

Water into wine

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Date: 01 February 2026

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[0 : 00] If you want to turn in your Bibles to John chapter 2, page 1064. That's where we'll spend the next few minutes.

! We might truly live for you, confident in your saving help.

In Jesus' name. Amen. I don't know whether you know this fact, but there are just seven miracles in John's Gospel. Only seven. Seven signs, as John calls them, of Jesus' identity and power.

There's the healing of the official son in John chapter 4. The healing of the lame man at the pool in John chapter 5. In John chapter 6, Jesus does two miracles. He feeds 5,000 people by the hillside.

And then he walks on the water. A private miracle, if you like, for his disciples. He heals a man born blind in John chapter 9. He raises Lazarus from the dead in John chapter 11.

[1 : 15] And then there is this miracle. The first one. The most ordinary, mundane miracle of them all. Jesus turns water into wine.

Why is it here? What does it reveal to us? What can we learn from it? Well, I suspect the answer, or at least part of it, is there in verse 11. What Jesus did here in Cana of Galilee was the first of the signs through which he revealed his glory.

And his disciples believed in him. So as we go through, keep your eyes open for glimpses of the glory of Jesus that gets revealed as he comes to a wedding and turns water into wine.

We're not told who the bride and groom are or why Jesus' mother or indeed Jesus and his disciples were there at the wedding.

But since the town of Cana is just maybe a couple of hours' walk north of Nazareth, it seems likely that the two families were either related or at least knew each other very well. Even in the times of Jesus, you didn't generally invite people you didn't know or had no relationship with to your wedding.

[2 : 23] By the time John picks up the story in verse 3, the ceremony is over and the celebrations are in full flow. There would have been food and wine, music and dancing, just as you would find at any wedding today.

But on this particular occasion, there was a problem, a big problem. The wine had run out. The family had not provided enough. Now, today that wouldn't be an issue, would it?

The barman would simply say, it's okay, we've got no more wine, but I've got a range of beers and lagers and ciders and everything else. But in those days, that was the choice, water or wine.

And at a wedding feast, it had to be wine. And if the wine ran out, the celebrations would come to a halt. The family concerned would face terrible shame and embarrassment. And in that culture, such shame was not easy to brush off.

It would cling like a limpet to the reputation of the family. It would have cast clouds over the newlyweds future, perhaps being seen as a terrible omen for what was coming.

[3 : 28] Running out of wine was a big deal. And people had begun to notice. Jesus' mother had noticed. John tells us that. Maybe she was a close friend of the mother of the bride, or perhaps she overheard a quiet conversation.

But somehow, she found out. What does she do? Well, her first reaction is to tell Jesus, son, they have no more wine. It's hard not to fill in the blanks, isn't it?

With a motherly tone, or a concerned or forceful look. But the way that Jesus responds with woman, why do you involve me? My hour has not yet come.

It does suggest that when Mary makes that statement, there was an implicit request there. Jesus, they have no more wine. It's a disaster for them. We can't let that happen.

You can't let that happen. There's clearly a deep understanding on Mary's part. She recognises that Jesus is far more than her firstborn son.

[4 : 30] She knows that Jesus has the power to resolve this impossible situation. And she has a confident trust that he will do what is right. Notice she doesn't answer him back.

She waits silently, perhaps smiling her motherly smile. And then she says to the servants who are nearby, do whatever he tells you. A word of warning here, I think.

We must not fall into the trap of somehow thinking that Mary knows more than Jesus. Or that she has some spiritual authority to tell him what to do. It certainly isn't an argument for praying to Mary, for seeing her as some kind of special intercessor.

Someone who can twist her son's arm to do things that he wouldn't otherwise have done. The usual pattern for us as Christians in our prayer life is to pray to the Father through the Son in union with the Holy Spirit.

We can pray to all three members of the Trinity. There are examples in the Scriptures for that. There's no warrant to pray to anyone else. But as well as being fully God, Jesus is also fully human.

[5 : 41] And at this moment, he is a son standing next to his mother, who has at least implicitly asked him to intervene.

And so he does. I wonder if Jesus' gentle response here is the first glimpse we get of the glory of God. That Mary can bring such an ordinary care to Jesus.

And for him not to send her away is a wonderful example for us of the way that God the Father treats us when we come to him with our requests. How he is patient with our failings.

Gentle with our misspoken, sometimes badly phrased prayers. Generous with his answers. As Jesus will teach us later in the Gospels, our Father longs for us to bring our requests to him.

What a gracious, kind God we have. Jesus reveals some of that love here. Well, back to the action. John tells us there are six stone water jugs nearby, the kind used for ceremonial washing.

[6 : 44] They range in size, but they're all huge. Each holding between 20 and 30 gallons. As a way of comparison, the kettle in the kitchen, which will be boiling to make our coffee, holds about a third of a gallon.

So that's somewhere between 60 and 90 jugs full, needed for each jar. That's a lot of water to fetch in, isn't it? You can't just turn the tap on. You've got to go and bring it in.

And all the time, the guests are finishing their glasses of wine, looking around for more, seeing the servants empty-handed. The servants, though, are working hard, though.

And soon the jugs are full, all of them right to the brim. And that's when Jesus gives his second command. Now, draw some out and take it to the master of the banquet.

I wonder how you would have felt if you had been the servant sent with that first pitcher of wine. Embarrassed? Scared? I'm sure whether you would lose your job once the master of the banquet tasted out the freshly drawn well water.

[7:49] Or would you have been excited? Because you'd already seen that the water you had drawn from the well and poured into those huge jars had already been transformed. Either way, the master of the banquet is in for a bit of a shock.

Taking a sip of wine, he could hardly believe his taste buds. The wine was stellar vintage like the 2010 Bordeaux. The palate was smooth. The nose was extraordinary.

This was the best of wines reserved for the best of occasions. This kind of wine was only and ever served first. Certainly not after the guests had already had plenty to drink.

The master of the banquet called the bridegroom aside and shared his disbelief and surprise with him. What are you doing? Everyone brings out the good wine first and the cheaper wine later after the guests have had too much to drink and they can't tell the difference.

But you have saved the best until now. Their joy would have increased vastly as the new and wonderful wine was poured out and shared around. The wedding that was on the verge of ending in shame was now basking in glory.

[8:56] The master of ceremonies and the bridegroom may not have known where this fantastic wine had come from. But of course the servants knew. And like some juicy gossip from 10 down in street, the news spreads.

Reaching the disciples. And after hearing what John the Baptist had been saying about Jesus, they obviously weren't surprised that he'd been able to do this. They knew he was someone special.

They had already decided to follow him after all. But John tells us that the miracle helped them see the glory of God in Jesus' actions. And they put their faith in him.

We mentioned the glory of Jesus' gentle response to his mother already. But I think there are several other signs to take note of here. Firstly, the quiet way that Jesus works.

For those who have eyes to see and ears to hear, the word and works of God are out there in the open. Jesus never does his works in secret. But he never blows his own trumpet, does he?

[10:03] The miracles he does are never done with a flourish, with a great drum roll and a final ta-da! He could do that. After all, all praise and honour are rightly due to God.

But more often than not, God works gently and quietly in the hearts and lives of those who seek him. That is a beautiful thing. And then we have the wine itself. An exceptional quality wine with vast quantities provided.

Far more than was needed. We saw a sign of God's great provision in that Old Testament reading. Here, again, there is so much more than might have been expected.

Far greater quality than what I expected. Far more than just was needed for the wedding feast. And such is the generosity of God that he often answers our prayers with far more than we can ask or imagine.

But again, it shouldn't surprise us, should it? According to Psalm 104, the Lord, it is the Lord who brings forth wine to gladden the heart. Isaiah reflects on the coming of God's kingdom.

[11:07] He writes this, On this mountain, the Lord Almighty will prepare a feast of rich food for all peoples. A banquet of aged wine. The best of meats. The finest of wines.

It's a glimpse into the glory to come that we sang about in our first hymn. Did the disciples recall this passage from Isaiah 25 and put two and two together?

Or was it the sheer abundance and quality of the wine that made them realise that the one in their midst was the Lord of life himself? And what about the power of Jesus here?

Could the one who turned water into wine be the long-awaited-for Messiah? The one who, according to Isaiah 61, would bring comfort to all who mourn?

Who would provide for all those who grieve? Who would bestow on them a crown of beauty instead of ashes? The joy of... The oil of joy instead of mourning. A garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair.

[12:06] Where there was plenty of joy and celebration at the wedding. That fear of shame had been taken away. This transformation is part of Jesus' mission.

And it's a wonderful description of the future all believers will enjoy in God's eternal kingdom. But for whatever reason, sometimes the thought that God wants us to know true joy sometimes runs contrary to the way we see God.

It's an old joke, perhaps you know it, that whilst the first miracle of Jesus was turning water into wine, the church has been trying ever since to turn it back. Sometimes churches, plenty of Christians, and I give off that feeling that following Jesus is dull and dreary, hard and grim.

Of course there is a difference between joy in God and happiness in pleasant circumstances. We can and should enjoy true Christian joy all the time, rejoicing in who God is and what he has done for us.

In God's providence, we won't always have happiness in pleasant circumstances. But when things do go badly wrong, we can still bring those situations to God.

[13:22] Trusting in his provision and his help. And reminding ourselves of the glory the disciples saw in Jesus at the wedding at Cana. The gentleness of the Father who longs for us to come to him with our prayers and requests.

The power of God to do far more than we can ask or imagine. And the overflow of good things that God has already provided for us through Jesus. Those are things that are worth celebrating and enjoying every day.

And whatever God gives and pleasures he gives to us in this life, we also have the knowledge that just like this miracle, the best is still to come.

May God bless us and encourage us with these words. Amen. Amen.