

The Beginning of Signs

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[0 : 00] I don't have a catchy beginning to my sermon today. I apologize. You know, in sermon prep, I'm supposed to tell you some story or some joke at the beginning, and I couldn't think of one.

And so I apologize for that, that I haven't been able to grab your attention right off, excuse me, with some telling story, but I can't.

So turn in your Bibles instead to John 2, verse 1, on page 919. And I want to show you a little simple clue as to how to become a better reader of the Bible.

So if you're using your pew Bibles, it's page 919, and it's John 2, and it's in verse 11. Verse 11 is sort of a...

I mean, I'm not saying this because I believe the Bible is God's word written. I really do. I believe that every word is ultimately there because that's the word that God wanted to be there. And I think God can do that type of thing, and he did do that thing, and we hold the result of his work in our hands.

[1 : 16] But at the same time, the way that God chose to have his words written, in this case, is he chose to have a book written, like it's a book. And so those of us who are used to reading books and are good at reading books, we have the potential to be good at reading the Bible as well.

We have the potential to be good at reading some of the books in the Bible. And John has obviously given lots and lots of thought to how he wanted to write his gospel.

Tradition, early church tradition, is that John's was the last of the gospels which was written. And, you know, so it's as if John spent years and years and years, you know, making notes and thinking about it, and he thought, you know, how can I write a book that will really try to communicate what I want to say about Jesus?

And so, well, here, let's just read verse 11 of chapter 2. This is the verse after he's told the story of the water being turned into wine, and he says this, The beginning of signs Jesus did in Cana of Galilee, and manifested his glory, and his disciples believed in him.

Now, I'm going to explain in a moment, but notice, after he's told this very, very first significant miracle, this is what he says, This beginning of signs Jesus did in Cana of Galilee, and manifested his glory, and his disciples believed in him.

[2 : 41] Now, turn to the back of John, not the back of your Bibles, but the back of John, and that's on page, if you're using the Pew Bibles, it's page 941. 941.

And John chapter 20 is the story of the three significant, several significant resurrection appearances, where Jesus, to prove to his disciples that he really had conquered death and had been resurrected, he appears to them in significant ways.

And after this summary of them, and chapter 21 is sort of going to finish up some final bits of the story to launch us into ministry, this is what John says in verse 30 and 31.

And truly, and listen how similar it is to verse 11 of chapter 2. So John 2, 11 is like right at the beginning of the book, and this is almost at the end of the book, and the same type of idea is communicated by John, sort of like an editorial aside.

And truly, Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written, that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing, you may have life in his name.

[4 : 00] And so what we see is this, that what John decided to do was, and if you actually go and read the very last few verses of John, you'll see that John says, you know what, my three years with Jesus, Jesus performed so many miracles, and did so many unbelievable things, that it would just take book after book after book after book to record it.

So what, in a sense, he's saying is, you know, so I spent years thinking, how can I tell people about Jesus? And what he decided to do is, he decided that he would spend the first half of his book, picking, he picked a series of significant miracles, that all told something very important about who Jesus is, what he's doing, and what it means for us as human beings.

And so he decided that he'd organize his book by telling these series of significant signs. And then at the very end of the gospel, he would tell of the most significant sign of all, which was the death and resurrection of Jesus.

And the purpose of all of these is, he says, I'm going to tell of a series of signs or miracles, and every one of them is a matter of, it shows forth how Jesus reveals his glory.

And the ultimate revealing of his glory is when he hangs upon the cross and dies, and when he rises triumphant from death and sin and hell and the evil one on the third day. That is the most significant of the signs.

[5 : 30] I'm going to leave that at the end, but I'm going to lead up to it by a series of significant miracles. And these things reveal the glory of who Jesus is.

Who is he? He is the Messiah, and he is God's son. And the purpose of all of these things is so that we might believe in him and have faith in him.

And that's how he wrote his gospel. And so turn back then to chapter 2, verse 11, and listen again. So this in a sense, John isn't going to repeat this, but on the coming weeks, you're going to see a series of significant miracles.

And every time you see one of these significant miracles, keep in mind chapter 2, verse 11. This beginning of signs Jesus did in Cana of Galilee and manifested his glory, and his disciples believed in him.

Now, note the first part of this sentence, this beginning of signs that Jesus did in Cana of Galilee.

You know, it's funny that even as he records this, he specifically tells us where the story happened.

[6 : 42] See, one of the things about John's gospel is he wants to communicate to us that these miracles are real, that they're true, that they actually happened.

In fact, if we don't understand that, we won't really understand the significance of the, you know, the whole significance. If John wants to communicate to us that these miracles are real and that they are signs that point to something, that they are, in a sense, a clue about something, two Saturdays ago in the Ask the Religion experts, the question was about miracles.

And I read the four Christian, or people who are part of Christian churches, their response to this. And two of the responders, the Anglican and the Orthodox responder, got the matter completely and utterly wrong.

The Catholic guy got it pretty good. You have to give him like an A. And the United Church guy sort of said some really good things and some really odd, you know, some things that sort of undermined it.

And so I don't know what mark I'd give him because I wouldn't know which side of it to sort of take. But interestingly enough, it's almost as if the Anglican and the Orthodox guy got together because between the two of them, they gave the two common misunderstandings of what miracles are, the two most common understandings.

[8 : 02] And in a sense today, this is really the heart of my sermon, is for us to understand something around this. Because you see, both the Anglican and the Orthodox guy, without acknowledging it, they've basically accepted what the modern and the postmodern world tells us about reality, and they've tried to reinterpret the Christian faith appropriately or accordingly.

And you see, at the very, very heart of the modern project and even the postmodern project, this is like a little bit philosophical, but it's not that complicated, really.

It's as if we are to live as if there is no God. Whether or not God exists, if he does exist, he's completely and utterly shut out of the created order, and the created order sort of runs itself, has its own integrity, runs according to its own laws, and none of these things need God.

God doesn't have to come into any of the explanations, and in fact, God is completely and utterly irrelevant to it. If you want to have some religious beliefs, well, good on you, mate.

But those religious beliefs are something that just affects your perception or your emotions. It's something private and internal to you. And by the way, your religion should be private and internal as well, and shouldn't have any type of an impact on other people or on the public square.

[9 : 26] Your religion should be private, your spirituality should be private, and ultimately, the heart of your private religion should be about things that affect your emotions or things that just affect how

you sort of view things, your internal perceptions of your own brain.

And that has to be the case. Why? Because we know that dead people don't rise. We know that water doesn't get turned into wine. And we know that people don't walk on water.

We know that all these things don't happen, can't possibly happen, because nature has its laws, its systems, its own integrity, and it runs on its own.

And that's just the world we live in, folks. So if you want to have sort of, you know, some people collect stamps, you know, and some people collect plates, and some people like going to church, and some people like to meditate, and listen, it's all cool, just, you know, leave it to yourself, and it's just something private and internal.

And this understanding of reality then leads, the Anglican guy said that a miracle is really, well, it's just like being able to see beauty. That's all it is.

[10 : 35] Like some people can see beauty, and, you know, they just look at things, and they just have that ability within themselves to see beauty, where they see things. And it's the same type of thing with miracles.

It's just that some people have this ability just to see, you know, the miracle of a sunset, or the miracle of an old person's smile, or the miracle of the gurgling of a baby. And the Anglican guy, by saying that, is falling right into one of the fundamental traps of the modern world and postmodern world.

And the Orthodox guy takes the other sense side. He said it's like the experience of wonder. Some people are freed up, and they can experience wonder. And if you can experience wonder, if you can allow yourself to experience wonder, then you'll start to experience the miraculous all around you, and you'll just have like this type of experience that can carry you through life.

And to the Orthodox guy, and to the Anglican guy, John would say, you are seriously wrong. The guy who wrote John would say, you are seriously wrong.

I disagree with you to the utmost. You and I aren't talking about the same thing at all. John would say, your account for how the world is, is not what the Bible teaches.

[11 : 51] The Bible teaches that God creates all things, that he sustains all things, and that the reason that all things have their integrity, and have their purpose, and have their order, is because it was created by a purposeful, mindful, powerful God, who really does exist.

And God has created things, he sustains things, and this shouldn't terrify us, because, you know, if there were many gods, and many gods created many different things, you might never know what, like reality would be unbelievably chaotic, but there is only one God who's made all things, and he sustains all things, and he invites us to, in Genesis chapter, you know, chapter one and two, to examine the world, and understand the world, and think about the world, and he has placed a beautiful, and a wonderful, and a marvelous order in this world.

And the same God who creates all things, and sustains all things, when he feels like doing a new thing, in his creation, he can do it, and that's a miracle. I'll give you an example.

To a Christian, it would be like this. Some of you folks are young student types. Imagine that you have the most remarkable granny, like, just the most remarkable grandmother in the world.

And this grandmother comes up to you and puts her arm around you one time and says, you know, dear, I know how hard it is getting started, and I've decided that at the last day of the month, I'm going to put \$500 in your bank account.

[13 : 27] And I'm going to do that every month, and I'll take into account inflation, and every month, I'm going to put \$500 in just to sort of round off some of the edges of your life.

And I'm going to not only do that while you're in school, but, you know, I know how hard it is. I remember how hard it is to get started in a career, and it's even harder nowadays, and I'm going to keep on doing that until you've sort of got well established.

Don't worry about it. There's always going to be that \$500 at the end of the month. And it's always going to, and you know, so year, month and month, and year and year goes by, and it's always there. You know, in a sense, we Christians would say, that's exactly what the created order is like. Just as that grandmother is unbelievably dependable, and that \$500 shows up every month without fail, and that person can do, the young person can do with it whatever they want.

In a sense, that's just what, like, nature is like. The sun always rises, things that you drop always fall, and it's rock solid. It is completely and utterly dependable.

[14 : 28] But here's the difference. You see, we Christians know that ultimately it's because the grandmother is putting that \$500 in the bank. It doesn't sort of come out of nowhere. And so one day, the young person, you know, they've, their dad and mom have given them this car, and they've really come to depend upon it.

They've got a part-time job. They really need that car to drive there. And one day, the transmission goes, the rad goes, like, just about everything on that car that could possibly go wrong all goes. And the young person is just, you're completely and utterly, you don't know what to do. You need the job because it's, you know, it's opening up doors for your future. You can't possibly pay to fix this.

You're at your wit's end. And so, so you finally screw up the courage after worrying about this for three or four days and you get on the phone and you call up your granny and you say, granny, I am completely and utterly, I am, I've just had the worst thing happen.

My car's broken down, the transmission's gone, the rad's gone, who knows what else is gone. I either need a new car or I need a lot of repairs. Could you give me \$5,000? This young person has the most remarkable granny.

[15 : 41] In the world. And so, the granny says, I'll see what I can do. And three days later, you go to your bank machine and lo and behold, there's five grand in the bank.

You see, we Christians believe that's what prayer is like and that's what miracles are like. You see, the grandmother is the one who sustains the \$500 every month.

God is the one who sustains this entire created order. And just, and the money, just as in the story, the money didn't just sort of pop out of the air instantly or it wasn't just somehow existing by itself. It was sustained by the goodness of the grandmother and the young person was able to depend upon it and plan upon it and study how they were going to use that money, whether they were going to invest it or whether they were going to blow it on a new pair of sunglasses and all of that type of stuff.

And one day they get into trouble and they call up their grandmother and they say, Granny, I am in trouble, could you please intervene? And the grandmother is able to intervene. And in the same way, God can act in the order which he creates and in which he sustains.

[16 : 51] And so John wants to communicate to us that a miracle is not just a matter of perception, a miracle is not just a matter of experience, that it's not something subjective to us.

what happened in Cana of Galilee was true. It's real. John would go to his grave maintaining that it really happened.

And by saying that it really happened, he said, not only did it happen, but it's a sign. It's a pointer. It's not just a display of power. It's not God showing off.

This is, in a sense, an answer to the longing and the yearning of the human race. And in the face of a longing and a yearning of the human race, because we human beings, on one hand, we long for something more and we fear that something more and we are complicated and cannot help ourselves, God intervenes in a powerful way in a series of events through the person of Jesus Christ and every single one of these are signs that if we watch the sign and look at the sign, it's like a clue and follow where they point, it will lead us to see the glory of the Son of God who is the Messiah for the human race whom we can believe in and have life.

I just read the most remarkable quote from Simone de Beauvoir, an atheist, and she said, I wish I'd written it down, you know, she said, by my writings and other things I can abolish, it's as if, okay, I'm going to get this, she's speaking about God, okay, and she said, you know what, my writings have abolished God, but I can't abolish the thirst for God.

[18 : 39] It's as if you could go to a particular area and you could take away all the water, but you can't get rid of thirst. And so that even in the midst of our naturalistic age where we've tried to abolish God, the fact of the matter is that we human beings still have a thirst for God and if that thirst for the living God isn't satisfied by God, we will take pale substitutes and illusions which ultimately do not satisfy.

And John is saying, God has come and there are signs. Listen to the second part of verse 11. The first part said, this beginning of signs Jesus did in Cana of Galilee and manifested his glory. In other words, John is saying that there is truth here, that the truth is in a sense that there is an image that we can keep before our mind. It means that we can fill our imagination, that we can heal our minds, that we can meditate upon this image.

Like I was thinking about this all this week. You know, the characteristic, if you want to have an image, if you want to have an image of an Eastern religion, it's something like the Buddha sitting there large and overweight with inward-looking eyes where it is the image of the individual person in a room with their legs crossed in a way that would break my legs with their hands like this, their eyes closed, looking inward.

And that, in a sense, is a sign or an image of all that those Eastern faiths pursue. We Christians, the preeminent sign for us as Christians is Jesus upon the cross.

[20 : 14] And what John is saying here, to lead us to the cross, the first thing we have to think is have another image in our head. What is that image? Jesus having wine with his friends at a wedding banquet and then making 70 to 100 bottles of wine.

And that's the image which is to be in our head. I'm thinking about that. Like, what does this show us about God? Just very briefly. In a sense, it's a picture of the glory of a generous giver.

It is the picture of the glory of a generous giver. Jesus sitting there with his friends having wine and the wine is running out and they just maybe need a little bit more wine to get through for the, you know, maybe there's 30 or 40 people there.

Who knows? It's a small number of people and Jesus goes and makes the best wine and he makes somewhere between 70 to 100 bottles of wine. Just picture it in your room.

All these bottles of wine. It is the picture of the glory of one who is a generous giver. It is a revelation in this miracle.

[21 : 27] It is an image of the glorious future. In the Old Testament, one of the signs that the Messiah had come and the Messianic age had begun was that there would be lots and lots of wine.

This image that somehow or another that the future when the Messiah would come would be characterized as if we are having the greatest time with our friends. We are completely and utterly at peace.

We have no longer any fears. We don't have any worries. We don't have any anxieties. And we can just, and we are completely and utterly finally surrounded with abundance and joy.

And that is one of the constant pictures in the Old Testament of when the Messiah comes. And the first sign that Jesus gives is that he makes lots of wine at a wedding when he's sitting around with his friends.

And people have just become his friends. What is revealed is the glory of the generous giver. The glory of the future. What is revealed is in a sense the glorious of the creator.

[22 : 30] Actually, sorry, it is the glory of the creator creating even in the midst of the disciples. You know, it's, you think about it for a second, folks.

Some of us on Thursday night, I thought that the leadership video that we watched on Thursday night was really, really remarkable. And this, by this guy, Aaron McManus, I think his name is. And he talked about the importance of gratitude. And ever since that on Thursday night, like I've just been thinking, you know, the trees, there's just so many leaves and they just look so fantastic and the grass is looking so green and the sky looks so blue.

When you can see the sky, I haven't done that in a few days. You know, but everything just looks so lush and so plentiful and so plenteous. And the creator is just so generous and he's so great.

And it's really appropriate that I try to learn what it means to live a life of gratitude. And this creation is just so plentiful and ongoing. And that is, in a sense, what is exactly revealed, what this sign is that Jesus just, with the merest of his power, is unbelievably generous, far more wine than they need, that he's, that he's, he's in a sense, pointing to what the future is like and he's just pointing to the wonderful fact of creation by the fact that he can create wine.

[23 : 55] Through which his glory is revealed, he's also, in a sense, trying to reveal to us the glory of a life that is lived, reconciled to God. And one of the wonderful things about this story is the water was there.

Why was the water there? The water was there for religious purposes. The water was there so that religious ceremonies of purification could be performed. And what does Jesus take to turn into wine?

He could have said, listen, there's a well there, you know, go get a few bottles, go get a few pots, fill it up, and that'll be it. But what does Jesus do? That which is there merely for religion and merely for religious rites and religious ceremonies and attempts to symbolize purification, in place of that, 70 to 100 bottles of wine.

