

John Series: An Unexpected Miracle

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[0:00] Amen. Amen.

I would like to read the passage that I would be preaching on this morning together. As we finished the verses appointed, the first thing she said to me was, what do you make of this passage?

And what a great question that is, isn't it? We should never let the word of God go in one ear and out the other. One of the reasons we do these expository sermon series is that we have this as a way of getting us to dig deeper into the riches that the text of Scripture has for us.

So what do we make of this passage? John identifies this as the first of the signs that Jesus did. In fact, with this passage, we are essentially moving into a new section of John's Gospel that is themed around the signs that Jesus performed in his ministry.

In some ways, this particular sign is a little bit of a strange sign. Its meaning is less immediately obvious than some of the other miracles that Jesus performed.

[2:03] We pretty readily get what's going on and what we're supposed to take away, for example, when Jesus raises the dead. What we take away from that is that Jesus can raise the dead.

But going to a wedding and changing water into wine, that one's a little bit tougher to figure out. It doesn't help at all that this passage is a little bit embarrassing and scandalous to some Christians. Jesus making wine so that people can continue to party. If that makes us uncomfortable, we can find ourselves ignoring this passage or trying to explain it away instead of digging into its meaning. Now, one of the scholars I consulted as I was studying and preparing for this sermon felt the need to slip in the admonition that the burden of proof is on those who think that Christians don't have to completely abstain from alcohol.

Now, he is a great scholar, generally did justice to this passage, but even he got sidetracked at this point. And a lesser scholar might have been so worked up about that issue so as to miss the point of the text.

[3:14] And there is a lot of meaning to unpack here about who Jesus is, about why he came, and quite a lot about what it means for us. So as we look at this passage together, the question on our mind should be this.

What does this sign, recorded here in this passage, tell us about Jesus? So let's look together at our text, John chapter 2, verses 1 through 12.

Now, as we read this text, we find that the first couple of verses really set the scene for what is happening. It's nothing other than a wedding banquet.

That's a familiar setting for most of us. You ever been to one of those? It's a time of joy and celebration. I remember my own wedding reception, of course, my beautiful bride, and the fact that I danced with enthusiasm, but without much skill and with plenty of awkwardness.

There are pictures on the internet to prove it, in case you were wondering. I especially remember that my side of the family filled the dance floor whenever a bluegrass number would come on. But this wedding banquet that we have in our text is a little different than what we might be used to.

[4:35] It was certainly a time of joy and celebration, there was that in common, but of a much larger scope. It could have gone on for a week, tons and tons of people would have been invited, and the wine flowed.

In fact, running out of wine at a celebration like this would have, at the very least, been a source of deep social shame, and could have even led to lawsuits, believe it or not, as there would have been a sense that the groom didn't meet his obligations in providing for the wedding.

With that little bit of setting, what do our first couple of verses tell us about this particular wedding celebration? First, it's in Cana of Galilee, so we get the location.

Second, Mary the mother of Jesus was there. We find out also that Jesus and his disciples are there as well. Okay, so we have our setting, we have our context. In verse 3, we see a bit of a twist in this story beginning to arrive. Disaster strikes, the wine runs out. And as we've already seen, that spells impending disaster for this wedding celebration.

[5:52] Mary, the mother of Jesus, responds to this deeply embarrassing situation by going to Jesus and asking him for help with this problem. It's likely that she had been assisting with the wedding in some capacity, although we have no way of knowing that for sure.

Now, we're not told exactly why Mary goes to Jesus. It would be a bit of a stretch for us to assume that she knows what's coming, that he would miraculously change water into wine.

But if we take into account that Mary was likely a widow at this point, it is not unlikely that she had learned to rely on her son, who was quite literally the perfect son.

So she goes to Jesus. They have a kind of curious exchange between one another back and forth that carries the potential to leave us scratching our heads.

Verses 3 and 4, we read, Now, we've already thought a little bit about why Mary would have gone to Jesus.

[7:13] She would have believed that he would have the ability to fix the problem. But what do we make of the response that Jesus gives to Mary? It could come across to us as somewhat dismissive or even disrespectful, right?

Notice that he does not say, Yes, Mother Dearest. First, he addresses her as woman. That's odd. If we were to dig into the original Greek, what we'd basically find is that Jesus is not responding to her in a way that is disrespectful, but it's also not the way one would be expected to address their beloved mom.

I've never, for example, given a Mother's Day card to my mom, who is here today, that addressed her as woman. There's always next year, Mom.

There is a kind of distancing here, though. What Jesus, in using such a term, is getting at, is that from this point forward, as he begins his public ministry, his family connection to Mary, like everything else, is subordinate to his mission and ministry as the Messiah.

That is what will come first from this point on. And it's indicating that Mary will need to come to see him as the incarnate Word and Savior, just like everyone else will need to see him as.

[8:53] But what do we make of this question, what does this have to do with me? The most convincing explanation of the meaning of this question that I've encountered is basically, what do you and I have in common on this matter?

Mary is basically given a gentle rebuke, and again, there's a bit of a distancing there. Jesus is making a statement about his identity and the importance of his ministry over all other connections and considerations.

And then he says, my hour has not yet come. What does that mean? The hour he speaks of is ultimately the cross, his dying, which is what he came to do, of course, and the resurrection and the exaltation at the Father's right hand that would follow.

And Mary would not have known this, of course, but in prompting Jesus to his first public song, kicking into gear his public ministry, the events that would lead to Jesus going to the cross began falling into place.

How does Mary respond to this less than intimate response or this less than intimate address and the gentle rebuke that is included? It's interesting.

[10:18] She doesn't argue with Jesus. She doesn't go and mope in some corner. She doesn't tell him as some mothers would that she brought him into this world and can take him out of it. No.

She responds in faith and trust, responds as a believer in Christ rather than as his mom, and gives the servant some simple instructions.

Do whatever he tells you. I'll come back to this later, but I can't pass up the chance to point out that this should be the attitude that all of us take towards Jesus.

Do whatever he tells you. Now let's look again at verses 6-10 to see how all of this plays out. Now there were six stone water jars there for the Jewish rites of purification, each holding 20 or 30 gallons.

And 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.

[11:25] 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. One scholar noted that Jesus treated this sign as an enacted parable, essentially.

And I think that's right. I'm going to hold off on what that enacted parable means, though I believe it is the central takeaway of this passage, because there are a few things to untangle first in these verses and the verses to follow, and a few obvious applications I want to get to.

First, these water jars were used for the Jewish rites of purification. So under Jewish practice, under Old Testament practice, there would have been a ceremonial washing of hands before meals, which is the most likely reason that these jars were kept close at hand at a banquet.

Now, it's clear in the text that the jars of water were filled to the brim by the servants, but there's some disagreement and some debate over whether or not the wine that was provided was drawn from the jars after they were filled, or if it was drawn from the well that had been used to fill the jars.

[12:59] I'm inclined to think that it was drawn from the well for reasons that we'll get to later on.

So once the wine is taken to the master of the feast, he is astonished that the best wine that Jesus provided has been saved for last.

If we think about it, we can understand why he would have thought it unusual that the best wine was saved for last. It's an observable fact that people, after a drink or two, start carrying a little glass about the quality of what they're drinking.

Don't know if you have ever noticed that. But what effect do we see from this miracle? We see this. This, the first of his signs, Jesus did at Cana in Galilee and manifested his glory and his disciples believed in him.

What Jesus performed here wasn't a flashy trick. It wasn't even merely an awesome display of power. Jesus reveals his identity and his authority in this sign.

Even if we don't have any indication that everyone at the feast understood it or saw it. But his disciples did. They saw his glory.

[14:23] And this verse ought to and is intended to draw us back to the prologue in chapter 1. The word became flesh and dwelt among us and we have seen his glory glory as of the only Son from the Father full of grace and truth.

That is the glory that the disciples saw and perceived in this first sign that Jesus performed. With that point established, our final verse for this morning provides a nice transition into our passage for next week.

We see that Jesus goes down to Capernaum with his mother and his brothers and his disciples. They stay there for a few days. So now we're going to transition.

I'm going to steal the words of our dear Bishop Dave Benne here. Transition from what the text says to what the text means. I'll start with what I consider to be the most obvious takeaways.

First, I think that this sign indicates Jesus' endorsement and blessing of marriage, right? And in a time like ours, that is a reminder that we need.

[15:41] I've seen study after study suggesting that my generation is avoiding marriage and thinks it's relatively unimportant. So an article just the other day warning that my generation isn't having children and the result will be a majorly problematic population drop in the years ahead.

And I will be feeling that when I don't have Social Security. Bummer. But I realize, of course, and the Bible is clear on this, that some people are specifically called to singleness.

It's also obvious that sometimes not marrying is the result of not finding a suitable partner. It's also obvious that marriages sometimes come to an end, sometimes with biblical justification.

But what I'm concerned about is that our current culture doesn't seem to even see the value in marriage. Part of that problem might be that we live in a culture that doesn't appear to understand what marriage even is.

the union of a man and a woman who become one flesh for life as a sign of the union between Christ and his church. People don't understand what marriage is.

[17:06] It's no wonder they have a low view of marriage. What can we do about that? A mentor of mine once told me, rightly I think, that one of the best ways we can bear witness to the gospel is to have a loving and godly Christian marriage.

And I think that's true. For those of us who have not been called to marriage, you're also called to glorify God in your particular calling.

And there's still a call to all Christians to affirm and support the goodness of marriage as God has designed it, because it's not simply good for human flourishing, and it is good for human flourishing because God designed it that way, but it points to the gospel truth of Christ as the perfect bridegroom of his church.

And if Christ is the perfect bridegroom of his church, suddenly it's not so surprising that he performed his first sign at a wedding, is it?

The next obvious takeaway that I see here is that in endorsing this celebration with a miracle, Jesus is indicating that all of human life can and should be lived to the glory of God, including our times of joy and our times of celebration.

[18:30] On the internet not so long ago, I saw someone post a quote that described fun as an un-Christian word. Man, what a bunch of nonsense that is, isn't it?

With Jesus performing his first miracle in this kind of setting, we're reminded that, as C.S. Lewis put it, we should not be the kind of people who are so heavenly-minded that we are of no earthly good. The writer G.K. Chesterton once said, you say grace before meals, all right, but I say grace before the play and the opera and grace before the pantomime and grace before I open the book and grace before sketching, painting, swimming, fencing, boxing, playing, dancing, and grace before I dip the pen in the ink.

Chesterton also reportedly said grace before he lit his cigars. Got an amen from our deacon over here. So, Jesus is fully human, and what he calls us to is not a withdrawal from being human. If it were, he wouldn't have performed the sign providing wine, and not only wine, but the best wine at a wedding. He calls us to be human in a way that recognizes and reflects the glory of God in every aspect of human life.

[19:58] So, perhaps, we should be saying grace when we are getting together with dear friends, or grace before we play with our children or grandchildren, maybe even grace before we light our cigars, if we are so inclined.

The next thing I think we should take away from this passage is the model of faith and intercession that we see from Mary. I once heard a sermon suggesting that this passage means that we should make all of our requests of Jesus through Mary.

I think that is a bit of an exegetical leap. but I do think that this passage provides us through her example with a vision of what praying for others looks like in practice.

After all, what did she do? She simply presents the needs of others to Jesus. And that's what we're called to do when we pray for others. And just to throw it out there, you have a great opportunity to do just that at our prayer meeting coming up on Wednesday evening.

Notice what she in faith directs the servants to do. Do whatever he tells you. That is a strong affirmation to all of us that we should approach Jesus in faith and in trust, trusting that he will provide what we need, and that we are called to faithful obedience to him.

[21:32] Do whatever he tells you. You might ask, well, what is it he's telling me to do? I am confident that if we pick up our Bibles and read, it will be clear.

So there's a lot that we can take away from this text, but I think the most important has to do with the enacted parable of the sign itself. what it says about who Jesus is and what he has done. So the water for the purification and the wine that Jesus provided symbolize two very different things when we look at this enacted parable. The water for the purification, by its very purpose, stands for the rituals and regulations of the law.

Think about the Old Covenant for a second. You had to have the means of purification close at hand under the Old Covenant because the means of purification provided under that covenant simply could not wash you clean forever.

So you had to have water for purification handy because if you became unclean again, which you inevitably would, you'd have to be purified again, and then you would become unclean again, and then you would need to be purified again.

[23:01] And so likewise, the priest would stand in the temple again and again offering the blood of bulls and goats, having to do it year after year because the blood of animals could never put away sin.

In contrast to that, in providing wine at a wedding banquet, Jesus is demonstrating something powerful about who he is and what it is he's going to accomplish.

First, he tells the servants to fill the jars to the brim. When we think about what this represents, it is not much of a leap to come to the conclusion that Jesus is indicating that the old covenant with its rituals and practices and requirements that could never put away sin has finally come to its complete fulfillment in him.

With the wine that he provides, we see what that fulfillment looks like, and it is nothing other than a new and better covenant.

We see that in the images of wine and of a wedding banquet. With the imagery of the wine that Jesus provides, we remember that the prophets talked about God sending an age of blessing, abundance, and redemption to his people.

[24 : 32] As we read in Isaiah 25, on this mountain, the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wine, of rich food full of marrow.

Personally, I'm hoping that's vegetarian. marrow of aged wine well-refined. He will swallow up on this mountain the covering that is cast over all peoples, the veil that is spread over all nations.

He will swallow up death forever, and the Lord God will wipe away tears from all faces, and the reproach of his people he will take away from all the earth.

for the Lord has spoken. In performing this miracle, Jesus is showing us that what the prophets promised is finding its fulfillment in him.

death. And Jesus is identifying himself with the wedding feast that God has promised on that day when death is destroyed, that day when the Lord will wipe away tears from all faces, and the sins of his people will be gone forever.

[25 : 51] we might be tempted to look at this morning's account of the marriage feast in Cana, and think, wow, that's a really cool story, and demonstrated that Jesus can do some awesome stuff, that he could work miracles, but through faith we see something more than that.

First, we see the better promise, the better covenant that we have in Jesus, as opposed to the old covenant with its sacrifices and rites of purification, that had to be repeated over and over because they could not take away sins, we have something so much better.

And we need it because we cannot take away our own sins, no matter how hard we try. The blood of bulls and goats cannot take away our sins. Our promises to do better and try harder cannot take away our sins.

Our attempts at being really religious cannot take away our sins. We can try so many things that we think might wash away our sins and make us right with God.

But there is only one thing that can make us right with God and wash away our sins, and that is the blood of Jesus Christ shed for us. God. As we read this account of this sign, we are reminded that Jesus is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through him.

[27 : 31] And so we are called to come to Jesus, even if we have tried to clean ourselves up over and over and we have failed every time.

All of those other attempts at becoming clean may have and will have failed, but the cross of Jesus Christ is not. His disciples saw his glory and believed in him.

What they saw and what we see is that the word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory. Glory is of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.

truth. So we find in Jesus grace, truth, forgiveness, cleansing, and the promise of new life.

I did not witness this sign with my own eyes, but I have seen his glory by faith. Praise God.

[28 : 53] What about you? In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.