

John 11 – The First Sign: The Blessing of Wine

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Scripture 1: (Jn. 2:1-12 ESV)

On the third day there was a wedding at Cana in Galilee, and the mother of Jesus was there. Jesus also was invited to the wedding with his disciples. When the wine ran out, the mother of Jesus said to him, "They have no wine."

And Jesus said to her, "Woman, what does this have to do with me? My hour has not yet come."

His mother said to the servants, "Do whatever he tells you."

Now there were six stone water jars there for the Jewish rites of purification, each holding twenty or thirty gallons. Jesus said to the servants, "Fill the jars with water." And they filled them up to the brim. And he said to them, "Now draw some out and take it to the master of the feast." So they took it.

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 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."

This, the first of his signs, Jesus did at Cana in Galilee, and manifested his glory. And his disciples believed in him. After this he went down to Capernaum, with his mother and his brothers and his disciples, and they stayed there for a few days.

Sermon:

The story of the miracle in Cana may well be Jesus' most popular miracle, or at least it often gets treated that way within American church culture. Sadly it seems as if this is the miracle which many people would most want to see repeated (since who does not want to have their water turned into wine) because they think that this miracle was performed just for our enjoyment. Yet, while this miracle was performed as a blessing, and its purpose was joyful, and its results were pleasurable and enjoyable, the spiritual meaning behind it: what it represents and means for us; is far more than just merely drinking wine. It was a miracle of God and, as with all such miracles, its purpose is to tell us something about Him.

Before we dive into the narrative, let us consider what miracles really are.

When we consider the miracles of Jesus as they are described in the Synoptic Gospels, most of them seem to be extraordinary “good works” of mercy and grace: healing the sick, exorcising demons, raising the dead, and feeding people when they are hungry. However, His works stop seeming extraordinary if we only consider them as good examples for Christians to follow, like early 20th Century Christian liberalism prominently taught and modern progressive “Do Good-ism” teaches by suggesting alternative “natural” explanations. Although their attitude still rightly led faithful Christians to emulate Christ through our good works: by inspiring the establishment of hospitals and schools, by promoting our mental health and well-being, and by providing food pantries and serving hot meals; our doing such things were never the primary point, purpose, or goal of Jesus' ministry but they made the works themselves out to be the point. The great problem with their attitude is that it tends to ignore the other supernatural miracles of Jesus, those which cannot be explained or emulated, like His control over the natural elements and walking upon the Galilean waters. But John describes Jesus' miraculous works as “signs”¹ instead. The Greek word for this is *semion* and this use pervades his Gospel.

So, if Jesus' miracles are actually “signs”, then what makes them so much more special than just their plain goodness and fact of their effect? What makes them a “sign” and what do they signify?

Old Webster² offers us two relevant definitions concerning what a sign meant to John and means for the church:

- 1. A token; something by which another thing is shown or represented; any visible thing, any motion, appearance or event which indicates the existence or approach of something else. Thus we speak of signs of fair weather or of a storm, and of external marks which are signs of a good constitution.
- 4. Some visible transaction, event or appearance intended as proof or evidence of something else; hence; proof; evidence by sight.

Signs are evidences which point beyond themselves to something, to someone transcendent; something which is not otherwise readily apparent or comprehensible. They are a preview of something coming, something greater than themselves. Therefore, we apply this theologically by interpreting the purpose of these signs, miracles, and wonders as confirmation of a messenger (prophet or Apostle) and/or their message of divine revelation because ultimately they point to Christ.

- God gave Moses signs to perform in Egypt before both Pharaoh and the Hebrews as proof that He was sent by the LORD (Exodus 4): the sign of his staff's transformation and an ability to inflict and heal leprosy, as well as the ten wonders inflicted upon the land and the Egyptians (Exodus 7:1-6).

¹(Greek: *semion* “sign”; Jn. 2:11, 18, 23; 3:2; 4:48, 54; 6:2, 14, 26, 30; 7:31; 9:16; 10:41; 11:47; 12:18, 37; 20:30)

² <https://webstersdictionary1828.com/Dictionary/sign>

- Twice Gideon asked God for a such sign upon his fleece to confirm the LORD's command to lead Israel against the Midianites. (Judges 6)
- Elijah's calling fire of down from heaven to ignite his water-logged sacrifice during his spiritual battle against Ahab's prophets of Ba'al at Mount Carmel, confirmed that he was the LORD's prophet and supported his authority against the wicked idolaters. (1 Kings 18)
- Isaiah gave King Hezekiah the sign of time turning back, as the sun's shadow moved back along the dial of Ahaz (Isaiah 38:8), proving the truth of Isaiah's prophecy and confirming the healing of Hezekiah.

John teaches us, by calling them signs, that the primary purpose of Jesus's miracles served to demonstrate that He came from God, that He is God, and that His words carried the full authority of the divine sovereign. His signs were also revealing what life in His Kingdom will be like: redemptive transformation and restoration to “very good” through His re-creation, no more death, pain, sorrow, and sickness instead it will be filled with joy, life, and gladness as we dwell within the glory of the LORD.

Furthermore, the later miracles of the Apostles also confirmed their “Sent” status and the Gospel message:

- their speaking in tongues on Pentecost (Acts 2) was a breaking down of Babel's curse;
- Peter's healing of a beggar outside the Temple (Acts 3);
- the death of Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5) demonstrating that the divine sovereign will not be mocked;
- Paul's raising of Eutychus after he fell from a third story window as Paul preached (Acts 20); and
- Paul's survival and immunity following a deadly snake bite (Acts 28).

Each of those were signs and we no longer need nor expect such wonders to happen today, because the only further revelation we expect is Jesus Christ Himself appearing: His return at the conclusion of this age. Regardless, even though the extraordinary, supernatural “sign gifts” have ceased following the death of the Apostles and the close of Scripture's canon, we still believe in miracles.

We still believe that God will heal the sick and bind up the broken-hearted; that He will rescue us from our trials and troubles; that He will still save the lost and call all of His chosen children to Himself. Unfortunately, we often tend to miss the miraculous, because our perspective is skewed, thinking them ordinary.

Every life is a miracle of God. It is a miracle that we wake up in the morning; a miracle that the world continues turning around its axis; a miracle that you arrived safely here this morning; and it is a miracle that we have air to breathe and food to eat.

- Therefore, if you are a Christian, then you **must** believe in miracles and the supernatural work of God since your faith in Jesus Christ is a miracle: your election unto salvation, your regeneration, faith, justification, sanctification, and future glorification; given to you by the Holy Ghost when He performed a heart transplant within you: giving you a new heart of flesh (Ez 11:19) and birthing you anew of His Spirit (John 3).

Miracles surround us, if we only just open our eyes to see them.

So, now that we better understand the purpose of miracles, let us look at Jesus' first sign: the miracle in Cana.

“*On the third day there was a wedding at Cana in Galilee, and the mother of Jesus was there. Jesus also was invited to the wedding with his disciples.*” John often provides us with rather specific details to ground his narratives in “real life” and because these details add important things to the story.

Beginning with, “*On the third day there was a wedding...*”, does not imply that this event happened only three days after Jesus met Nathanael, nor is it reasonable to assume that he meant the third day of the week (because what importance would it have being on a Tuesday, really?) since apart from commonly noting the Sabbath and the resurrection, John does not otherwise make a point concerning what day of the week things happened on. Instead, this may be better read and understood as being “*On the third day of a wedding feast in Cana...*” {since “the third day” is written in the Greek dative form}. This is an important distinction and detail because first century Jewish weddings were ordinarily week-long affairs, marking this as the middle of the feast; it was neither early nor late.

“*...a wedding at Cana in Galilee, and the mother of Jesus was there. Jesus also was invited to the wedding with his disciples.*”. Not only were wedding feasts lengthy celebrations, they were also often community-wide events. Weddings should be joyful, so it was not unusual that everyone should want to participate and offer their blessings for the couple.

But, considering that Mary and Jesus were not from Cana, we should not ordinarily expect them to be considered as a part of that community; they were from Nazareth, a nearby town several hours walk away. So, why were they invited?

- They might have been relatives or friends of either party;
- Jesus and or Joseph, His father, could have been connected to either party through their vocation;
- Jesus was not yet known as a “famous Rabbi”, so His personal “star power” would not have been a reason to invite Him;
- Or unlikely, it may have been a connection through Nathanael, who was from Cana, but while that might explain the presence of Jesus and His disciples, it would not explain Mary's invitation.

Truly, the “Why” of their presence is not so important for us to speculate about, beyond recognizing that there were many good and ordinary reasons for Jesus to be in attendance.

Then, three days into the wedding feast trouble occurs. “*...the wine ran out...*”. Unfortunately this was not the sort of problem which could be solved by a quick trip to the local grocery store. Getting the needed quantity of wine would have been far more than a local wine merchant could arrange on short notice, even at an inflated price. This was an epic social problem. It was a cultural faux pas: embarrassing to the bridegroom, as the host, and insulting to his guests. This was a failure to plan and may have been considered symbolic of his inability to provide satisfactorily for his bride. This was on the third day; it was the middle of the feast, but by running out of wine, the party was now over. Or was it?

Then, “*...the mother of Jesus said to him, "They have no wine. And Jesus said to her, "Woman, what does this have to do with me? My hour has not yet come."*”. I really think that this is one of the strangest exchanges of dialog recorded in Scripture.

Mary says, “Jesus, they're out of wine.” and Jesus kind of replies, “So what?”.

Which when you think about it, He is not wrong. What should this problem have to do with Him? Why should it be His concern? Why and what does His mother expect Him to do about it?

Attempts to answer those questions can lead us to make some crazy assumptions.

- Some will make up extra relational details, suggesting that Mary and Jesus were probably close relations {perhaps they would be their declared redeemer; as in Boaz and Ruth?} to the groom and that “saving the day” was Jesus' responsibility and familial duty.
- Others will go even further beyond the text of Scripture and assume wrongly {even in jest it is quite wrong} that turning water into wine was an ordinary occurrence for Jesus; suggesting that maybe Jesus did it all the time for Mary.
- Still others will view this due to as Mary's kind-heartedness and empathy, and a demonstration of her “special knowledge” about Jesus. They suggest that Jesus acted according to His mother's wishes, just like every good Jewish boy should and would; an attitude which then leads and builds into the Marian worship and veneration by Roman Catholics, who think that Jesus is more likely to respond favorably because His mother asks Him, rather than just trusting Him to hear and answer our petitions and prayers Himself (1 Timothy 2:5-6).

{Another odd and challenging point in this text, which can make some people uncomfortable, if the way Jesus seems to address His mother as “Woman”. The Greek term used is *gune'*; a term plainly meaning “woman” but respectfully and commonly used to address a married woman (one's own wife or another's) or a widow. Jesus uses the same expression, in the same way, to address the Samaritan woman at the well in John 4:21. Although we might expect, based upon our own modern cultural biases, a different form of address towards His mother than towards a stranger, this was still culturally appropriate, reasonable, and respectful towards Mary.}

Yet the narrative ultimately makes it clear that Jesus's activity is always according to His will and is for the LORD's purposes and not subject to the whims of His mother, nor to forced, frivolous obligations of social requirement. Jesus acts because He wills and chooses to act.

When Jesus asks Mary, “*Woman, what does this have to do with me?*” the reason He appends for questioning her motive, is “*My hour has not yet come.*”. This is something else which will flow throughout John's Gospel³, an emphasis upon Jesus' “hour”; not being the specific time of a specific day, but His “hour” as in His “*kairos*”: the divinely appointed time for His passion and glorification (12:23). What Jesus was saying was that **this** was not the time for Him to reveal Himself to Israel; that it was not time for Him to display His glory. This wedding was not about Jesus and He was not going to make it about Him. He was not going to “upstage” those whom they were there to celebrate and to celebrate with.

Yet what did Mary do? She “*...said to the servants, "Do whatever he tells you."*”, not because she expects Jesus to be a good son and do whatever His mother commands, but because she knew her son and she knew that He will either do something or not. Still, it does read as if she was fully expecting that He would choose to act.

“*Now there were six stone water jars there for the Jewish rites of purification, each holding twenty or thirty gallons. Jesus said to the servants, "Fill the jars with water." And they filled them up to the brim. And he said to them, "Now draw some out and take it to the master of the feast." So they took it.*” Again, John gives us plenty of minor, but very important details.

These stone jars were commonplace, holding water for ceremonial washing according to the “traditions of the elders” (Mark 7:3-7). The water was intended for the “ritual purification” sense of “cleanliness” rather than for being used in sanitary purposes. {They were stone because natural stone vessels did not acquire or retain ritual

3 Jn. 1:39; 2:4; 7:30; 8:20; 12:23, 27; 13:1; 16:21, 32; 17:1

impurity gained by contact with “uncleanness”. However, clay and ceramic vessels did but when they did, they could not be purified, instead they had to be broken. When vessels made of wood, bronze, or copper became “unclean”, they could be purified through boiling and ordinary washing (Lev 6:28; 15:12). Thus stone, in this case, because it remained “purity neutral”, was the most appropriate sort of vessel to hold water for washing during such an occasion (*Mishnah, Tohoroth, Kelim*).} But these containers were not chosen merely because of their availability, Jesus must have had a reason for using these ordinary “special purpose” vessels.

- First, Jesus told the servants to fill the jars up with water and they obediently filled them up to the brim.
- Next, Jesus told them to draw some and take it to the “*master of the feast*”: a first century equivalent to a *Maitre d'*, butler, or “master of ceremonies” (MC).
- Then “presto-chango”, the water was transformed into wine.

{What kind of miracle was this? It certainly seems even more unusually extraordinary, beyond even Jesus' healing miracles; however, just as when He healed the body there is also an natural explainable understanding of what occurred in this miracle, yet this one still remains quite unique.

Jesus' healings are miraculous because of their immediacy, their extent, and His methods: ordinarily His sovereign command or His mere touch. Even still, we can understand and explain the process of healing, such as tissue regeneration or the death of disease.

This miracle however, while it seems strange, is really a rather “ordinary miracle” because every day water is being transformed into wine, just as human bodies as being healed. The grapevine draws moisture from the soil, fills it into its fruit along with various sugars. Then, when the grapes are harvested, crushed, and allowed to ferment through the introduction of yeast, this sugar water slowly becomes wine. The average bottle of wine still contains between 80-85% water by volume.

Both healing and the conversion of water to wine are miracles; most natural processes are truly ordinary miracles, if we're willing to see and admit it. Jesus' signs often consisted of Him taking these natural processes and making them supernatural through the application of His divine power and influence.}

“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 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.””

Six, twenty to thirty gallon (call it six by twenty five gallon jars, or about one hundred and fifty gallons), filled to the brim with water became filled with wine; the equivalent of 757 (750mL) bottles of wine, or 63 cases (cases containing 12 bottles each) of wine.

Such an amazing party trick! It is no wonder that many people like/love the idea of this miracle, right? Plus, unlike most of Jesus' miracles, there is no apparent costly response for us. There is no requirement of faith in it; it is all fun with no repentance, and the only obedience needed is to just drink it and enjoy! Right? Not really, and we will get to that, but first let us think about what the master of the feast had to say.

“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.” Simply put, he tells the groom, “You saved the best for last!”. Common convention was to serve the best wine first, but then as the feast drew on and people's senses became “dulled” {not necessarily from inebriation, more from duration as novelty wore off}, then the ordinary and common “table

wine” would be served to minimize expenses {not being cheap, but as an exercise in good stewardship, frugality, and prudence}. So, it was very reasonable for the “master” to be surprised at this show of generosity, of blessing, and of provision by their host. Instead of being a social embarrassment, now he becomes praiseworthy! Jesus certainly saved his day.

However, John's record of the master of the feast's remark is more than a memory of praise, it is the key to unlock the wondrous miracle in this story. His praise directs us towards our eschatological hope. It points us to the “wedding supper of the Lamb” (Revelation 19) and the joy of Christ's eternal Kingdom.

This is the reason why John refers to all of Jesus' miracles as “signs”, because each one points beyond itself through the present into the future reality of life in the New Creation. His miracles were far more than mere “good works” because each one meant more for all God's people than their immediate individual benefit suggests. This becomes readily apparent once you think about it.

- His healing miracles demonstrate how there will no longer be any need for healing in the Kingdom; then we shall all be healthy and whole.
 - There will no longer be any blind, lame, sick, or leprous persons.
- His exorcisms demonstrate how He has completely triumphed over Satan with His Kingdom.
 - There will no longer be any demonic oppression or need for deliverance from the powers of darkness.
 - There will no longer be any captives or prisoners needing release or rescue.
- His feedings demonstrate how the LORD will provide for all of our needs in the Kingdom.
 - There will no longer be anyone who goes hungry.
 - There will no longer be anybody naked who needs to be clothed and warmed.

But how does this miracle: Jesus turning water into wine; translate into the Kingdom life?

Does it mean that we will not drink water and that there will be rivers of wine flowing throughout the land? No, of course not! Instead, to better understand this, we must ask two important questions:

1. What does wine usually represent in Scripture and what role or purpose does it play in the life of God's people?
2. What kind of water did Jesus transform?

First, remember that:

- Melchizedek, the king of Salem, brought out bread and wine when he blessed Abraham (Gen 14:18-20), celebrating his victory over the invading kings.
- Jacob's blessing of Judah, his son, declares that he shall bind “...*his foal to the vine and his donkey's colt to the choice vine, he has washed his garments in wine and his vesture in the blood of grapes. His eyes are darker than wine, and his teeth whiter than milk.*” (Gen. 49:11-12 ESV) declaring his royalty.
- Wine was also given to the LORD as part of the regular “drink offering” (Ex 29:40) and sacrifice.

Although inebriation and frequent or public drunkenness were considered shameful (considering Noah, Lot, Eli's remark to Hannah), the provision of wine and its drinking were a blessing to God's people. Not only was wine a regular and ordinary part of life, it was especially given for use in celebration and times of joy. Even the prophet Zechariah declared, speaking about the days of Israel's future redemption, "*I will strengthen the house of Judah, and I will save the house of Joseph. I will bring them back because I have compassion on them, and they shall be as though I had not rejected them, for I am the LORD their God and I will answer them. Then Ephraim shall become like a mighty warrior, and their hearts shall be glad as with wine. Their children shall see it and be glad; their hearts shall rejoice in the LORD.*" (Zech. 10:6-7 ESV)

The miracle at Cana was a sign of the LORD's blessing upon His people, symbolizing His desire for us to be glad and joyful. Truly there is no Scriptural cause for the Elect to be severe or dour all the days of our lives {as people wrong assume about the Puritans because of their painted portraits}. We really should "Eat, drink, and be merry!", not because tomorrow we may die, but because God is good and He wants His children to be blessed. Remember, God actually wants us to be happy; both happy in and happy with Him.

Secondly, Jesus did not merely transform some ordinary one hundred and fifty odd gallons of water into wine, He transformed the "waters of purification".

- He transformed water that was meant to be used to remove spiritual impurity and corruption.
- He transformed water used to restore a person's personal holiness so that they could safely enter into the divine presence to worship the LORD.
- He transformed "waters of obligation" into the "wine of gladness".
- He transformed an expression of the old covenant regulations: a symbol of our duty to be holy and righteous before God; into a sign of celebration and joy because under the new covenant of grace through Jesus Christ, our corruption and spiritual pollution has been removed and we are cleansed by Jesus' death upon the cross, declared justified and made holy in God's sight.

Jesus' first sign, this miracle, symbolized a change in God's dispensation: from the covenant of Law unto the covenant of Grace; a transition from the Old Testament to the New. The waters of ritual purification were no longer necessary because God's Holy Spirit now works within us, sanctifying us as Jesus justifies us before our hallowed Father in heaven. Just as Jesus transformed the water, thus He transforms His Chosen people. The coming of Jesus and the working of His signs: His miracles and wonders; was God doing something new and wonderful. They foreshadowed the greatness of the good things to come. They whet our appetite for the things of God, like a small "taste test" which causes us to desire the full meal even more.

Finally, John concludes this story explaining "*This, the first of his signs, Jesus did at Cana in Galilee, and manifested his glory.*". Therefore, that is what this sign points us towards, our fullness of hope and joyful expectation in Jesus Christ and His reign. This, like all of His signs, was an expression and a manifestation of Christ's glory; a display of God's glory. Everything that Jesus ever did, He did for God's glory. Everything was an act of worship and love for His Father in heaven (WSC #1).

"*And his disciples believed in him.*" Did they believe in Him just because of His miracles, just because of His glory? Surely not, but just as surely, witnessing and experiencing these signs undoubtedly built up and encouraged them in their faith, just as our reading and hearing about them encourage us in our faith.

Now, a final point of application. Whenever you feel as if this world is just "too much": that all the darkness and evil in the world is too overwhelming; whenever you wonder how there could be a loving and good God when

there is so much hate, pain, and misery in the world; remember the wedding at Cana and encourage yourself with our Christian hope for the future.

Jesus Christ has come and He is making all things new, but He has not finished working yet: He is making, He has not yet made. Jesus transforming water into wine gives us hope that He shall transform us and our lives into something more wonderful and blessed. We have seen and heard from Scripture a mere foretaste of what is to come and it will surely be far greater than we could even imagine.

Remember, even now, Christ reigns over all and someday He shall return and will establish His righteous reign upon earth as in heaven. Then He shall restore us all to His holy and divine intention and He shall fill us with joy and gladness “...*as with wine*.”

Believe in Jesus Christ. Trust in Him and be glad because, as with the wine at the wedding, the best is yet to come!

AMEN