there is another Word, and another Wisdom of the Father. They say that He is only called the Word and the Wisdom conceptually on account of things endued with reason, while they perceive not the absurdity of this.”

John Chrysostom also pointed out⁶⁶ how the grace of the Holy Spirit can be both fire and water at different times. This is not descriptive of the nature of the Spirit, since the Spirit is Simple and Invisible.

“Scripture calls the grace of the Spirit sometimes ‘Fire’, sometimes ‘Water’, showing that these names are not descriptive of its essence, but of its operation. The Spirit, being Invisible and Simple, cannot be made up of different substances. Now the one John declares, speaking thus, ‘He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire’ (Matthew 3:11); the other, Christ, ‘He who believes in Me, as the Scripture has said, out of his heart will flow rivers of living water’ (John 7:38). ‘But this He spoke concerning the Spirit, whom those believing in Him would receive; for the Holy Spirit was not yet *given*, because Jesus was not yet glorified’ (John 7:39). So also conversing with the woman, He called the Spirit water; ‘but whoever drinks of the water that I shall give him will never thirst. But the water that I shall give him will become in him a fountain of water springing up into everlasting life’ (John 4:14). So also, He calls the Spirit by the name of ‘fire’, alluding to the rousing and warming property of grace, and its power of destroying transgressions. But He calls the Spirit by the name of ‘water’, to declare the cleansing wrought by it, and the great refreshment which it affords to those minds which receive it. And with good reason; for it makes the willing soul like some garden thick with all manner of trees fruitful and ever-flourishing, allowing it neither to feel despondency nor the plots of Satan. And it quenches all the fiery darts of the wicked one.”

Baptism in One’s Own Blood

Some Christians, such as the thief on the Cross, to whom Christ said, “Assuredly, I say to you, today you will be with Me in Paradise” (Luke 23:43). Others, especially some of the martyrs, have had no opportunity for baptism. The Church has consistently declared that these people are welcomed to Paradise, and that their “baptism” is the blood they shed in their death.

Basil the Great compared⁶⁷ baptism by water, baptism with the Holy Spirit, baptism by fire and baptism in one’s own blood. Each of these is distinct and cannot be compared to one another. For the martyrs, baptism in one’s own blood can lead to salvation even if one has never been baptized by water. Basil describes baptism by fire as referring to Judgment Day.

“Through the Holy Spirit comes our restoration to paradise, our ascension into the kingdom of heaven, our return to the adoption of sons, our liberty to call

⁶⁶ John Chrysostom, Homilies on John, XXXII, v. 14.

⁶⁷ Basil the Great, On the Spirit, XV, 36.

God our Father. Also, our being made partakers of the grace of Christ, our being called children of light, our sharing in eternal glory, and, in a word, our being brought into a state of all ‘fullness of blessing’ (Romans 15:29). This applies both in this world and in the world to come, of all the good gifts that are in store for us, by promise, through faith, beholding the reflection of their grace as though they were already present, we await the full enjoyment. If such is the earnest, what the perfection? If such the first fruits, what the complete fulfillment? Furthermore, from this too may apprehend the difference between the grace that comes from the Spirit and the baptism by water. John indeed baptized with water, but our Lord Jesus Christ by the Holy Spirit. ‘I indeed baptize you with water unto repentance, but He who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire’ (Matthew 3:11). Here He calls the trial at Judgment Day the baptism of fire, as Paul says, ‘each one’s work will become clear; for the Day will declare it, because it will be revealed by fire; and the fire will test each one’s work, of what sort it is’ (1 Corinthians 3:13). And before now there have been some who in their championship of true religion have undergone death for Christ’s sake, not in mere similitude, but in actual fact. They have needed none of the outward signs of water for their salvation, because they were baptized in their own blood⁶⁸. Thus, I write not to disparage baptism by water, but to overthrow the arguments of those who exalt themselves against the Spirit. They confound things that are distinct from one another, and compare those which admit of no comparison.”

Cyril of Jerusalem pointed out⁶⁹ that martyrdom can substitute for Baptism, where the martyr is baptized in his own blood. Christ was also baptized this way. He was baptized, even though He was sinless, in order to give us grace, and to share in flesh and blood like us.

“If any man will not receive Baptism, he has not salvation; except only Martyrs, who even without the water receive the kingdom. For when the Savior, in redeeming the world by His Cross, was pierced in the side, He shed forth blood and water. This was done that men, living in times of peace, might be baptized in water, and, in times of persecution, in their own blood. For martyrdom also the Savior tends to call a baptism, saying, ‘Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, and be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?’ (Mark 10:38) And the Martyrs confess, by being made a spectacle to the world, both to angels and to men (1 Corinthians 4:9); and you will soon confess — but it is not yet the time for you to hear of this.”

“Jesus sanctified Baptism by being Himself baptized. If the Son of God was baptized, what godly man is he that despises Baptism? But He was baptized not that He might receive remission of sins, for He was sinless; but being sinless, He was baptized, that He might give to them that are baptized a divine and excellent grace. ‘For since ‘the children have partaken of flesh and blood, He Himself likewise shared in the same’ (Hebrews 2:14), that having been made partakers of His presence in the flesh we might be made partakers also of His Divine grace. Thus, Jesus was baptized, that thereby we again by our participation might receive both salvation and honor.”

⁶⁸ For a discussion on “Baptism in one’s own blood”, see Cyril of Jerusalem, Catechetical Lectures III, 10.

⁶⁹ Cyril of Jerusalem, Catechetical Lectures, III, 10-11.

Ambrose of Milan spoke⁷⁰ of the “fire” as the Holy Spirit dwelling in us. This is also true and is the Holy Spirit teaching and guiding us in all things.

“We form the congregation of the Lord. We recognize the propitiation of our Lord God, which our Propitiator wrought in His passion. I think, too, we cannot leave out of sight that fire, when we read that the Lord Jesus baptizes with the Holy Spirit and with fire (John 1:33), as John said in his Gospel. Rightly was the sacrifice consumed, for it was for sin. But that fire was a type of the Holy Spirit, Who was to come down after the Lord’s ascension, and forgive the sins of all, and Who like fire inflames the mind and faithful heart. Wherefore Jeremiah, after receiving the Spirit, says: ‘His word was in my heart like a burning fire shut up in my bones; I was weary of holding *it* back, and I could not’ (Jeremiah 20:9). In the Acts of the Apostles, also, when the Holy Spirit descended upon the Apostles and those others who were waiting for the Promise of the Father, we read that tongues as of fire were distributed among them (Acts 2:3). The soul of each one was so uplifted by His influence that they were supposed to be full of new wine (Acts 2:13), who instead had received the gift of a diversity of tongues.”

Separating the Wheat from the Chaff

What did John the Baptist mean by the chaff? (Matthew 3:12) Who are they? The “wheat” is the people of God, who are faithful to the Lord. The chaff on wheat is the loose, inedible outer covering that must be removed by threshing. It is very lightweight, and is easily blown away by the wind once it is removed from the grain. The chaff grew up with the wheat and was part of the wheat at one time. Similarly, with people in the Church: some may go to Church all their lives, but never seem to get the message, and end up apostate. The persecution of the Church helps to make clear who is faithful to God and who isn’t.

Irenaeus of Lyons stated⁷¹ that man was molded in the image of God; but the chaff is those who apostatize and who are cast away. Tribulation is necessary to sort out the wheat from the chaff.

“Throughout all time, man, having been molded at the beginning by the hands of God, that is, of the Son and of the Spirit, is made after the image and likeness of God. The chaff, which is the apostasy, is cast away; but the wheat, that is, those who bring forth fruit to God in faith, is gathered into the barn. Tribulation is necessary for those who are saved, that having been after a manner broken up, and rendered fine, and sprinkled over by the patience of the Word of God, and set on fire for purification, they may be fitted for the royal banquet. As a certain man of ours⁷² said, when he was condemned to the wild beasts because of his testimony with respect to God: ‘I am the wheat of Christ, and am ground by the teeth of the wild beasts, that I may be found the pure bread of God’”.

Cyprian of Carthage stated⁷³ that it should disturb no one if the enemies of God depart from the Church. Some of Christ’s own disciples departed from Him when He began to speak of the

⁷⁰ Ambrose of Milan, Duties of the Clergy, III, xviii, 102.

⁷¹ Irenaeus of Lyons, Against Heresies, V, xxviii, 4.

⁷² That is, Ignatius of Antioch, Epistle to the Romans, Chapter 4.

⁷³ Cyprian of Carthage, Epistles, LIV, 7

Eucharist. People choose either death or salvation! And people perish through no one's fault but their own.

“It should disturb no one who is faithful and mindful of the Gospel, and retains the commands of the apostle if in the last days certain persons depart from the Church. Many are proud, contumacious, and enemies of God's priests; they depart from the Church or act against the Church, since both the Lord and His apostles have previously foretold that there should be such. Let no one wonder that the servant placed over them should be forsaken by some, when Christ's own disciples forsook Him, who performed such great and wonderful works, and illustrated the attributes of God the Father by the testimony of His doings. And yet He did not rebuke them when they went away, nor even severely threaten them; but rather, turning to His apostles, He said, ‘Do you also want to go away?’ (John 6:67) He observed the law whereby a man left to his own liberty, and established in his own choice, himself desires for himself either death or salvation. Nevertheless, Peter, upon whom the Church had been built by the same Lord, speaking one for all, and answering with the voice of the Church, says, ‘Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. Also, we have come to believe and know that You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.’ (John 6:68-69). This signifies, doubtless, and shows that those who depart from Christ perish by their own fault, yet that the Church which believes on Christ, and holds that which it has once learned, never departs from Him at all. Those are the Church who remain in the house of God; but that, on the other hand, they are not the plantation planted by God the Father (Matthew 15:13), whom we see not to be established with the stability of wheat. Some are blown about like chaff by the breath of the enemy scattering them, of whom John also in his epistle says, ‘They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us; but *they went out* that they might be made manifest, that none of them were of us’ (1 John 2:19). Paul also warns us, when evil men perish out of the Church, not to be disturbed, nor to let our faith be lessened by the departure of the faithless. ‘For what if some did not believe? Will their unbelief make the faithfulness of God without effect? Certainly not! Indeed, let God be true but every man a liar’” (Romans 3:3-4).

Tertullian of Carthage stated⁷⁴ that persecution of believers is a major mechanism for sifting the wheat from the chaff. This is also analogous to Jacob's Ladder. Persecution is a contest, where we do not struggle against flesh and blood.

“Let me say, that nothing happens without God's will. Persecution is especially worthy of God, and, so to speak, requisite, for the approving, or if you will, the rejection of His professing servants. For what is the issue of persecution, what other result comes of it, but the approving and rejecting of faith, in regard to which the Lord will certainly sift His people? Persecution, by means of which one is declared either approved or rejected, is just the judgment of the Lord. But the judging properly belongs to God alone. This is that fan which even now cleanses the Lord's threshing-floor — the Church, I mean — winnowing the mixed heap of believers, and separating the grain of the martyrs from the chaff of the deniers (Matthew 3:12). This is also the ladder of which Jacob dreams (Genesis 28:12), on

⁷⁴ Tertullian of Carthage, De Fuga in Persecutione, 1.

which are seen, some mounting up to higher places, and others going down to lower. So, too, persecution may be viewed as a contest. By whom is the conflict proclaimed, but by Him by whom the crown and the rewards are offered? You find in the Revelation its edict, setting forth the rewards by which He incites to victory (Revelation 11:18). Those, above all, whose is the distinction of conquering in persecution, in very deed contending in their victorious struggle not against flesh and blood, but against spirits of wickedness.”

Cyprian of Carthage stated⁷⁵ that heresies are often the vehicle that is used to separate the wheat from the chaff, and Paul warned the Corinthians about this. The Lord permits this to happen in order that the faithful might be approved and the chaff detected.

“Heresies not only have frequently been originated, but continue to be so; while the perverted mind has no peace — while a discordant faithlessness does not maintain unity. The Lord permits these things to be, while the choice of one’s own liberty remains, so that while the discrimination of truth is testing our hearts and our minds, the sound faith of those that are approved may shine forth with manifest light. The Holy Spirit forewarns, ‘For there must also be heresies among you, that those who are approved may be recognized among you’ It is needful also that there should be heresies, that they which are approved may be made manifest among you’ (1 Corinthians 11:19). Thus, the faithful are approved, thus the perfidious are detected; thus, even here, before the day of judgment, the souls of the righteous and of the unrighteous are already divided, and the chaff is separated from the wheat. These are they who of their own accord, without any divine arrangement, set themselves to preside among the daring strangers assembled. They appoint themselves prelates without any law of ordination, who assume to themselves the name of bishop, although no one gives them the episcopate. The Holy Spirit points out in the Psalms (Psalm 1:1) as sitting in the seat of pestilence, plagues, and spots of the faith, deceiving with serpent’s tongue, and artful in corrupting the truth. They vomit forth deadly poisons from pestilential tongues; their speech creeps like a cancer, their discourse forms a deadly poison in the heart and breast of everyone.”

Cyprian of Carthage also stated⁷⁶ that a struggle during a contest is what demonstrates what is the wheat and what is the chaff. This was shown very clearly by the life of the Apostle Paul.

“Unless the battle has preceded, there cannot be a victory; when there shall have been, in the onset of battle, the victory, then also the crown is given to the victors. For the helmsman is recognized during the tempest; in the warfare the soldier is proved. It is a wanton display when there is no danger. Struggle in adversity is the trial of the truth. The tree which is deeply founded in its root is not moved by the onset of winds, and the ship which is compacted of solid timbers is beaten by the waves and is not shattered. When the threshing-floor brings out the grain, the strong and robust grains despise the winds, while the empty chaff is carried away by the blast that falls upon it.”

“Thus, the Apostle Paul, after shipwrecks, after scourging, after many and grievous tortures of the flesh and body, says that he is not grieved, but benefited by

⁷⁵ Cyprian of Carthage, Treatises, I, 10.

⁷⁶ Cyprian of Carthage, Treatises, VII, 12-13.

his adversity, in order that while he is sorely afflicted, he might more truly be proven.”

John Chrysostom stated⁷⁷ that the righteous are unconquerable, while sinners are vulnerable, and are likened to chaff, which is easily blown away by the wind. The sinner is constantly at war with himself due to his guilty conscience. The righteous are like a mountain; trying to destroy a mountain by hurling stones from a catapult at it just won't work!

“If you wish, I will endeavor to teach you by actual facts how the righteous are unconquerable, but the condition of sinners is vulnerable. Listen to how the prophet intimates both these particulars. ‘Not so the ungodly; not so: but rather as the chaff which the wind scatters away from the face of the earth.’ (Psalm 1:4 LXX). For even as chaff lies exposed to the gusts of wind, and is easily caught up and swept along, so also the sinner is driven about by every temptation. While he is at war with himself, and bears the warfare about with him, what hope of safety does he possess; betrayed as he is at home, and carrying with him that conscience, which is a constant enemy? Such, however, is not the nature of the righteous man. But what manner of man is he? Hear the same prophet, saying, ‘They that trust in the Lord *shall be* as mount Zion’ (Psalm 125:1). What does it mean, ‘As Mount Zion?’ ‘*Which* cannot be moved, *but* abides forever’. For whatever engines you bring up, whatever darts you hurl, desiring to overturn a mountain, you will never be able to prevail; for, how can you? You will break in pieces all your engines, and exhaust your own strength. Such also is the righteous man. Whatever blows he may receive, he suffers no evil therefrom; but destroys the power of those who take counsel against him, and not of men only, but of demons. You have heard often what engines the Devil brought up against Job; but not only did he fail to overthrow that mountain, but drew back exhausted, his darts broken to pieces, and his engines rendered useless, by that assault!”

John Cassian quoted Abbot Piamun to say⁷⁸ that we are injured due to our own fault, not due to someone else's attack. The threshing floor of this life separates the wheat from the chaff, but we must remember that the wheat and the chaff are often together in the Church.

“I cannot be injured by any man however spiteful, if I do not fight against myself with warlike heart. If I am injured, the fault is not owing to the other's attack, but to my own impatience. Just as strong and solid food is good for a man in good health, so it is bad for a sick one. But it cannot hurt the man who takes it, unless the weakness of its recipient gives it its power to hurt. If then any similar temptation ever arises among brethren, we need never be shaken out of the even tenor of our ways and give an opening to the blasphemous snarls of men living in the world. We do not need to wonder that some bad and detestable men have secretly found their way into the number of the saints. So long as we are trodden down and trampled in the threshing floor of this world, the chaff which is destined for eternal fire is quite sure to be mingled with the choicest of the wheat. Finally, if we bear in mind that Satan was chosen among the angels, and Judas among the apostles, and Nicholas the author of a detestable heresy among the deacons (Acts

⁷⁷ John Chrysostom, Homilies on the Statues, VIII, 4.

⁷⁸ John Cassian, Conference of Abbot Piamun, III, xviii, 16.

6:5), it will be no wonder that the basest of men are found among the ranks of the saints.”

John the Baptist Warned about the Unquenchable Fire

John Chrysostom stated⁷⁹ that dying a miserable death by torture, fire or being eaten by wild animals is not evil; only dying in sin is evil. Dying in Christ by whatever means results in eternal joy; dying in sin results in eternal punishment and in the unquenchable fire.

“I have no fear of death, says one, nor of the act of dying, but of a miserable death, of being beheaded. Did John the Baptist, I ask, die miserably? For he was beheaded. Or did Stephen die miserably? For he was stoned; and all the martyrs have thus died wretchedly, according to this objection: since some have ended their lives by fire; and others by the sword; and some cast into the ocean. Others have been cast down a precipice; and others into the jaws of wild beasts. To die basely, is not to come to one’s end by a violent death, but to die in sin! Listen to the Prophet David moralizing on this very matter, and saying, ‘The death of sinners is evil’ (Psalm 34:21 LXX). He does not say that a violent death is evil; but what then? ‘The death of sinners is evil’. And justly so; for after the departure from this life, there is an intolerable punishment; undying vengeance, the envenomed worm; the fire unquenchable, the outer darkness, the chains indissoluble; the gnashing of teeth, the tribulation, the anguish, and the eternal justice.”

Gregory the Theologian mentioned⁸⁰ several different types of “fire”. Isaiah spoke of our own “fire”, which is our own opinions. Christ spoke of a “cleansing fire”, which is the action of the Holy Spirit. There is also the fire of Sodom, which is God’s wrath on the evil of society. “Fire” also proceeds the Lord’s Second Coming. Finally there is the “unquenchable fire” of the Last Judgment.

“One light alone let us shun — that which is the offspring of the baleful fire; let us not walk in the light of our fire, and in the flame which we have kindled (Isaiah 50:11 LXX). For I know a cleansing fire, which Christ came to send upon the earth (Luke 12:49), and He Himself is anagogically⁸¹ called a Fire. This Fire takes away whatever is material and of evil habit; and this He desires to kindle with all speed, for He longs for speed in doing us good, since He gives us even coals of fire to help us (Isaiah 47:14 LXX). I know also a fire which is not cleansing, but avenging; either that fire of Sodom (Genesis 19:24) which He pours down on all sinners (Psalm 11:6), mingled with brimstone and storms, or that which is prepared for the devil and his angels (Matthew 25:41). There is also that which proceeds from the face of the Lord, and shall burn up his enemies round about (Psalm 97:3); and one even more fearful still than these. There is also the unquenchable fire (Mark 9:44-48) which is ranged with the worm that doesn’t die but is eternal for the wicked. All these belong to the destroying power.”

John Chrysostom stated⁸² that we are familiar with the things of this world, but not with the things of the next. This creates a bit of a mystery! There is fire, but there is also darkness, and

⁷⁹ John Chrysostom, Homilies on the Statues, V, 7.

⁸⁰ Gregory the Theologian, Oration on Holy Baptism, XL, 36.

⁸¹ Anagoge is one of three methods of mystical interpretation, according to the distich, along with allegory and tropology (figurative analysis).

⁸² John Chrysostom, Homilies on Hebrews, I, 4.

it burns forever! People there gnash their teeth, but no one hears them. People here who have been imprisoned speak of the stench of a dungeon and being bound to murderers as more intolerable than death. There it will be worse!

“We are familiar with the things of this world; but what words can tell us the things of the next world, either the good or the evil? Regarding blessings, they surpass all thought, not speech only; their opposites are expressed in terms familiar to us. For fire, it is said, is there, and darkness, bonds and a worm that never dies. But this represents not only the things which are spoken of, but others more intolerable. And to convince you, consider this first: if it is fire, how is it also darkness? Do you see how that fire is more intolerable than this? For it has no light. If it is fire, how is it forever burning? Do you see how something more intolerable than this happens? For it is not quenched. Therefore, it is called unquenchable. Let us consider how great a misery it must be, to be forever burning, and to be in darkness, to utter unnumbered groanings, to gnash the teeth, and not even to be heard. For if anyone should be cast into prison, he speaks of the stench, and being laid in darkness, and being bound with murderers, as more intolerable than any death. Think what it is when we are burning with the murderers of the whole world, neither seeing nor being seen, but in so vast a multitude thinking that we are alone. For the darkness and gloom does not allow our distinguishing those who are near to us, but each will burn as if he were thus suffering alone. Moreover, if darkness of itself afflicts and terrifies our souls, how then will it be when together with the darkness there are likewise so great pains and burnings?”

John Chrysostom also stated⁸³ that Christ came to His own people and offered to make them children of God. Not only did they deprive themselves of this great honor, but they willingly and maliciously rejected Him, and chose the unquenchable fire instead.

“You have said that they were ‘His own,’ and that when ‘He came to His own, and His own did not receive Him’ (John 1:11); but what they shall suffer for this, what punishment they shall undergo, you have not gone on to add. You would have terrified them even more, and have softened the hardness of their insanity by threatening. Why then have you been silent? And what other punishment, he would say, can be greater than this, that when power is offered them to become children of God, they do not become so, but willingly deprive themselves of such nobility and honor as this? Although their punishment shall not even stop at this point, that they gain no good, but moreover the unquenchable fire shall receive them, as He has more plainly revealed. But for the present he speaks of the unutterable goods of those who received Him, and sets these words in brief before us, saying, ‘As many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, to those who believe in His Name’ (John 1:12). Whether bond or free, whether Greeks, barbarians or Scythians, unlearned or learned, female or male, children or old men, in honor or dishonor, rich or poor, rulers or private persons, all, He saith, are deemed worthy of the same privilege. For faith and the grace of the Spirit, removing the inequality caused by worldly things, has molded all to one fashion, and stamped them with one impress, the King’s. What can equal this loving-kindness? A king, who is framed of the same clay with us, does not

⁸³ John Chrysostom, Homilies on John, X, 2.

condescend to enroll among the royal host his fellow-servants, who share the same nature with himself; but Christ did this.”

John Chrysostom further pointed out⁸⁴ that just as there is a death and destruction of the body in the grave, so also there is a death and destruction of the soul in the unquenchable fire. The body dies when the soul leaves it, and the body eventually rots and is destroyed in the grave. The soul is immortal, however. The soul dies when it rejects God, but it continues to be aware of its condition. In the unquenchable fire, however, the Holy Spirit is withdrawn; then the soul is destroyed.

“Have you seen cruel and inhuman sacrifices? Do you want to see yet more shocking ones than these? Then I will show you no longer the bodies of men, but the souls of men slaughtered in the other world. Yes, for it is possible for a soul to be slain with the slaughter peculiar to the soul; for as there is a death of the body, so is there also of the soul. ‘The soul that sins, it shall die’ (Ezekiel 18:4). The death of the soul, however, is not like the death of the body; it is far more shocking. For this bodily death, separating the soul and the body the one from the other, releases the one from many anxieties and toils, and transmits the other into a clear place (Hades). Then when the body has been in time dissolved and crumbled away, it is again gathered together in incorruption, and receives back its own proper soul. Such we see is this bodily death. But that of the soul is awful. For this physical death, when dissolution takes place, does not let it pass, as the body does, but binds it down again to an imperishable body, and consigns it to the unquenchable fire. This then is the death of the soul. And as therefore there is a death of the soul, so is there also a slaughter of the soul. What is the slaughter of the body? It is the being turned into a corpse, the being stripped of the energy derived from the soul. What is the slaughter of the soul? It is its being made a corpse also. And how is the soul made into a corpse? Because as the body then becomes a corpse when the soul leaves it destitute of its own vital energy, so also does the soul then become a corpse, when the Holy Spirit leaves it destitute of His spiritual energy.”

John of Damascus pointed out⁸⁵ that both angels and demons are ignorant of the future. God may reveal the future to angels and command them to prophesy; demons also make predictions based on guesswork. Demons are fallen creatures and cannot repent anymore. Their lot is the unquenchable fire following the Second Coming of Christ.

“Of the future both the angels of God and the demons are alike ignorant; yet they make predictions. God reveals the future to the angels and commands them to prophesy, and so what they say comes to pass. But the demons also make predictions, sometimes because they see what is happening at a distance, and sometimes merely making guesses. Hence much that they say is false and they should not be believed, even although they do often, in the way we have said, tell what is true. Besides they know the Scriptures. All wickedness, then, and all impure passions are the work of their mind. But while the liberty to attack man has been granted to them, they have not the strength to over master any one; for we have it in our power to receive or not to receive the attack. Wherefore, there has

⁸⁴ John Chrysostom, Homilies on Ephesians, XVIII, v. 14.

⁸⁵ John of Damascus, Exposition of the Orthodox Faith, II, 4.

been prepared for the devil and his demons, and those who follow him, fire unquenchable and everlasting punishment” (Matthew 25:41)

“Note, further, that what in the case of man is death is a fall in the case of angels. For after the fall there is no possibility of repentance for them, just as after death there is for men no repentance.”

Baptism in Perspective

Baptism in the Church is so simple; yet it is a really serious matter. Each person is presented to God before myriads of angels and given grace by the water. As people came to John the Baptist, confessing their sins, they showed him their wounds and he applied the remedy. In the Church, chrismation, or anointing with oil, has always been a part of baptism to confer the Holy Spirit on the newly baptized. John the Baptist did not do this because the Holy Spirit had not yet been given to the Church. We note that Jesus didn’t begin preaching until after He was baptized. When we are baptized, all our sins are forgiven and we become a son of God by adoption; then the wolf and the lamb can begin to feed together.

Tertullian of Carthage pointed out⁸⁶ that major heretics couldn’t believe in Baptism because it was so simple. Death is washed away by bathing? This was so incredible they couldn’t believe it! God had chosen the foolish things of the world to put to shame the wise.

“Is it not wonderful that death should be washed away by bathing? But it is the more to be believed if the wonderfulness is the reason why it is *not* believed. For divine works are normally above all wonder. We ourselves wonder, but it is *because* we believe. Incredulity, on the other hand, wonders, but does *not* believe; for the simple *acts* it wonders at, as if they were vain; the grand *results*, as if they were impossible. And it is just as you think, sufficient to meet each point is the divine declaration that says: ‘God has chosen the foolish things of the world to put to shame the wise’ (1 Corinthians 1:27). Also, ‘The things which are impossible with men are possible with God’ (Luke 18:27). For if God is wise and powerful (which even they who pass Him by do not deny), it is with good reason that He lays the material causes of His own operation in the contraries of wisdom and of power. That is, in foolishness and impossibility; since every virtue receives its cause from those things by which it is called forth.”

Cyril of Jerusalem pointed out⁸⁷ how serious a matter Baptism really is! Each person is presented to God before tens of thousands of angels, and the baptismal font is not just water, but spiritual grace is given to the water. Since man is a two-fold nature, soul and body, the water cleanses the body and the Spirit seals the soul. Without this baptism, one cannot enter the kingdom of heaven, as was demonstrated by Cornelius.

“Baptism is in truth a serious matter, brethren, and you must approach it by paying attention. Each one of you is about to be presented to God before tens of thousands of the Angelic Hosts; the Holy Spirit is about to seal your souls; you are to be enrolled in the army of the Great King. Therefore, make ready, and equip yourselves, by putting on I mean, not bright apparel, but piety of soul with a good conscience. Regard not the Laver as simple water, but rather regard the spiritual grace that is given with the water. Remember that the offerings brought to the

⁸⁶ Tertullian of Carthage, On Baptism, III, ii, 2.

⁸⁷ Cyril of Jerusalem, Catechetical Lectures, III, 3-4.

heathen altars, though simple in their nature, become defiled by the invocation of the idols. So also, the simple water having received the invocation of the Holy Spirit, and of Christ, and of the Father, acquires a new power of holiness.”

“For since man is of twofold nature, soul and body, the purification also is twofold, the one incorporeal for the incorporeal part, and the other bodily for the body. The water cleanses the body, and the Spirit seals the soul; that we may ‘draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water’ (Hebrews 10:22). When going down, therefore, into the water, think not of the bare element, but look for salvation by the power of the Holy Spirit: for without both thou canst not possibly be made perfect. It is not I that say this, but the Lord Jesus Christ, who has the power in this matter. For He said, ‘Unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God’ (John 3:3). Neither does he that is baptized with water, but not found worthy of the Spirit, receive the grace in perfection; nor if a man be virtuous in his deeds, but receive not the seal by water, shall he enter into the kingdom of heaven. A bold saying, but not mine, for it is Jesus who has declared it: and here is the proof of the statement from Holy Scripture. Cornelius was a just man, who was honored with a vision of angels, and had set up his prayers and alms-deeds as a good memorial before God in heaven. Peter came, and the Spirit was poured out on them that believed, and they spoke with other tongues, and prophesied. After the grace of the Spirit the Scripture said that Peter commanded them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ’ (Acts 10:48); in order that, the soul having been born again by faith, the body also might by the water partake of the grace.”

Tertullian of Carthage pointed out⁸⁸ that just as the Spirit of God hovered over the waters at the beginning, so the Spirit hovers over the waters of the baptismal font, sanctifying the waters. Both the spirit of a man and his flesh are washed in the font.

“All waters, after invocation of God, attain the sacramental power of sanctification. For the Spirit immediately supervenes from the heavens, and rests over the waters, sanctifying them from Himself. Being thus sanctified, they imbibe at the same time the power of sanctifying. The similitude may be admitted to be suitable to the simple act; that, since we are defiled by sins, as it were by dirt, we should be washed from those stains in waters. But as sins do not show themselves in our *flesh* (inasmuch as no one carries on his skin the spot of idolatry, fornication, or fraud), so persons of that kind are foul in the *spirit*, which is the author of the sin. For the spirit is in charge, the flesh servant. Yet they each mutually share the guilt: the spirit, on the ground of command; the flesh, of subservience. Therefore, after the waters have been endued with medicinal virtue through the intervention of the angel, the spirit is corporally washed in the waters, and the flesh is in the same spiritually cleansed.”

Cyril of Jerusalem pointed out⁸⁹ how the people coming to John the Baptist did so confessing their sins. They showed their wounds, then he applied the remedies. On the other hand, John criticized those who did not confess as a generation of vipers.

⁸⁸ Tertullian of Carthage, On Baptism, III, ii, 4.

⁸⁹ Cyril of Jerusalem, Catechetical Lectures, III, 7.

“John was baptizing in the Jordan, and there went out to him all Jerusalem (Matthew 3:5), to enjoy the first-fruits of baptisms: for in Jerusalem is the prerogative of all things good. But learn, O inhabitants of Jerusalem, how they that came out were baptized by him: confessing their sins (Matthew 3:6). First, they showed their wounds, then he applied the remedies, and to them that believed gave redemption from eternal fire. If you will be convinced of this very point, that the baptism of John is a redemption from the threat of the fire, listen to how he says, ‘O generation of vipers, who has warned you to flee from the wrath to come?’ (Matthew 3:7) Don’t be a viper, but as you have been formerly a viper’s brood, put off the skin of your former sinful life. For every serpent creeps into a hole and casts off its old skin, and having rubbed off the old skin, grows young again in body. In like manner, enter also through the strait and narrow gate (Matthew 7:13-14): rub off your former self by fasting, and drive out that which is destroying you. ‘Put off the old man with his deeds’” (Colossians 3:9).

Tertullian, the founder of Latin Christianity, pointed out⁹⁰ how chrismation following Baptism derived from the Old Testament. Chrismation is a fleshly act that has an extensive spiritual effect.

“When we have come up from the Baptismal Font, we are thoroughly anointed with a blessed unction, — a practice derived from the old discipline. On entering the priesthood, *men* were anointed with oil from a horn, ever since Aaron was anointed by Moses (Leviticus 8:12). Therefore, Aaron is called ‘Christ’ (Leviticus 4:5, 16 LXX), from the ‘chrism’, which is ‘the unction’; which, when made spiritual, furnished an appropriate name to the Lord, because He was ‘anointed’ with the Spirit by God the Father. ‘For truly against Your holy Servant Jesus, whom You anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, with the Gentiles and the people of Israel, were gathered together’ (Acts 4:27). Thus, too, in *our* case, the unction runs carnally, (*i.e.* on the body,) but profits spiritually. In the same way the *act* of baptism too is carnal, in that we are plunged in water, but the effect is spiritual, in that we are freed from sins.”

Tertullian of Carthage also pointed out⁹¹ that John the Baptist’s baptism was earthly because it did not supply the Holy Spirit. John’s prophecy was heavenly, but even that failed when he was in prison. John stated that he who prepares does not necessarily perfect, and this he expected Christ to do.

“In the Acts of the Apostles, we find that men who had ‘John’s baptism’ had not received the Holy Spirit, whom they hadn’t even heard about (Acts 19:1-7). That baptism, then, was no celestial thing which furnished no celestial endowments. The very thing which *was* celestial in John — the Spirit of prophecy — completely failed, after the transfer of the whole Spirit to the Lord. As a result, John sent to inquire whether Christ, whom he had himself preached (Matthew 3:11-12), whom he had pointed out when coming to him, were ‘HE’ (Matthew 11:2-6). And so ‘the baptism of repentance’ (Acts 19:4) was dealt with as if it were a candidate for the remission and sanctification shortly about to follow in Christ. For in that John used to preach ‘baptism *for* the remission of sins’ (Mark 1:4), the

⁹⁰ Tertullian of Carthage, On Baptism, III, ii, 7. Note that the Western Church at that time had the same practice as the Orthodox Church today.

⁹¹ Tertullian of Carthage, On Baptism, III, ii, 10.

declaration was made with reference to *future* remission. If it was true, (as it was) that repentance comes first, remission comes afterwards; therefore, this is 'preparing the way' (Luke 1:76). But he who 'prepares' does not himself 'perfect', but procures for another to perfect. John himself professes that the celestial things are not his, but Christ's, by saying, 'He who comes from above is above all; he who is of the earth is earthly and speaks of the earth. He who comes from heaven is above all' (John 3:31). And again, by saying that 'I indeed baptize you with water unto repentance, but He who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire' (Matthew 3:11). Of course, because true and stable faith is baptized with *water*, unto salvation; pretended and weak faith is baptized with *fire*, unto judgment."

Cyril of Jerusalem summarized Baptism by saying⁹² that Jesus didn't begin to preach until after He was baptized. We should follow that order also. When the Holy Spirit descended on Jesus like a dove, this was for the benefit of John, not Jesus, since Jesus had known the Holy Spirit from eternity. When we are baptized, we become a son of God by adoption. All our sins are forgiven; the sins of the 3,000 at Pentecost were forgiven, even though they had crucified Christ.

"Jesus Christ was the Son of God, yet He didn't preach the Gospel before His Baptism. If the Master Himself followed the right time in due order, ought we, His servants, to venture out of order? 'From that time Jesus began to preach and to say, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand"' (Matthew 4:17). When 'the Holy Spirit descended in bodily form like a dove upon Him' (Luke 3:22); not that Jesus might see Him first, for He knew Him even before He came in a bodily shape. This was for the benefit of John that John, who was baptizing Him, might behold Him. For 'I did not know Him, but He who sent me to baptize with water said to me, "Upon whom you see the Spirit descending, and remaining on Him, this is He who baptizes with the Holy Spirit"' (John 1:33). If you too have unfeigned piety, the Holy Spirit comes down on you also, and a Father's voice sounds over you from on high. Not, 'This is My Son', but, 'This has now been made My son'; for the 'is' belongs to Him alone, because 'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God' (John 1:1). To Him belongs the 'is', since He is always the Son of God; but to you 'has now been made'; since you have not the sonship by nature, but receive it by adoption. He eternally 'is'; but you receive the grace by advancement."

"Make ready then the vessel of your soul, that you may become a son of God, and an heir of God, and joint-heir with Christ (Romans 8:17). If you are preparing yourself that you may receive; if you are drawing near in faith that you may be made faithful; if of set purpose you are putting off the old man. For all things whatever you have done shall be forgiven you, whether it be fornication, or adultery, or any other such form of licentiousness. What can be a greater sin than to crucify Christ? Yet even of this Baptism can purify. For so Peter spoke to the three thousand who came to him, to those who had crucified the Lord, when they asked him, saying, 'Men and brethren, what shall we do?' (Acts 2:37) For the wound is great. You have made us think of our fall, O Peter, by saying, 'You killed the Prince of Life' (Acts 3:15). What salve is there for so great a wound? What cleansing for such foulness? What is the salvation for such perdition? 'Repent',

⁹² Cyril of Jerusalem, Catechetical Lectures, III, 14-15.

he said, ‘and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. (Acts 2:38). O unspeakable loving-kindness of God! They have no hope of being saved, and yet they are thought worthy of the Holy Spirit. You see the power of Baptism! If any of you has crucified the Christ by blasphemous words; if any of you in ignorance has denied Him before men. If any by wicked works has caused the doctrine to be blasphemed; let him repent and be of good hope, for the same grace is present even now.”

John Chrysostom interpreted⁹³ the meaning of the expressions used by John the Baptist to refer to what was about to happen. He also interpreted what Isaiah meant when he spoke of the wolf and the lamb feeding together: this refers to the Church and how everyone will get along.

“Luke does not repeat Matthew’s introduction, but setting down likewise all the prophecy. ‘Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill brought low; the crooked places shall be made straight and the rough ways smooth. And all flesh shall see the salvation of God’ (Luke 3:5-6). Do you perceive how the prophet has anticipated all by his words; the concourse of the people? Thus, when he said, ‘Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill brought low; the crooked places shall be made straight and the rough ways smooth’; he is signifying the exaltation of the lowly, the humiliation of the self-willed, the hardness of the law changed into easiness of faith. For it is no longer toils and labors, he said, but grace, and forgiveness of sins, affording great facility of salvation. Next, he states the cause of these things, saying, ‘All flesh shall see the salvation of God’; no longer Jews and proselytes only, but also all earth and sea, and the whole race of men. Because by ‘the crooked things’ he signified our whole corrupt life, publicans, harlots, robbers, magicians, as many as having been perverted before afterwards walked in the right way. He Himself likewise said, ‘tax collectors and harlots enter the kingdom of God before you’ (Matthew 21:31), because they believed. And in other words, also again the prophet declared the self-same thing, thus saying, ‘the wolf shall feed with the lamb’ (Isaiah 11:6 LXX). By the hills and valleys, he meant that incongruities of character are blended into one and the same evenness of self-restraint. So also, by the characters of the brute animals indicating the different dispositions of men, he again spoke of their being linked in one and the same harmony of godliness.

After John was beheaded, his disciples buried his body (Matthew 14:12) while Herod had his head thrown in the garbage dump (called “Gehenna”) outside the city. Joanna (the wife of Chuza, Herod’s steward) who was later one of the myrrh-bearing women and who contributed to the support of Jesus’ ministry (Luke 8:3), retrieved John’s head during the night and secretly buried it⁹⁴ in the Garden of Gethsemane.

To the people of his day, John was considered to be a prophet, and very much so. This is illustrated in the questions the chief priests and scribes posed to Jesus during the week before His crucifixion:

⁹³ John Chrysostom, Homilies on Matthew, X, 3.

⁹⁴ Nikolai Velimirovic, Prologue of Ochrid, June 27.

“By what authority do you do all these things? Who is He who gave you this authority?” Jesus returned a question to them: “The baptism of John - was it from heaven or from man?” They reasoned among themselves that if they said “from heaven”, Jesus would ask why they didn’t believe him. But if they answered “from men, all the people will stone us, for they are persuaded that John was a prophet” (Luke 20:1-6). Not only did the people consider John to be a prophet, but this belief was so strongly held that they would have stoned their religious leaders for blasphemy if they denied it.

Jesus confirmed what the people felt. He stated flatly that John the Baptist was the greatest of the prophets (Luke 7:24-28, Matthew 11:8-14). Yet Jesus went on to say that the least in the kingdom of God is greater than John (Luke 7:28). John was filled with the Holy Spirit from his mother’s womb (Luke 1:15). But the least in the kingdom of God has a body that is the Temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 6:19-20) and united in one new man with the risen Christ (Ephesians 2:15-21). This was not possible under the Old Covenant; God provided something better for us that they should not be made perfect apart from us (Hebrews 11:40).

Thus, as John prepared the people of his day with baptism, so the spirit of his message prepares us for baptism today. The four points of his message illustrate an agenda that newcomers to the faith still need to do today:

- Repent, the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand
- Be baptized with confession of sins
- Clean up our lives
- Messiah is coming.

The Epistle lessons illustrate the first, second and last of the above items.

The Mystery of Godliness

Revision B

Background: Timothy: Bishop of Ephesus

Paul first met Timothy in Lystra and Timothy was well spoken of by the brethren there and at Iconium (Acts 16:1-4). While the Acts 16 passage occurred at the beginning of Paul's second missionary journey (49 AD) or right after the Council of Jerusalem (Acts 15), Paul probably met Timothy on his first missionary journey. Timothy may have been among the elders (or presbyters) Paul and Barnabas appointed at the end of their first missionary journey in 48 AD (Acts 14:23).

Lystra was not Timothy's first contact with Christianity. Timothy and Titus were numbered among the original Seventy who were sent out by the Lord two by two to heal the sick and cast out demons (Luke 10:1-24). Since the Seventy were sent out around October of 29 AD (the year before the Crucifixion), Timothy had been a believer for over 20 years when Paul met him.

Paul's first letter to Timothy was written about 64-65 AD, or following Paul's release from house arrest in Rome; that is, after the end of Acts 28. During the intervening years 48-64 AD, Timothy had accompanied Paul on all his missionary journeys doing apostolic work.

Paul had recently left Timothy in Ephesus (1 Timothy 1:3) to set some things straight. The words Paul used for Timothy's mission there are very strong. In 1 Timothy 4:11, Paul instructs Timothy, "These things command (Greek: *paragello*) and teach (Greek: *didasko*)". The Greek word *paragello* comes from the Greek work *agellos* meaning "angel" and an adverb meaning near or close. Thus Paul is saying that Timothy's work in Ephesus is the Word of God coming to the Ephesians as in an angelic visit. These are strong words; it's not something that's optional whether they receive it or not. [The same word *paragello*, is also used in 1 Timothy 1:3, 1:5, 1:18, 5:7, 6:13, 6:17.]

Timothy may even have ordained other bishops in the area; otherwise 1 Timothy 3:1-7 seems out of place. In 1 Timothy 3:1-7, Paul describes qualifications and characteristics of a bishop. Paul knew many of these didn't apply to Timothy himself, but these very well may apply if Timothy, himself, was ordaining Bishops. Timothy remained Bishop of Ephesus until about 95 AD when he was martyred. Shortly after Timothy's martyrdom, the Apostle John returned from a 15 year exile on Patmos and ordained Onesimus, Philemon's former slave (Philemon 10), as bishop in Timothy's place.

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Paul wrote his first Epistle to Timothy probably from Macedonia (1 Timothy 1:3) where he went after leaving Timothy in Ephesus. From there he went to Nicopolis in Pontus (Titus 3:12) for the winter. A couple years later, Paul had been arrested again and Alexander the Coppersmith had been instrumental in Paul's accusation (2 Timothy 4:6), and he looked forward to being with the Lord (4:8). Thus 2 Timothy is the last letter he wrote.

Epistle: 1 Timothy 3:14-4:5

In the verses preceding, Paul described what type of person to look for to fill the role of bishops (vv.1-7), deacons (vv.8-13) and deaconesses (v.11). When he addressed Timothy's role in the House of God (v.15), he was definitely speaking of a leadership role.

Timothy's focus was to be in the House of God, which is the Church, the pillar and support of the truth (v.15). The Church has the Holy Spirit, called the Spirit of Truth (John 16:13), and by Him, we know that we are of the Truth (1 John 3:19, 4:6). The Head of the Church is the Lord Jesus, who is the Way, the Truth and the Life (John 14:6). Therefore the Truth supports the Church and the Church supports the Truth. One might contrast this with the world's view of truth as expressed by Pontius Pilate "What is truth?" (John 18:38). Having no spirit of truth for an absolute reference, any "truth" is relative.

This allusion to pillars in v.15 had greater significance in ancient architecture than it does today. In the Greek New Testament, just one word, *stulos*, is used to describe a pillar. In the Hebrew Old Testament, two different words are used to describe pillars: *ammud* (large pillars or column) and *matstsebah* (a small pillar or monument). Usage of pillars is shown in Table I.

From the use of pillars in Table I, the implications of Paul's letter to Timothy is

- Just as pillars are the sole support of a large building so the Church is the sole support of the truth.
- The Lord and His angels are described in terms of pillars; thus the Church is also since she is His Body.
- Leaders in the Church who stand for the truth are also called pillars.
- These pillars define the location of the House of God (i.e. Bethel).

As Paul wrote to Timothy, he fully expected that Timothy would be a pillar in the Church in Ephesus.

The Mystery of Godliness

As a pillar in the Church, Timothy would be involved with the mystery of godliness (v.16). In connection with this, Paul quoted an ancient creed or hymn that Timothy knew. Each of the lines or items in this creed is a mystery in itself (see Table II). Put together as godliness in us, "great is the mystery of Godliness." And Timothy, like Paul, was one of the "stewards of the mysteries of God" (1 Corinthians 4:1).

**TABLE I
SCRIPTURE REFERENCES TO PILLARS**

WORD	OCCASION	REFERENCES
Ammud	The Lord was a pillar of fire and a pillar of cloud in the wilderness.	Exodus 13:21-22, 14:19, 24
	The entire temple of Dagon rested on 2 central pillars; when Samson pushed these over, the temple collapsed.	Judges 26:25-29
	Hiram made huge pillars for Solomon's Temple	1 Kings 7:15-21
Matstsebah	Jacob set up a pillar to mark the spot God spoke to him at Bethel (i.e. House of God). He anointed the pillar with oil	Genesis 28:18, 22; 31:13
	Jacob returned to Bethel and God spoke to him again. He set up another pillar and anointed it with wine and oil.	Genesis 35:14-20
	A pillar to the Lord will be a sign and witness as Egypt returns to the Lord.	Isaiah 19:19
	A pillar marked the covenant between Jacob and Laban.	Genesis 31:45-52
	Sacred pillars to idols were strictly forbidden	Deuteronomy 16:22 2 Samuel 18:18; 2 Kings 3:2
Stulos	Those overcoming will be a pillar in the Temple of God.	Revelation 3:12
	James, Peter and John were pillars in the Church of Jerusalem.	Galatians 2:9
	A strong angel was described as having feet like pillars of fire.	Revelation 10:1

**TABLE II
THE MYSTERY OF GODLINESS**

ITEM	MYSTERY	REFERENCE
God manifested in the flesh by the Church	The Incarnation Further revealed	Luke 1:35 Ephesians 3:10
Justified in the Spirit	Holy Spirit as Dove at Baptism He committed no sin	Matthew 3:13-17 1 Peter 2:22
Seen by Angels	Angels watch over Christ	Luke 4:10-11; Psalm 91:11-13
Preached among the Gentiles	Paul's Ministry	Ephesians 3:8-10
Believed on in the World	Gentiles grafted in	Romans 16:25-26; Colossians 1:23
Received up in Glory	The Ascension	Acts 1:9-11

As one approaches baptism, one needs to realize that there is a mystery to what is being considered and that it is unlike anything else in the world. Baptism itself is a mystery whereby we are buried and raised with Christ (Romans 6:4).

The Mystery of Lawlessness

Working counter to the mystery of godliness, Paul wrote that there is also a mystery of lawlessness at work (2 Thessalonians 2:6-12), except this lawlessness is currently being restrained (2 Thessalonians 2:7). Just before the Lord's return, the restrainer will be taken out of the way (2 Thessalonians 2:8) and this mystery of lawlessness will be revealed. In the meantime, the Epistle lesson describes some of the activity that is at work by the mystery of lawlessness.

- Some will depart from the Faith (v.1)
- They will give heed to deceiving spirits (v.1)
- They will give heed to doctrines of demons (v.1)
- They will speak lies in hypocrisy (v.2)
- Their conscience will be seared with a hot iron (v.2)
- Their personal life may be very impressive; they may be monks; they may fast and be very restrictive about some foods (v.3)

John Chrysostom stated regarding those involved in this mystery of lawlessness, that "this implies that they utter not these falsehoods through ignorance and unknowingly, but as acting a part, knowing the truth, but having their conscience seared; that is, being men of evil lives" (Homily xii on 1 Timothy 4).

Fasting is fine (Luke 5:33-35) and has been practiced by the Church a great deal; remaining celibate is great if one can do it without burning inside (1 Corinthians 7:9). But more important is discerning the mysteries of God from the mysteries of lawlessness. Regarding discernment, Anthony and Athanasius of Alexandria wrote about how it is one of the greatest of the spiritual gifts (Hausherr, Spiritual Direction in the Early Christian East, 1990, chap. 3). Before considering a long program of fasting or celibacy, one needs to be prepared to discern the mysteries of God, because one will be partaking of the Lord's Supper - the Lord's Body and Blood in a mystery - immediately after baptism. (Compare also 1 Corinthians 11:28-30 regarding discerning the Lord's Body).

Paul wrote to the Colossians at about this same time to address a Gnostic heresy that was developing there. For more details, see the Epistle lesson for the 29th Sunday after Pentecost. One of the Gnostic tenets involved certain kosher foods and ascetical practices. Here Paul said, "For every creature of God is good, and nothing is to be refused if it is received with thanksgiving. For it is sanctified by the Word of God and prayer" (vv.4,5). This refers to meat that does not meet the conditions specified in Leviticus 11 for being "clean". John Chrysostom comments as follows: "First, no creature of God is unclean. Second, if it were to become so you have a remedy: seal it (with the sign of the Cross), give thanks, and glorify God, and all the uncleanness passes away" (Ibid.).

A Crown of Righteousness

Revision B

Epistle: 2 Timothy 4:5-8

Another important consideration before baptism is the reward at the end and the cost of getting there. As Paul wrote this Epistle, he was very near the end of his life (2 Timothy 4:6). According to tradition⁹⁵, he was beheaded by Nero shortly after writing this Epistle. He likened his life to fighting the good fight and to finishing the race (2 Timothy 4:7).

To the Corinthians, Paul used the same imagery: many people run in a race, but only one receives the crown or prize. Everyone who competes is temperate in all things; they discipline their body and bring it into subjection. Thus, Paul ran the Christian life; thus, he fought the good fight. Not with uncertainty; not as one who flailed at the air. He ran in such a way that he might obtain the crown (1 Corinthians 9:24-27).

In the verses preceding the Epistle lesson, Paul wrote of those who ran the race differently. “They will not bear with healthy teaching but according to their own lusts; they will pile up for themselves teachers who tickle the ear (i.e. teachers who say what they want to hear.) On the one hand, they will turn away their ears from the truth; they will be turned aside to fables” (2 Timothy 4:3-4, 1 Timothy 1:4). In this way they are not temperate and disciplined in the faith and will not attain the crown.

The Crowns We Receive

There are many allusions to crowns as the reward for the righteous at the end of time. Not only are there references to different crowns but to crowns that have different meanings. Table III traces references in the Scriptures to the Greek word *stephanos* and the Hebrew word *atarah*, both meaning crown. As one can see, there are many different varieties of crowns at the end of time and even within these varieties of crowns there are differing aspects.

For example, Proverbs dwells a lot on acquiring wisdom, where “the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom” (Proverbs 9:10). Wisdom is contrasted with foolishness and wisdom leads one to righteousness. (For a detailed comparison of Wisdom vs. Foolishness, see the 9th Sunday of Luke: The Parable of the Rich Fool.) Solomon advised men to “acquire wisdom; prize her and she will exalt you; she will present you with a crown of beauty” (Proverbs 4:5-9). Later Isaiah wrote that “the Lord of Hosts will become a crown of beauty to the remnant of His people” (Isaiah 28:5); and yet “Jerusalem will be a crown of beauty in the hand of the Lord” (Isaiah 62:3). In other words, the Lord and His people are crowned for each other. The illustration here sounds similar to the Orthodox wedding service where the bride and groom are each crowned for each other. (The crowns in the Orthodox wedding represent martyrs’ crowns.)

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⁹⁵ Nikolai Velimirovic, Prologue of Ochrid, June 29.

**TABLE III
USE OF CROWNS IN SCRIPTURE**

TYPE OF CROWN	USAGE	REFERENCE
At the end of time		
Crown of Righteousness		2 Timothy 4:8
Crown of Life		James 1:12, Revelation 2:10
Crown of Glory		1 Peter 5:4, Proverbs 16:31
Crown of Loving Kindness and Compassion		Psalm 103:4
Crown of Beauty		Proverbs 4:9, Isaiah 28:5, 62:3
Crown of Martyrdom		Tradition
In this Life		
Crown of Old Men	His Grandchildren	Proverbs 17:6
Paul's Crowns	Churches of Philippi & Thessalonica	Philippians 4:1 1 Thessalonians 2:19
Crown of the Wise	His Riches	Proverbs 14:24
Crown of a Husband	His Wife	Proverbs 12:4
Crown of Gold	For Kings	Esther 8:15 2 Samuel 12:30 Psalm 21:3

Thus, the crown of beauty seems to speak of some mystical aspect of the Body of Christ. Like the other crowns, we probably won't know very much details about them until the Lord returns. The point we need to understand, however, is that the rewards for the faithful at the end of time are significant and well worth the effort spent during this life in running the race and fighting the good fight. In the Parable of the Minas, one of the rewards was authority over ten cities (Luke 19:17). In other places we are spoken of as kings and priests to God the Father (Revelation 5:10; 1:6; 1 Peter 2:5, 9; Exodus 19:6; Isaiah 61:6).

In our Epistle lesson, Paul stated that a crown of righteousness is also laid up for all who have loved His appearance (2 Timothy 4:8). Examples of people who loved His appearance are Simeon (Luke 2:25), Anna (Luke 2:38) and Joseph of Arimathea (Luke 23:51) among others.

We Offer Ourselves as an Offering to God

As part of our calling, however, we must "be watchful in all things and endure afflictions" (2 Timothy 4:5). In Paul's case, he described his state of affairs as he wrote this Epistle as one of being poured out as a drink offering (2 Timothy 4:6).

Every reference in the Scripture to a drink offering (or libation) offered to the Lord is also in conjunction with a whole burnt offering and a grain offering. (For example, see Leviticus 23:18, 37, Numbers 29). The drink offering was always wine (Numbers 28:14) and it accompanied the

burnt offering whether it was the morning and evening continual burnt offering, a special Festival burnt offering or a private burnt offering (Numbers 28, 29). The burnt offering represents the entire surrender to God of the one offering the gift. The Hebrew word *olah* meaning burnt offering comes from the word that means to ascend like smoke; thus, the burnt offering was entirely consumed on the altar (Leviticus 6:8-13). Paul refers to this same type of offering relative to us: “I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, well-pleasing to God, which is your reasonable service (Romans 12:1).

The drink offering itself, being wine, refers to joy (Psalm 104:15, Ecclesiastes 10:19, Proverbs 31:6). Together with the burnt offering they both speak of one joyfully surrendering himself to the will of God. Paul spoke of this also to the Philippians: “And if I am being poured out as a drink offering on the sacrifice and liturgy (Greek *leitourgia*) of your faith, I am glad and rejoice with you all” (Philippians 2:17).

After speaking of himself as a drink offering, Paul said, “I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the Faith” (2 Timothy 4:7). John Chrysostom wrote that he had difficulty at first understanding why Paul spoke so loftily. Chrysostom concluded⁹⁶,

“Often, when I have taken Paul into my hands, and have considered this passage, I have been at a loss to understand why Paul here speaks so loftily: ‘I have fought the good fight’ (2 Timothy 4:7). But now by the grace of God I seem to have found it out. For what purpose then does he speak thus? He is desirous to console the despondency of his disciple, Timothy, and therefore bids him be of good cheer, since he was going to his crown, having finished all his work, and obtained a glorious end. You ought to rejoice, he says, not to grieve. And why? Because, ‘I have fought the good fight’. As a father whose son was sitting by him, bewailing his orphan state, might console him, saying, Weep not, my son; we have lived a good life, we have arrived at old age, and now we leave you. Our life has been irreproachable, we depart with glory, and you may be held in admiration for our actions; Our king is much indebted to us.”

There is a lot of depth in baptism and its preparation. Few new converts will understand all of it, but then we are encouraged to remember our baptism all our lives (Romans 6). And with our baptism as a firm foundation, we are able to look forward to taking our turn with the joy that is set before us that we may endure our crosses and despise the shame that the world gives us (Hebrews 12:2).

⁹⁶ John Chrysostom, Homilies on 2 Timothy, IX, v. 7.

