

Water Into Wine

John 2:1–11

Studies in John #4

WE'VE all been there. The anticipation of the groom to see his bride. All eyes turn around to see her coming down the aisle. It's a glimpse of heaven! What's the wedding all about for us? The bride—oh, and that appendage next to her called a groom! It's interesting that the other Gospels begin with Jesus' baptism and temptation before they get to his public ministry of preaching and performing miracles. But John gets right into it. And it all starts at a wedding.

This wedding in John 2 starts what has been called “the book of signs” that goes all the way to John 12 as Jesus reveals his glory through miraculous signs. Later comes “the book of glory” in chapters 13–21 as Jesus is lifted up on the cross and from the grave. In this story of the wedding in Cana Jesus' memorably displays his glory through the sign of turning *WATER INTO WINE*.

SIGNS IN JOHN'S GOSPEL

When it was all over John tells us it was the first of many of Jesus' **signs** (v. 11). Now, there are actually people who deny this really happened. Some say the story really is a big joke as Jesus and his disciples raised their glasses full of water and said sarcastically, “The best for last!” Others say Jesus was really telling his disciples to dilute the wine to make it last longer. Others say

it's based on the pagan myth of Dionysus, the god of wine.¹ But none of these theories can themselves hold any water!

The other Gospels most often use the word δύναμις when they speak of Jesus' healings and miracles, which is a word that expresses the "power" of the miracle itself. But John uses σημεῖον or "sign" to speak of healings and miracles. In fact δύναμις is used thirty-eight times in the other Gospels but never in John. Now this word σημεῖον is full meaning. What it communicates is not merely that Jesus did powerful things, but that those powerful things were outward signs of something more that was signified. By using this word John is saying, "Do not let your eyes and minds stop at the sign; let your hearts penetrate past the outward to what is signified." In other words, Jesus performed healings and miracles not to attract a crowd, entertain the masses, or get fanfare for himself like a first-century Vegas street magician; he performed signs to reveal his glory. Turn to the back of the Gospel for why:

Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written **so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.** (20:30–31)

THE STORY OF THIS SIGN

To have this eternal life we have to believe in Jesus and to believe in him we have to know who he is and what he did. The story of this sign begins with

ITS SITUATION in verses 1–2. Its details show it really happened; it was not a parable or based on a myth. It happened **on the third day** after Jesus and his disciples entered Galilee in 1:43.² On that day **there was a wedding at Cana in Galilee**. Galilee was the Roman province north of the province of Judea. The town of Cana was about 9 miles north of Jesus' hometown town of Nazareth. And on that day in that place there was a wedding.

I said at the beginning that for us, weddings are all about the bride; even more for us we get in and get out of the ceremony, have a several hour reception, then it's sayonara! In Jesus' world weddings were not just about two individuals being joined, but two families within a community. It started with a betrothal period that was much more than our idea of engagement as it took a legal divorce to break a betrothal. According to Jewish tradition a wedding began on Wednesday for a virgin and would last in upwards of seven days. Just like today families would go into debt to put on a show! For widows it began on Thursday and would last three days.³ The wedding day would begin with the village women washing and decorating the bride. The groom and his party would process through town at night by torchlight to the bride's home. Then the bride and groom and their parties would process together through town dancing and singing in the streets on their way to the groom's home where the wedding banquet took place.⁴ At this wedding in Cana was **the**

mother of Jesus⁵ (v. 1) and **Jesus also who was invited to the wedding with his disciples** (v. 2), mentioned in chapter 1: Andrew, Simon Peter, Philip, Nathanel, and the unnamed disciple (1:35), who is possibly John himself.

Then comes *ITS PROBLEM* in verse 3: **“They have no wine”** (v. 3).

Imagine you’ve invited most of your community to your wedding and you have an open bar, but the bar runs dry! How would that make you feel? Maybe not too bad as it’s super expensive and you budgeted for two drinks per person, which is plenty! Wine was and is so important to weddings in particular but to a life of joy more generally. The rabbis had a saying: “There is no rejoicing except with wine.”⁶ “But that’s those ridiculous rabbis and we all know Jesus drank Welch’s!” Scripture says this in Ecclesiastes: “Bread is made for laughter, and wine gladdens life?” (Ecc. 10:19) The Psalmist says the Lord “cause[s]...plants [to grow] for man to cultivate that he may bring forth...wine to gladden the heart?” (Ps. 104:14, 15) This gladness is so important. J.C. Ryle said, “True religion was never meant to make men melancholy. On the contrary, it was intended to increase real joy and happiness among men.” He went on to say, “The Christian who...walks the earth with a face as melancholy as if he was always attending a funeral, does injury to the cause of the Gospel. ...It is a positive misfortune to Christianity when a Christian cannot smile.”⁷

Back to the problem of no vino. In the world of our story a lack of wine implied a lack of friends and a lack of financial resources. And for food and wine to run out at a wedding brought shame and loss of family honor. In fact, the family of the groom hosting the wedding banquet could even be sued for inhospitality if they didn't provide wine!⁸ I should include *that* in all pre-marital preparation going forward! So one of the ways families and friends in towns and villages would alleviate the burden of providing so much at a wedding was forming a wedding association called a *shushbinim*. The fact that Mary and even Jesus get involved implies they are either related or are part of the *shushbinim*.⁹

On the heels of the problem comes *ITS RESOLUTION* in verses 4–10.

“Woman, what does this have to do with me?” (v. 4) Before we start flexing our muscles because Jesus approves misogynistic speech, slow down. First, this was a normal way for Jesus to speak. Second, in point of fact this was actually a respectful way of address as we hear him speak this way throughout the Gospel (Matt. 15:28; Luke 12:12; 13:10; John 4:21; 8:10–11; 20:13). From the very cross itself he said to his mother, “Woman, behold your son,” speaking of John (19: 19:25–26). Third, Jesus speaks here in the vocative case, which is a way of speaking formally in respect and affection.¹⁰ The point is there's not a great English translation for how Jesus is saying what he's saying.

Why does Jesus say this? Look at the context of what he says next: **“My hour has not yet come.”** Because **they have no wine** this community member is going to lose honor and Mary knows the angel’s promise that her son is the Son. “My son, do what you’re able to do as the Son.”

You have to know that behind all this are prophetic promises that abundance of wine would be a sign of the coming of the kingdom. Isaiah (25:6) and Amos (9:13–14) speak of a day to come when the Lord would provide a feast of well-aged, sweet wine that would flow down the mountains. Mary is asking Jesus to do what he can do; Jesus’ response shows that she doesn’t actually know that what’s she’s *really* asking for is the culmination of the eternal kingdom to come now!¹¹ But **my hour has not yet come**,¹² which in John’s Gospel is the cross.¹³ Glory will come, but only first through suffering. There’s an important application here for us. We need to learn patience and to wait for the Lord’s timing. We all want all of God’s blessings like five minutes ago! But God has his own timetable for things. He’ll provide us what we need now according to his desire for us. And learning this through a gentle rebuke, Mary puts faith in her son: **“Do whatever he tells you”** (v. 5).

John then says there were **six stone water jars** used for the **Jewish rites of purification**, each able to hold[...] **twenty or thirty gallons** (v. 6). A family

would have had no more than one of these jars for purification. The fact that there were six of them implies the community *shushbinim* has brought them there. What are these large **jars** made of again? **Stone** not clay. All the way back in Leviticus 11 there is a lengthy list of clean and unclean animals including a strange mention that if any rodent or lizard fell into a clay water jar the whole thing would be unclean (Lev. 11:33). By the first century Israelites got around this law by making their water jars out of stone! Why? Because by this time there was a tradition that you had to perform a ritual **purification** by washing your hands before eating (Mark 7:1–4). So **Jesus** tells **the servants**, **“Fill the jars with water.”** **And they did up to the brim** (v. 7), which of course, would have taken some time while the stress increased as guests were crying out, “*Más vino!*” When they were done Jesus said, **“Now draw some out and take it to the master of the feast”** (v. 8) who was an important family member acting like a modern wedding coordinator. It all sounds so perfunctory. Then comes this: **when the master of the feast tasted the water now become wine**. Remember the opening of the Gospel: the Word made all things out of nothing; now the Word made flesh makes one substance out of another! **The master of the feast did not know where it came from** so he **called the bridegroom 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.” (vv. 9–10) Wine was diluted

one part wine to somewhere between three to ten parts water in the first

century.¹⁴ So you would serve less diluted wine first, then very diluted wine

last. And what Jesus provided was better than the good wine that has run out!

Jesus restores this groom’s honor while showing us his glory!

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THIS SIGN

What’s the significance of this sign for who Jesus is? Go back to 1:14 and look at how this story connects back. After **the Word became flesh** John writes

and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full

of grace and truth (v. 14). Then John says **from his fullness** (of grace and

truth) **we have all received grace upon grace** (v. 16). The image is **grace in the**

place of or instead of grace.¹⁵ I mentioned back in the sermon on this text that

John is saying God’s previous revelation of himself was gracious, as he goes on

to say in verse 17—**for the law was given through Moses**—but that there is

something more gracious, more abundant, and more inexhaustible that has

come in its place: **grace and truth came through Jesus Christ!** All God did to

reveal himself as a gracious God from after the Fall of Adam and Eve was

preparation for Jesus. And so we read in our story that in this sign Jesus

manifested his glory (v. 11)—the **glory as of the only Son from the Father** (v. 14). And at the end of chapter one, just two days prior to our story, Jesus told his disciples: “You (all) will see greater things than these” (1:50). This sign was one of those “greater things!” Jesus is the eternal and glorious Son of God in human flesh! Jesus brings the fullness of eternal life and joy to the world!

The significance of this sign for you and me is for us to believe! **And his disciples believed in him** (v. 11). But didn't they believe before when they heard John's preaching, when they saw Jesus, when they followed Jesus, when they remained with Jesus, and when they told others to “come and see?” Yes! But faith is not a one-time thing; it's ever growing, ever strengthening.

In this sign we as the bride of Christ get a glimpse of who he is. It's no coincidence but providence that the first event at which Jesus performs his first sign is a wedding. Marriage is that most ancient institution from the Garden (Gen. 2) that portrayed the love the Lord had for his people (Song of Songs), that Jesus has for his church (Eph. 5), and that is the metaphor for eternal dwelling with the Triune God (Rev. 19). At this wedding feast in Cana Jesus gives us a preview of *the* wedding feast of the Lamb.

Endnotes

¹ See D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1991), 166–167; Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to John*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (1971; repr., Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1989), 175–176.

² On the theological interpretation that John is speaking of a creation week plus one to show a new creation, see Carson and Morris who date this, including day five, to the seventh day or Sabbath. Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, 167–168; Morris, *The Gospel According to John*, 177. Malina and Rohrbaugh date this as the eighth day. *Social Science Commentary on the Gospel of John*, 66. Ridderbos takes this as simply the “third day” after the previous narration. On his interaction with the various views of a “creation week” in John 1–2, see Herman Ridderbos, *The Gospel of John: A Theological Commentary*, trans. John Vriend (William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1997), 99, 102–103.

³ Bruce J. Malina and Richard L. Rohrbaugh, *Social Science Commentary on the Gospel of John* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998), 70–71.

⁴ Morris, *The Gospel According to John*, 177–178.

⁵ It’s interesting that John never names Mary despite always being so careful to give names. Morris, *The Gospel According to John*, 175–177.

⁶ Cited in Morris, *The Gospel According to John*, 179 n15.

⁷ J. C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on the Gospels: John 1–6* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 2007), 3:89.

⁸ See Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, 169; Morris, *The Gospel According to John*, 177.

⁹ Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, 169.

¹⁰ Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, 170.

¹¹ Morris, *The Gospel According to John*, 179–180.

¹² This implies that Mary has sinned in trying to get her son to show his glory in her timetable and not the Lord’s! Ryle, *Expository Thoughts: John 1–6*, 3:96.

¹³ 7:6, 8, 30 and 8:20 speak of it as not yet. 12:23, 27, 13:1, 16:32, and 17:1 speak of it as now come. This is contra Ryle, who said, “The simplest and most reasonable view of these words is to refer them to Christ’s...time for working a miracle.” He spoke of the view that the “hour” was the cross as “a curious idea,” “very far-fetched,” and an “improbable application.” Ryle, *Expository Thoughts: John 1–6*, 3:96.

¹⁴ Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, 169; Morris, *The Gospel According to John*, 179 n15.

¹⁵ On χάρις ἀντὶ χάριτος, see Carson, *John*, 131–134; Ryle, *Expository Thoughts*, 3:39–40.