

Lord of the Feast

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[0 : 0 0] I've always loved John's Gospel. It's the Gospel that I was reading when I came to faith as a 22-year-old. It's always had a special place in my heart. One of the things I love about John's Gospel, which we just read from, is that it was written later than the other Gospels.

So John's focus is a bit different. He doesn't just tell us what happened, but he focuses more on the meaning of what happened. What does it mean that Jesus has come into the world?

And he has a very clear aim. He lays his cards down on the table. We see at the end of his Gospel in chapter 20, he says, I have written all of this 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.

So he's saying there's a kind of life that we were made to have, a kind of life that we were made to experience, that we're not experiencing it now, and that the only way to experience that kind of life is by putting our faith in the name of Jesus Christ.

And so throughout his book, he gives us a series of signs that act like clues in a treasure hunt. We're meant to follow these signs because each one of them points to the true identity of Jesus, and they're meant to convince us to believe in him.

[1 : 2 4] So you would think that they should be pretty impressive signs if they're meant to do that. And John chapter 2 is the very first sign, we are told, the first clue in the treasure hunt.

So we would expect, given all this, that John would start his Gospel with a bang, that it would be something really impressive, that there would be lightning bolts or words written in the sky or pillars of fire or earthquakes, or at least maybe feed a few thousand people.

But no. We look here. John tells us a story about a catering mishap, a social faux pas. Here's the sign.

Jesus makes 150 gallons of the best wine you have ever tasted. That's it. And so we're going to look this morning at this sign, and we're going to look first at what happened, and then what it means, and then what it means for us.

Why would John think it's so important to tell us about this almost private miracle that many people at the party had no idea had even occurred? Let's pray, and then we'll open God's Word.

[2 : 3 3] Lord, we thank you for your Word, and we thank you that we're not left to our own efforts to try to understand what this says, that we're not just dealing with ink and paper, but that we come here in the presence of the living God, that you, through your Holy Spirit, speak to us through your Word, that you know what we need, what we need to hear.

You know the work that needs to be done in each one of us. You know the reasons you brought us here this morning, and we pray now that you would do your work through your Word for your glory. And we pray this in your Son, Jesus' holy name.

Amen. So first of all, let's look at what happened. Very familiar story, but it's worth looking at again, because almost every time I look at this, I pick up on things that I didn't pick up on before.

There's a wedding. Jesus and his disciples have been invited, along with Jesus' mother, Mary. No mention of his father. It could be that Joseph has passed away by this point.

In this culture, you need to understand, weddings were a lot bigger deal than they are even in our culture. A wedding would usually last a full week. It would be marked by multiple processions through the street.

[3 : 43] This is probably going to be the best experience of this couple's life. This is an opportunity for them to throw a lavish party for the whole town. And the feast was really the high point, a multi-day feast.

And at the center of the feast was the wine. The wine is what makes the feast a feast. So running out of wine in the middle of the feast is a very big deal.

You couldn't just run down to Costco and buy more mega bottles. This couple is about to be humiliated because they live in an honor-shame culture. They're going to be the laughing stock of the town.

People are going to be talking about this behind their backs for the rest of their lives. And in this culture, the groom and his family were the ones that were responsible for paying for all of the festivities.

So of course, what are people going to say? They're going to say, well, if he can't even afford his own wedding, how would we expect him to provide for his wife and family?

[4 : 46] So this is going to be socially devastating for them. Mary's immediate response is to turn and ask Jesus for help. It's not his wedding, technically not his responsibility, but she knows enough about Jesus to know if anybody can do anything about this, it's him.

But Jesus gives Mary a very unexpected, seemingly brusque, almost rude response. And we're going to come back to that in a little while. First, I want to note how Mary responds.

She doesn't say, how dare you talk to me like that? I am your mother. You get up out of that chair right now. Now that's how most Jewish mothers would have responded to their sons after getting a response like she got from Jesus.

And she would be perfectly justified in doing so. But that's not how she responds. She turns to the servants and she says, do whatever he tells you.

And I think this is really interesting because we can almost imagine her saying something like this, kind of walking over to the servants and saying, okay, listen, he often says really strange things and he does weird things.

[6 : 00] And sometimes you ask him something and he does the opposite. And sometimes you say something to him and then he responds and it's a total non sequitur. And I know it seems really weird, but here's the thing.

Take it from me, he's amazing. There's no one like him. You can trust him. Do whatever he tells you. And you see right there in Mary, one of many ways that Mary shows us a beautiful example to follow.

Even when God doesn't seem to make sense, even when we are asking and pleading and begging God to do things that we know God loves. And God does the opposite. God seems to not respond.

God does something that we don't want. He brings something into our lives that we've prayed against. And God makes no sense. Mary's response is to say, I know that often he does things that don't make sense, but you can trust him.

And this is the thing that we see with God again and again and again and again. Even when we don't understand God's motives, we can always understand or we can always trust God's character.

[7 : 11] Even when we don't understand his motives, which we rarely do, we can always trust his character. Do whatever he tells you. It's one of the best pieces of advice we could possibly get of what it means to live our lives participating in the life of Christ.

And so Jesus says, okay, see those stone jars over there? I want you to fill those with water. Now, no doubt there were plenty of empty wineskins lying around, but Jesus specifically requests the stone jars.

When the master of the feast thinks there's no wine, he's on the verge of panicking, right? Word is starting to spread. I think the wine's run out. I think the wine's run out. Jesus says, fill those stone jars.

And then he says, take some of that to the master of the feast. He was sort of like the MC. He was kind of responsible for keeping the party going. And so just before word gets out and just before this big humiliation happens, the servants bring some of this liquid to the master of the feast and the master tastes it.

And to his great relief and astonishment, he's drinking wine. And he doesn't know where the wine came from. And so he assumes that it has been provided by the groom.

[8 : 20] And so he calls out to the groom and he says, everyone else serves the best wine first. And then when people have drunk freely, you know, when their palates are not quite as refined, then the poor wine comes out.

And he says, but you have kept the best wine until now. And so the groom ends up being honored. And from this day forward, I guarantee you, everybody at the party talked about how amazing that wine was and how amazing it was that the groom kept it until the end of the party.

So this is what happened. But John is interested in more than this. He wants us to understand the meaning behind this series of events. And in order to understand that, we need to go back to the way Jesus responds to Mary's request.

He says, woman, what does this have to do with me? And I would love to be able to say that if you look at it in the original Greek, it's not quite as rude as it seems to be.

But that's actually not true. It is as rude as it seems to be. It's brusque. It's a bit cold. It's a bit distant. I wouldn't say it's overtly rude or disrespectful, but there's a certain kind of distance that Jesus is placing between himself and his mother.

[9 : 34] And that's because something else is on his mind. And he goes on to tell us what he's thinking about. He says, woman, what does this have to do with me? My hour has not yet come. Now, in the book of John, every single time we see this phrase, my hour has not yet come, it's always referring to the same thing.

It's referring to Jesus' death, his crucifixion. So this raises a very interesting question. Why is Jesus sitting at a wedding surrounded by people who are drinking and dancing and he's thinking about dying?

And somebody once said to me, you know, when you're single and in your 30s and you go to a wedding, it sort of makes you feel like you want to die sometimes. But I don't think that that is the explanation that makes sense.

There's a lot more going on here. Jesus is sitting here. He's thinking about his death. And the reason is because Jesus knows the Old Testament Scriptures by heart.

And when you look at the Old Testament Scriptures, all throughout, God refers to himself as a bridegroom. And he refers to his people as his bride.

[10 : 42] And we see that this is the kind of relationship that God desires to have with us, with his people. That God didn't just make us to merely be subjects or followers.

That God created us to be the object of his love and delight. And he made us to love and delight in God. But no matter how much God pursues his people, all through the Old Testament, the story is the same.

God is pursuing his people, loving his people, chasing after his people, and they are continually unfaithful to him. Again and again, they reject his love, they spurn his love, and they give themselves away to other substitute gods.

And that really, friends, is what is wrong with the world deep down. If you want to know the core problem, why the world is so broken, why there's so much injustice and conflict, this is why.

It's because instead of loving God above all else, human beings set our hearts on other things again and again and again. We take things like comfort or safety or status or financial security, and we set our hearts on those things.

[11 : 56] In other words, we give into the idea that if I could just have this thing and keep this thing, then I'll be okay, then my life will be okay, then I'll be satisfied, then I'll be happy, I'll finally have what I need.

And what we find over time is that again and again and again, those things let us down. They never last. It's never enough. And so human beings go from one substitute God to another, giving our hearts away again and again and again.

This is what's wrong with the world. And so God is a God who desires this kind of relationship with His people, but His people are like a wayward bride. And so it raises the question at the end of the Old Testament, there really is no answer.

How does God deal with people like this? Now there is no answer, but there are clues in the Old Testament about what God intends to do. In the book of Isaiah, God says something astounding.

In chapter 61, He begins to speak of an anointed one. And it's very clear the more you read about this anointed one that He's far more than just a human being, that we're dealing with someone who is divine, who's able to do things that no mere human could do.

[13 : 07] And in chapter 62, which is our Old Testament reading for this morning, this anointed one appears as a bridegroom who has come to make His bride ready.

And He says, for the sake of my people, for the sake of my bride, I will not stop until your righteousness blazes like the sun.

I will not stop until your righteousness blazes like the sun. And then in Isaiah, there's this great transformation. And God's people are transformed.

And they are no longer desolate. They're no longer forsaken. They're transformed into a radiant bride. The object of God's eternal delight.

And then it describes a great wedding celebration that spans the earth and people everywhere celebrate as God is finally joined to His people like a bride to a bridegroom.

[14 : 04] But of course, this raises a very important question. What makes this transformation possible? How do they go from desolation and perpetual unfaithfulness to shining like the sun?

And if we go back to Isaiah 53, we find the answer that before this wedding can happen, before the transformation can occur, before the bride can make herself ready, the bridegroom is going to have to suffer.

And He's going to have to suffer for the sake of His bride. And it says there that His body is going to be crushed like grapes in a wine press, that His life is going to be poured out like wine.

And verse 11 tells us why. Why is He suffering? Why? out of the anguish of His soul, many will be counted righteous, for He shall bear their iniquities.

So why does Jesus respond to Mary the way He does in this seemingly brusque way? It's because Jesus is thinking about His own wedding. And He knows that in order to make His bride ready, He's going to have to be crushed.

[15 : 33] See, on the cross, Jesus took all of the shame and the guilt and the iniquity. All of the shame and the iniquity of the world, He took on to Himself.

And yet, the Gospel tells us this, that out of the anguish of His soul, all who come to Him in faith and repentance are counted righteous. So this is why Jesus used the purification jars instead of the wineskins.

He's saying, I have come to give you what these jars and that water and the religion that you have been following never could have given you. No amount of water can ever make you clean.

You can clean the outside, but you can't clean the inside. And you need something that can clean you on the inside. And He's saying, this is why I have to shed my blood for you, why I have to be crushed.

Only that can make you clean on the inside. Only then will your righteousness shine like the sun. And that's why, before Jesus was betrayed and taken away to be crucified, He shared one last meal with His disciples, where He took a cup of wine and He handed it to them.

[16 : 41] And He said, this cup is the new covenant in my blood. And He commands them to drink it. And the reason is clear if we understand this story that it's because He's saying, you will be purified ultimately by what I provide.

Only the wine that I provide can do that. And it's the wine of my blood. It's my blood for your souls. Now we begin to understand why John would put this at the beginning of His gospel because this miracle prefigures Jesus' entire ministry, the whole reason He came, which is to turn the water of religion into the wine of the gospel.

It's to turn the water of self-made righteousness into the wine of righteousness that comes as a gift by faith in Jesus Christ. I mean, think about how this story plays out.

Who gets credit for the wine? It's the groom. Right? Jesus did all the work, provides all the wine, but the groom is the one who gets the credit.

That's the gospel. That's the gospel. So let's ask just with a few minutes remaining here, what does this actually mean for us? If this is what the gospel of John is trying to tell us, the meaning of this wonderful story about a wedding, what does it mean for us?

[18 : 03] I'll just make a few suggestions. First of all, I believe this story, if we understand it, if we believe it, it transforms the way we deal with our failures and our shortcomings. We live in a culture, and especially if you live in D.C.

or somewhere like D.C., that praises competence, we praise accomplishment, we praise self-sufficiency, we praise resumes and CVs and accolades.

Most of us live in dire fear of anyone seeing our failures or our shortcomings or our weaknesses. But notice what happens at this wedding.

Although no one knew it, the bridegroom did run out of wine. Right? He did fall short. This was on his watch, and he, something fell apart.

Something got overlooked. But that in this story is precisely where the glory of Jesus shines through. Right? It's through the deficit. It's through the failures and the shortcomings of this bridegroom, the glory of Jesus is revealed.

[19 : 08] And what we see here is that where this man would otherwise have found failure and shame, Jesus supplies more richly and abundantly than this man ever could have done on his own.

This is exactly what the Apostle Paul discovered in his own ministry. when he's endeavoring to love and to serve the people of the church at Corinth. But he's weak.

He's not a great public speaker. He's made mistakes, and the false teachers are exploiting that, and they're mocking him, and they're ridiculing him for his weaknesses. And his response is not to say, here's all of my justifications and all of my defenses for why I'm so great.

No, he actually does the opposite. He says, listen, I've learned, I've learned actually that Jesus' power is made perfect in weakness. I've learned that his power is made perfect in my weakness.

And he says, that is where I most powerfully experience the love and the grace of Jesus Christ. It's when I fail, and I have no other option but to turn to him and cry out to him.

[20 : 13] And he says, so not only will I admit my weaknesses, I'll boast in my weaknesses. So imagine the next time someone criticizes you or calls you out instead of defending yourself or justifying yourself.

Your response would be to say, you think that's my worst problem? You think that's as bad as it gets? That's just the tip of the iceberg. It is so much worse than you possibly could imagine.

Right? That's what Paul's response is because he knows the more he leans into his failures and his shortcomings, the more he experiences the abundance of Christ. Right?

We freely admit our weaknesses because those are the places where we find Christ. Number two, this, I believe, reminds us how God sees us in Christ.

I say this from time to time. I like to ask people when I meet with them for prayer or other things, I like to at some point ask, how do you think that God feels when you come into his mind?

[21 : 11] You know, when God is thinking about you, how does he feel when you come into his mind? And in my experience, most people, when they're honest, say they assume God is probably vaguely disappointed in them.

They know they should be doing more. They know they should do a better job coming to church. They know they should be praying more. They know they should be serving more. They know they should be giving more and that God's given them a lot of chances.

They know that that thing that they keep doing, that sin that they keep committing, that they know that God has given them a thousand chances and they figure that probably by this point God is just kind of ready to give up. And that's what most people say when they're honest.

And if that is you, if that's what you believe, then I want you to memorize Isaiah chapter 61, verse 5. As the bridegroom rejoices over the bride, so shall your God rejoice over you.

Let me say it again. As the bridegroom rejoices over the bride, so shall your God rejoice over you. I've been to a lot of weddings. I've been to a lot of weddings as a priest.

[22 : 14] I've been to a lot of weddings as a friend. I've been to one wedding as a groom. And then before that, I did a stint as a wedding photographer. By far the hardest of all.

And much respect for wedding photographers. High stress job. But because of that, I've often gotten a unique vantage point. I get to see things from an angle that most people don't get.

There's this moment in every wedding where the doors open and the bride is revealed. And everybody stands and they turn and they look at the bride as they should.

But I always like to kind of sneak a peek at the groom's face. Because normally I'm standing right next to the groom. And I've seen this look again and again and again.

I've seen this look where the groom in that moment is utterly transfixed by the sight of his bride. It is a look of pure joy.

[23 : 11] It is a look of pure delight. And at that moment, even though the room may be filled with hundreds of people, it is as though there is no one in the room. It is as though the bride is the only one there.

And what we need to understand is that that is how God feels when he looks at you. That is how God feels. That's the look on his face when he sees you.

Right? As the bridegroom rejoices over the bride, so shall your God rejoice over you. Memorize that verse. And then finally, I believe this gives us a vision and a reason for Christian hospitality.

You know, we worship a God. I mean, if this makes anything clear, it's that we worship a God of lavish hospitality. It's no coincidence that Jesus reveals himself by providing wine to keep the party going.

His entire earthly ministry is marked by table fellowship and often with the most unlikely people. He's accused again and again by the religious leaders of being a glutton and a drunkard because he stays up late into the night eating and drinking with the dregs of society, with the outcasts, with the people that you wouldn't even talk to lest you become unclean.

[24 : 27] And these are some of Jesus' best friends. And he stays up late into the night laughing and talking and drinking and eating and feasting with them. And when people accuse him of that, at one point he says, why wouldn't we feast?

The bridegroom is here. Right? Of course this is what he's talking about. And the sacrament that Jesus gave us that enables us to experience our union with him is also a feast.

Christ. Right? He welcomes us to a feast of bread and wine, of his body and blood. Right? So if you look at all of these things, it is undeniable that God is a God of lavish hospitality.

And when we practice hospitality, we are walking in the footsteps of Christ. In other words, just to put it plainly, I believe Christians should throw the best parties. I think that Christians should be known for throwing some of the best parties out there.

Because what better way to introduce people to the God of lavish hospitality than to show them lavish hospitality. To love them the way God has loved us.

[25 : 37] You know, many of you know about the For the City campaign. We're raising finances to renovate our future church home and God willing we'll move in later this year. And one of the main things we're excited about, about having our own space, is to be able to show hospitality to the neighborhood.

To be a place of hospitality for Shaw, for the surrounding communities, for the city. To have the ability to welcome people in every day. To love them by welcoming them into our space and providing for their needs.

And every time we gather around this table, which we're going to do in just a little while, we're reminded that this is God's vision for the culmination of all human history. Right? In the book of Revelation, at the end of time when Jesus makes all things new, there will be a great wedding feast.

The supper of the Lamb. And I love to think that the wine they tasted at the wedding at Cana is the same wine that we will all one day drink at that great feast.

Let's pray. Our Lord, we thank you for your love for us. We thank you that as the bridegroom rejoices over the bride, so you look upon your people and you rejoice.

[26 : 53] We thank you for this boundless, limitless love that has pursued us over the centuries, that pursues us still. Lord, we thank you that our hope does not rest in our faithfulness, but our hope rests in your faithfulness.

That our hope rests in the fact that even when we turn away from you, even when we give up on you, you never turn away from us. You never give up on us. Lord, I pray that those of us who need to hear this most would receive it, that your deep love and delight is here, that we need only receive it, Lord.

Lord, I pray that you would give us the grace to respond to your invitation into this kind of relationship that you made us for, and I pray that you would make this all the more real as we come to receive the bread and the wine later this morning.

We pray all this in Jesus' name. Amen.