

The Gospel of John
Session Four: The Wedding at Cana
Commentary

John 2:1-12

2:1–3. Many commentaries invest endless pages in an exploration of the chronology at the beginning of John 2. The third day from when? Possibly three days after Philip and Nathanael had become disciples of Jesus. Or perhaps three days after Jesus' departure from the place of his baptism. The exact identification seems unimportant, but we should note that less than a week went by between Jesus' appearance in the desert and the miracle at Cana.

Jesus' mother had been invited to this event and Jesus accompanied her. The Lord was always welcome among those having a good time in the right way. Running out of wine represented a social disaster much greater in the first century than it would today. Disgrace, humiliation, insult—all these and more would be brought upon the family with such carelessness as to allow this to happen. Wedding celebrations in that day sometimes lasted nearly a week, so the wine supply was a major consideration.

This small town was the home of Nathanael, who might have known the host family as well as the bride and groom. A major lesson surfaces even in these early verses: weddings create opportunities for families to focus on Jesus.

2:4. After the remark of Mary to Jesus ("they have no more wine"), the Lord's response gives rise to even more confusion among commentators. Did he rebuke Mary for her implied request? Was he relieving her of responsibility by saying in effect, "I'll take care of it"? Did he receive her statement and respond with another question which might be interpreted as, "What would you like me to do?"

The Greek text literally reads, What to me and to you, woman? Jesus was probably not saying, "This is not our problem; let them figure it out." Perhaps he wanted to emphasize to Mary that they had come into a new relationship with her remark. This may be the first time that she had asked her son for help on a public occasion. For Jesus it was his first opportunity to work under the heavenly Father's authority and through the Holy Spirit's power to produce a miraculous sign.

The last part of verse 4 seems to explain the first part—My time has not yet come. The word translated time in the NIV is actually *horo*, the common word for hour. These two terms are used somewhat interchangeably in John. Four times more in this Gospel we are told that Jesus delayed something or that his enemies could not seize him because his time had not yet come. But as he approached the time of his death on the cross, Jesus prayed, "Father, the time has come" (John 17:1).

Mary had carried the stigma of Jesus' miraculous birth for thirty years. It was only natural she would want some public revelation that her son was the Messiah. Jesus seemed to be saying, however, "What you expect out of this will not occur yet. I'm on a divine timetable and the

revelation of my purpose will not happen today.” But God’s timetable for the Lamb did allow him to begin giving evidence of his calling by performing this local miracle.

2:5. This timeless spiritual principle lives on through two thousand years of church history: Do whatever he tells you. Mary’s faith stood strong; she knew that Jesus could do whatever was necessary in the situation as long as the servants obeyed. This is probably true in any family or congregation which has, in some way, run out of spiritual wine. If we as servants obey and trust the power of Jesus, God is capable of any results. Of this verse Archbishop Trench writes, “Luther bids us here to imitate her faith, who, nothing daunted by the semblance of a refusal, reads between the lines of this refusal a better answer to her prayer; is confident that even the infirmity which clave to it shall not defeat it altogether; is so confident of this, as to indicate not obscurely the very manner of its granting” (Trench, Richard C. *The Miracles of Our Lord*. London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1904, p. 110).

2:6–7. Notice the phrase, six stone water jars ... each holding from twenty to thirty gallons. These containers held a total of at least 120 gallons. The servants were told to fill them with water, and they did so—to the brim. Such washing pots were used in religious ceremonies, but they were about to enter a new phase of operation. Tenney clarifies the magnitude of the liquid refreshment created on this occasion: “The combined capacity of the water pots was about 150 gallons. Reckoning a half-pint to a glass, these vessels would contain about 2,400 servings of wine—certainly enough to supply a large number of people for several days. In quality and quantity the new-made wine more than satisfied the needs and taste of those who attended the feast” (Tenney, Merrill C. *The Gospel of John. Expositor’s Bible Commentary. Vol. 9*. Ed. by Frank E. Gaebelin. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981., p. 83).

2:8. From these jars Jesus chose the servants to draw some out and take it to the master of the banquet. Not to the waiters nor the maitre’d, but to the master. These servants knew they were handling water when the host asked for wine. We have to conclude that the water became wine somewhere between the kitchen and the head table at the banquet. This demonstrates great faith and obedience on the part of these servants. Despite misgivings, they followed through on Mary’s words.

Let us back up for a moment and talk again about this master of the banquet. Tenney suggests “toastmaster,” a word we would today associate with master of ceremonies. The important idea, regardless of title, helps us see these servants making a public commitment, not discussing matters with their manager in the back room. They marched out with the “water.” When the public reception of what Jesus had accomplished was obvious to many at the party, it was wine.

2:9–10. John carefully drew the narrative to indicate that the master tasted the wine and, probably much to the amazement of the trembling servants, pronounced it the best of the evening. Many interpreters have pondered whether Jesus created intoxicating wine, and arguments have been raised on both sides. The word *oinos* is of no help since it is used for both intoxicating and non-intoxicating wine. We can hardly imagine, however, that people who had

been drinking throughout the evening would not immediately recognize a switch from normal wine to grape juice.

Perhaps we must simply recognize that the culture of the day accepted and even demanded drinking on occasions like this. The most we can say here is that this passage cannot support abstinence, but verse 10 hints at the importance of moderation. Whatever we believe or do not believe about the use of alcoholic beverages will have to draw support from some other passage.

Just as this wedding ran out of wine, humankind ran out of fellowship with God in the Garden of Eden. When sin entered the world, the celebration ceased—but Jesus came to restore our reason to celebrate. Wine is even used sometimes in Scripture as a picture of joy: “Wine that gladdens the heart of man, oil to make his face shine, and bread that sustains his heart” (Ps. 104:15).

Just as the banquet master said that most people brought out the best wine first and the cheap wine once senses were dulled, in the same way the world throws its best pictures of sin at us to trick us, then the cheap stuff comes along. Eventually the joy and pleasure the world offers through sin runs out. But God’s joy lasts forever and he saves his best blessings for last. As Christians we always have more to look forward to because heaven reminds us that God saves the best wine for the end of the party.

2:11. The results of the first miracle? Two things happened: Jesus revealed his glory by this miraculous sign, and his disciples put their faith in him. Certainly they had some faith before this event, but now it was strengthened, solidified, and stabilized. Now they were ready to follow him anywhere.

We should never ignore the little ways in which Jesus did his miracles, especially when we read the word sign (semeion) as we do here in verse 11. The ceremonial washing of hands for which these jars had always been used was put aside and replaced with something new. The Lamb came to fulfill the Mosaic Law and exchange it for higher law—the law of grace. He would fulfill ceremonial cleansing with complete, spiritual, and eternal cleansing of his own blood on the cross.

The disciples surely did not understand this part of the sign at the moment. But when Jesus held a cup of wine at the Last Supper and said, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you” (Luke 22:20), we wonder if any of them remembered the wedding in Cana where old covenant water became new covenant wine.

What a fitting picture of Christ’s submission. The continual need for cleansing water reminded the Israelites that they were constantly unclean. But Jesus would offer his cleansing blood as the wine that would satisfy forever.

And what a wonderful sign for us. We do not need animal sacrifices and ceremonial cleansing water because Jesus has poured out his blood as the final and perfect sacrifice for our sins. We have complete forgiveness and cleansing because we've been washed in the blood of the Lamb. This is no trivial miracle to satisfy the thirst of partygoers but a clear symbol with a magnificent message. Christ transformed temple-cleansing water into eternal-saving wine. To those of us who have no wine of our own, he offers his blood for eternal life.

2:12. John made a clear transition in his narrative as he showed us Jesus and his disciples heading to Capernaum, and from there on to Jerusalem for the Passover—the first such festival mentioned in the Lord's three-and-one-half-year ministry. We may assume that up to this point Jesus had maintained a comfortable relationship with his family but now he left them in Galilee and his disciples took the place of his mother and half-brothers as his constant companions.

The body of all New Testament passages taken together tells us that Mary and Joseph had other children after the supernatural birth of Jesus. Some have suggested that these brothers were former children of Joseph by a first marriage. This position is intended to uphold the perpetual virginity of Mary, but it is not supported by Scripture. In the words of Morris, "The most natural way of taking [brothers] is to understand children of Joseph and Mary. This is called the 'Helvidian' view (from Helvidius, a fourth century theologian who advocated it). The expression occurs several times in the Synoptic Gospels, and never with any qualification such as would be expected if the words were to bear any other meaning. The view is supported by appealing to the statements that Joseph 'knew her not till she had brought forth a son' (Matt. 1:25) and that Jesus was Mary's 'firstborn son' (Luke 2:7)" (Morris, Leon. *The Gospel According to John*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971, p. 187).¹

¹ Kenneth Gangel, *John*, ed. Max Anders (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2000).