

John 2:1-12: First Sign: Kingdom Joy

by Pastor Jason Van Bommel

On the third day there was a wedding at Cana in Galilee, and the mother of Jesus was there. ² Jesus also was invited to the wedding with his disciples. ³ When the wine ran out, the mother of Jesus said to him, “They have no wine.” ⁴ And Jesus said to her, “Woman, what does this have to do with me? My hour has not yet come.” ⁵ His mother said to the servants, “Do whatever he tells you.”

⁶ Now there were six stone water jars there for the Jewish rites of purification, each holding twenty or thirty gallons. ⁷ Jesus said to the servants, “Fill the jars with water.” And they filled them up to the brim. ⁸ And he said to them, “Now draw some out and take it to the master of the feast.” So they took it. ⁹ When the master of the feast tasted the water now become wine, and did not know where it came from (though the servants who had drawn the water knew), the master of the feast called the bridegroom ¹⁰ and said to him, “Everyone serves the good wine first, and when people have drunk freely, then the poor wine. But you have kept the good wine until now.” ¹¹ This, the first of his signs, Jesus did at Cana in Galilee, and manifested his glory. And his disciples believed in him.

¹² After this he went down to Capernaum, with his mother and his brothers and his disciples, and they stayed there for a few days. – John 2:1-12, ESV

Introduction: What Happens at a Wedding?

What happens at a wedding? Besides women getting teary-eyes and cute little girls sprinkling flower petals down the aisle, what is really happening at a wedding? Simply put, the old order of things passes away and a new reality is ushered in. Old lives are left behind and a new life is begun. When two people become one flesh in the presence of God and their closest friends and family members, it is a transformation of joy and hope, brought about by a loving commitment in a covenant bond.

Jesus used the occasion of a wedding at Cana in Galilee to perform His first sign in the Gospel and John and to manifest His glory to His disciples. This morning, we will consider first the wedding itself and Jesus’ brief conversation with Mary. Then we will consider the miracle itself, when Jesus turns water into wine. Finally, we will consider John’s summary explanation of this sign and its effect on the disciples.

I. The Wedding and the Woman (vv. 1-5)

This wedding takes place in Day 7 of John’s narrative of the ministry of Jesus. John is very careful to narrate this week day-by-day for us, which is also significant given John’s opening, which recalls Genesis 1 and the original creation week. Let’s briefly review this week:

Day 1: John the Baptist’s testimony about himself, John 1:19-28.

Day 2: John the Baptist’s public testimony about Jesus, John 1:29-34

Day 3: The first disciples follow Jesus, John 1:35-42

Day 4: Philip and Nathanael follow Jesus, 1:43-51

On the third day . . . Day 7: Jesus at the wedding in Cana in Galilee (or possibly Day 6)

a. The Wedding & the Wine Problem

So Jesus comes to this wedding with His first disciples at the end of this first week described in John's Gospel. We don't know whose wedding this is, although it seems that Mary has some key responsibilities, since she takes the lack of wine personally. So, it could be a close family member, maybe someone on Mary's side of the family. John intentionally doesn't tell us whose wedding it is because the focus is on Jesus.

Weddings in ancient Israel were a huge deal. The wedding celebration would often last as long as seven days. The bride and groom were the queen and king of the wedding and wore crowns and sat at the center of attention. For people whose lives were very hard and who had little money and less freedom, the wedding was the highlight of their lives, a chance to be celebrated and to rejoice like no other time in life.

The groom was responsible to provide the wine for the wedding and running out of wine would be a major social disgrace. Having a public celebration without wine for all of the guests was considered deeply shameful. The fact that the wine was the groom's responsibility likely means that the groom was a close relative of Mary's, perhaps a nephew or cousin. Certainly, Mary takes the lack of wine as a personal concern and she relays it to Jesus with some urgency.

Some have speculated that Jesus and His disciples showed up at the wedding uninvited and that's why the groom ran out of wine, but John tells us that Jesus was invited, along with His disciples. Still given the fact that the disciples - at least four men - did not know Jesus a week before the wedding, it's natural to think that the groom had not accounted for them when he budgeted for the wedding and secured the wine. 4-5 extra men at a small village wedding could make a big difference in the wine consumption.

b. Jesus' Conversation with Mary

Jesus' conversation with Mary is surprising, perhaps even shocking. She comes to him with a simple but serious problem: They have no wine. Jesus responds by saying, "*Woman, what does this have to do with me? My hour has not yet come.*"

By calling his mother, "woman," Jesus was not using a rude term or being insulting, but this was not the normal way to address your mom. This was cold and distant, a verbal stiff-arm, a polite rebuff but still a rebuff. Imagine a Southern gentleman being told by his mom, "Son, they have no wine" and responding, "Ma'am, I fail to see what that has to do with me."

The problem with Mary's approach is that she was approaching Jesus as His mom, asking her son to help solve the problem. Jesus has entered into His public ministry and He cannot be commanded as a son by His mother any more. Now He looks only to His Heavenly Father for direction. He lives to please only Him.

Be rebuffing Mary's motherly request for her son to help, Jesus is free to act as the Son of God and do something beyond what anyone would have expected. Mary herself could not have been expecting Jesus to turn the water into wine. He had not yet done any miracles. Maybe she was expecting Him to gather His disciples and collect some money to go and buy some wine. We can't know for sure, but those who think Jesus rebuked Mary because she wanted Him to perform a miracle for selfish reasons are reading into the text what is not there.

It is interesting that, after Mary has been rebuffed by Jesus, she turns to the servants and says, "Do whatever he tells you." Mary is now no longer approaching Jesus as His mother, trying to get Him to do something. Rather, she is now placing herself in the position of a disciple, pointing the servants to Jesus and telling them to obey Him and not her.

We could say much here about Mary, but here's what's clear: Mary doesn't enjoy special access to Jesus as His mother. She must come to Him in faith as a disciple. All four Gospel writers make it clear that Mary and the younger brothers of Jesus have no special access and no special standing with Jesus. Matthew 12:46 – 50, Mark 3:31-35 and Luke 8:19-21 all convey the same story of Mary and the brothers of Jesus trying to get Him to listen to them and come home with them, and they all conclude with the same statement by Jesus: "My mother and my brothers are those who hear the word of God and do it."

And finally, as regards Mary, the last words we hear from her in the New Testament are directing people to Jesus, saying: "Do whatever he tells you." After the Gospels, Mary is never mentioned again in the New Testament. Though she was a believer and a part of the early church, she clearly seems to have had no leadership position or special place of honor within the church.

II. The Water and the Wine (vv. 6-10)

Turning from Mary and Jesus to the water and the wine, it is vital that we pay attention to every detail in John's account. He wastes no words and includes only what is important for us to know.

a. The Jars

The first thing John tells us about is not the water or the wine but the jars: "*Now there were six stone water jars there for the Jewish rites of purification, each holding twenty or thirty gallons.*"

The first obvious thing to note is that these are jars for ceremonial rites of purification, not for drinking. Jesus specifically chooses these jars and not any of the wine pitchers, which were now empty. John tells us there were six of these jars. Seven is a critically important number in John's Gospel. Jesus performed seven signs and spoke seven "I am" statements. Seven is the number of divine completion and it is prominent in all of John's writings and throughout the Bible. Here, these ceremonial water jars number 6, incomplete.

In His miracle, Jesus is making a statement about the incompleteness of the Jewish ceremonial law. It is incomplete as a way of salvation, as a way of purification. But there's more than that happening here.

b. The Water

Jesus tells the servants to fill the water jars, and we're specifically told that they filled them up to the brim. These jars, associated with the ceremonial law and with purification, were completely filled to the brim before the wine could be drawn. In the same way, Jesus had to completely fulfill the ceremonial law in the holiness of His life, in His sacrificial death, in His offering up of Himself as our High Priest, before purification and salvation could flow to us.

The fact that this miracle is meant to point us to the cross is not only found in the use of purification jars but also in Jesus' words to Mary that "My hour has not yet come." Very specifically in John's Gospel, when Jesus says "my hour" or "the hour," He means the cross. So, the full blessings of purification and salvation cannot be poured out yet, because Jesus' hour has not yet come. He has not yet laid down His life and paid for the sins of His people. He has not yet purchased our redemption and won our salvation. His hour had not yet come, but He could give a sign, privately to His disciples, that would point them to what He was going to accomplish.

c. The Wine

And so, once the water jars of purification are completely filled, the wine could flow. To be careful and comprehensive, I should mention that the text is somewhat unclear as to where the wine comes from. The most common interpretation is that the servants draw the water out of the water jars, once they've been completely filled. But the verb used for draw could better be understood to mean specifically "draw from a well," in which case the servants would be drawing the water from the well. Don Carson argues for this interpretation, but I'm not convinced of his argument.

What is clear is that the wine drawn is of the very best quality. The head-waiter – "the master of the feast" – who had to taste all of the wine that was being served, naturally thought the bridegroom had supplied this wine. He was so shocked when he tasted it, that he called the groom over to himself and said, *"Everyone serves the good wine first, and when people have drunk freely, then the poor wine. But you have kept the good wine until now."*

The wine Jesus makes is the very best of wine. Now I do feel obligated to make a comment or two here about wine: Some people have argued that this wine Jesus made was unfermented grape juice. Historically and culturally, that's an absurd assertion. In a world before refrigeration, it was difficult-to-impossible to keep wine unfermented and no one would even try because such wine would spoil. However, to speak to the other side for a moment, wine in the Bible was almost always served diluted, usually by adding two-to-four parts water for every part of wine. In other words, the alcohol content of wine in the Bible was 20% - 33% of what the alcohol content of modern wine is. Undiluted wine was considered unsafe to drink because you could not drink large quantities of it without being intoxicated, and so it was not served. Jesus and His disciples drank fairly large quantities – multiple full glasses – of high-quality but very diluted wine.

My point here is a simple one: The Bible does not condemn drinking wine. In fact, the Bible praises God for giving “wine to gladden the heart of man.” (Psalm 104:15) However, the Bible very clearly and repeatedly condemns drunkenness as dangerous, foolish and inappropriate for God's people. This is not at all the main point of the text, however, so let's return to that.

III. The Sign, the Glory & the Faith (vv. 11-12)

After the steward's commendation of the good wine, John concludes his account of this event by saying, “*This, the first of his signs, Jesus did at Cana in Galilee, and manifested his glory. And his disciples believed in him.*”

a. Jesus' First Sign

John refers to this miracle as the first of Jesus' signs. The Greek has different words that could be used for miracle. The Bible uses for main words which can be translated as miracle:

Ergon – work. This word emphasizes miracles as works of God.

Teras – wonders. This word focuses on miracles as wonderful displays.

Dunamis – powers. This word emphasizes miracles as demonstrations of the power or might of God.

Semeion – signs. This word emphasizes miracles as signs which point beyond themselves to a deeper truth about God or Christ's work of kingdom.

John consistently uses the last word, signs. In his Gospel, Jesus' miracles are always revealing something, teaching something, pointing us to something. Signs thus have a message, and the message of this first sign is this: In His coming hour of suffering and death on the cross, Jesus would fill up in Himself the ceremonial law and make purification for the sins of His people. He would be our purification, and once full atonement had been made and our sins had been cleansed, the wine of the joy of God's kingdom could flow. We would receive not just purification but . . .

- adoption as the children of God
- citizenship in the kingdom of God

- assurance of the love of God
- the indwelling presence of the Spirit of God
- the fruit of the Spirit (like the fruit of the vine) in love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control
- an inheritance in heaven, purchased by Christ and kept by the power of God

This miracle reminds me of Jesus' parable of the wedding feast, told in Matthew 22. In that parable, the king throws a wedding banquet for His Son, but none of the invited guests can be bothered to show up. They all think up plausible excuses, so the king sends his servants out to gather in the poor, the blind, the lame, the outcast and he brings them into the feast.

We are all poor, blind, lame, helpless creatures who have nothing of value to offer our king. We weren't on anyone's social calendar list of the most important and influential people. But God not only forgives our sin and cleanses us, but He invited us to come to His Son's wedding banquet, where we sit and feast with the king of the universe as joint-heirs with the Son of God!

b. Manifest Glory

John also say that in this first sign, Jesus glory was manifest. In other words, Jesus made known His glory to His disciples. How is Jesus glorious? He is glorious in many ways, but here He shows His glory as the bridegroom who never runs out of wine and whose wine is of the very best quality. Jesus as a bridegroom is contrasted with the poor, humble bridegroom of this village wedding, He could only afford cheap wine and he ran out of wine. But Jesus is the bridegroom whose wine is sweet and of the highest quality and which never runs out.

The blessings of Jesus' kingdom are freely and fully offered to all! He is the best of all bridegrooms and He demonstrated His abundant grace in this wonderful sign.

c. The Disciples' Faith

And finally, John notes that the disciples, upon seeing this sign "believed in him." This is sign-induced faith, which is real faith, but it is faith in response to sight. The disciples saw Jesus' glory and so they believed. Later, in John 20, Jesus would say, "*Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.*"

In the Bible, seeing and believing work as an ever-growing cycle of cause and effect. John explores this repeatedly in this Gospel. Seeing Jesus' glory leads to faith which leads to more seeing of His glory which leads to more faith, etc. But the cycle can also start with faith – trusting in Jesus leads to seeing His glory by faith, which strengthens our faith and leads us to see more of His glory. It is better – "more blessed" – to believe and then see, but God is gracious and sometimes gives us a glimpse of His glorious grace, usually through someone else, sparking our faith and getting the cycle going.

So, have you seen? Have you believed? The riches of the kingdom of God- the blessing of adoption and love and peace and freedom as the children of God- have been secured by Jesus. Come to Him to drink the wine so good only He can give it!