

Better Wine

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[0 : 00] Well, I wonder if you would open your Bibles to John 2 that Louise read for us, to the wedding in Cana in Galilee where Jesus turned water into wine.

It's on page 887 in my Bible. And as I was working on this passage this week, I took one of the commentaries and opened it to this passage and a whole collection of little pieces of chocolate fell out onto my table and they looked suspiciously like Toblerone and they were delicious.

But it was not quite what I was expecting. And I think that nicely sums up this passage and how we experience it. It's so familiar and we think we know what we should expect, but there's something completely wonderful going on here and I think unexpected.

I mean, why would Jesus choose a wedding as the first place to do a miracle? I mean, it's not saving people from death or disease, is it?

I mean, saving them from embarrassment maybe. And why turn water into wine? It seems so commonplace, so domestic. Now, what's the point of this miracle?

[1 : 19] And you can hear sermons on all these things. Is Jesus the best guest to invite into your life? Is this pro-marriage?

Should we have a sermon on marriage? Is it pro-wine or anti-wine, as one of the commentaries I read said? Or are we meant to be like Mary, Jesus' mother, speaking words of wisdom?

And you'll be grateful to know that it's none of those. And that John actually tells us something about the reason that he includes this sign in verse 11.

He says this, this is verse 11 in chapter 2, this, the first of his signs, Jesus did at Cana and Galilee, manifested his glory and the disciples believed in him.

By the time we get to the end of the gospel, John tells us that if he'd written all the things that Jesus had done, all the books in all the world couldn't contain them.

[2 : 20] He's been highly selective. And he selects what he reports to us, and there are only seven of these miracle signs. The basis on which he chooses them is so that we would see that Jesus is the son of God and believe in Jesus and have life in his name.

So turning water into wine is not just a big power miracle. It's a sign. It points to something. It shows something else. It's not a big party trick.

And when John says this is the first of his signs, he could mean this is the first, you know, chronologically, the first thing he hadn't done miracles before this. But it's the same word that gospel began with, you know, in the beginning was the word.

And it can mean first, not just chronologically, but first as in primary, foundation, basis. It's exactly the same word here. And I think John is saying this is like the doorway sign miracle into all the others.

I don't think we really understand the other signs unless we understand this one. It's the key. And the reason is because, and I know this is so obvious, that the miracle itself is a miracle of change.

[3 : 44] It's a miracle of transformation of one thing into another, of water into wine. And that is the sign of the great change that Jesus has come to bring of what it means to have his life.

The second last verse in chapter one said, Jesus said to us, you'll see greater things. This is the beginning of the greater things. Jesus said, I'm the connection between heaven and earth at the end of chapter one.

What does that look like? What does that look like in the common, ordinary circumstances of our daily lives? Well, it's a complete transformation. It's like from water into wine.

That's why the passage starts on the third day. Did you notice that in verse one? It's not just three days after Jesus said, greater things are going to happen.

But if you've been here, the first chapter is built around this seven day, this new week, because what Jesus is doing is nothing short of a new creation. We've spoiled the old creation.

[4 : 46] And so Jesus has come to restore order, to recreate, to transform. And this sign is a demonstration and showing that.

And the reason this is important, the reason we're even talking about it today is because what Jesus did then, he is able to do now and more than able and willing to do something greater. So I just want to look at the passage with you around two surprises, because I think there are two very surprising things in the passage. And the first surprise shows us the basis of the change and points to Jesus' death.

And the second surprise shows us the result of the change and it points us to Jesus' life in us. So firstly then, the first surprise, the basis of our change.

And I think the surprise is the interaction between Mary and Jesus. Don't you think it's a little abrupt, that interchange? Despite the best attempts at the commentaries to smooth it over, Jesus' words to his mother are sharp.

[5 : 52] So in verses 1 and 2, the event is laid out like a perfectly normal Saturday afternoon. We get the date, we get the occasion, we get the place, we get the guest list.

It's a family wedding, a little town not far from Nazareth. And it may well be a relative of Mary's, since Mary is invited and Jesus is invited and the five very big eating disciples are invited.

And it's likely Mary's related to this family because she's in close touch with the kitchen staff. She may be helping. And before we go on, it's worth pointing out that Jesus had a social life.

He's not an ascetic like John the Baptist. He's not anti-marriage, not anti-parties. And often in the Gospels we find him at feasts and meals. But then early on in verse 2, just at the beginning of verse 3, I'm sorry, the catering catastrophe comes.

The wine ran out. Now, this is a perfectly normal crisis. It's the kind of thing that happens to you and to me on a regular basis. And it's the perfect context for Jesus' first sign.

[7 : 11] Because just like wine running out, we are always running out. Everything in our lives, every natural joy and pleasure we have runs out.

I mean, this happy wedding couple on their wedding day and with their wedding guests, even those people are not going to last.

The bride and groom might have children. They'll grow old and they will ultimately die. Their health will run out. Their capacities will run out. Their time will run out just as yours will in mine. That's what makes this interchange between Mary and Jesus so surprising.

If you just look down at it, in chapter 2, verse 3, Jesus' mother says to him, They have no wine.

That's what she says. And then Jesus says, verse 4, and it's even sharper in the original, What are you to me, woman?

And then Mary says, not to Jesus, but to the servants, Do whatever he tells you. And I've got to say, I honestly don't know what to make of that. I really don't.

[8 : 18] Because you can read it all the way from a really positive example of faith of Mary down to being a meddling, manipulative mother. And I can line up the books on both sides of that divide.

However, it is a surprise. Jesus' words, they're not rude, but they are highly unusual. He says, what are you to me? My hour, literally, has not yet come.

He's clearly pushing back on Mary, and he's placing a line between the two of them, placing a bit of a distance between he and his mum. He's establishing a distance, which I think is a surprise for Mary, and it is a surprise for us.

You know, Jesus does this a number of times in this gospel. Someone comes to him in desperate need and asks for Jesus' help. Jesus says, no.

And then he goes around and he does something even more wonderful, way beyond the miracle that was asked for in the first place. So in chapter 4, for example, an official comes to Jesus whose son is on the point of death and asks Jesus to help.

[9 : 29] And Jesus' response is a strong rebuke. Because, you see, the official is in danger of just believing in Jesus' power, but not believing in Jesus himself. And he wants to give him the greater gift of believing in himself.

And when the man does, then Jesus heals the boy, even from a distance. Or in chapter 11, when Lazarus, Jesus' friend, is very sick, and the sisters send off to Jesus and say, come, the one whom you love is sick.

They thought that Jesus could help before Lazarus died. They thought, but they had no idea that he had power over death itself. And so Jesus waits until after Lazarus dies, we're told.

And then he raises Lazarus from the dead. And he gives them a greater gift to show them that he is Lord of life and death. So, you see, each time Jesus does this in the gospel, the key to the story is why he is saying no to the person.

Each time he says no to the person, he's trying to move them out of spiritual danger to something much better, into faith in him. And here at the wedding feast, Jesus is indicating to his mother that there's a change in their relationship, that he's no longer primarily Mary's son, he's primarily the son of God, that he doesn't belong to anyone, that he's not going to be there for anyone's agenda.

[10:54] Why? What's the greater thing that he's going to do? Well, he says, my hour has not yet come. Those of you who've read John's gospel, you know that the hour means Jesus' death.

To you seven times, it's always speaking of his death. So right here in this foundation sign, Jesus has his death in mind. That the essence and pivot of his ministry, and I think this is very helpful for us, because if he hadn't talked about his death, then we wouldn't really understand this sign.

Because you see, what Jesus is trying to do by turning water into wine is a sign of his transformation, the sign of the transformation that he brings through death.

Now, if you've just wandered off, just come back in. Listen to this, you see. You see, it's not that Jesus does lots and lots and lots of powerful works, and that his life is tragically cut short.

It all runs, all his power and works run through the nexus of his death. And it's because of his death that his power is now available to us. You see, otherwise, we would just be spectators looking at this miracle.

[12:07] If you separate Jesus' death from his signs, in the end, we just want to use him for what we want. He becomes a tool for our agendas, rather than being drawn up into the plan and agenda of God.

Jesus keeps warning us about this. When he feeds the 5,000, he says something like this to the crowd. Look, you're after me because of the signs, not really because of what they point to.

I fill your bellies with food. That's the only reason you're following me. So here's the first surprise, that Jesus connects this transformation with his death.

Water into wine is a sign of his death, and that's the basis of the change. Secondly, what is the result of the change? And the result of the change is that life, the life of Jesus comes to us.

The gospel is all about life. This is the great theme in John's gospel. Remember, John tells us he's writing so that we might believe in Jesus and have life in his name.

[13:14] But we need pictures to see what that life is all about. And the basic picture of someone who begins to follow Jesus Christ is that they are changed, that they're transformed.

Like being changed from plain, ordinary water into something that is living and fermenting, if you will, and changing. It's not just ideas we're talking about.

It's not just spiritual change that is confined into my inner experience. This is a miracle of power with a particular date and occasion and guest list.

It's a change in the material world showing what Christ will do for us. And John so wants us to get this that he doesn't even show us the miracle happening.

He only shows us the results. Have you noticed that? He does this throughout the gospel. There's no razzle-dazzle. The miracle itself is narrated. The actual changing of water into wine happens between verses 7 and 8.

[14:17] Look down at verse 7, please. In verse 7, Jesus tells these servants to fill up the six stone water jars with water and they fill them to the brim.

End of verse 7. The next thing, verse 8, he tells them to draw out some of the water and take it to the emcee. It's already been changed. The master of ceremonies loves it.

And just in case we missed it, verse 9, John calls it the water now become wine. So where did the miracle happen? Well, it happened between verse 7 and verse 8. We don't even get to see it.

But the effects are very big. What's the result? What are the effects? There are three of them. And I want to talk about each of them. Newness, goodness and fullness.

Firstly, Jesus, this change Jesus makes means newness. So what were the water jars there for? For the Jewish rites of purification.

[15:15] They're connected to washing on the outside. But by filling them with water and changing them into wine, Jesus creates something completely new, something different.

It's not the old with a bit of cordial mixed in. It's de novo, a new creation, a different thing. He's transformed stuff that was used for ritual, formal practice into something which is brilliant and alive and will meet the ordinary human needs.

This is what God promised in the Old Testament. That when the Messiah came, the mountains will drip sweet wine and all the hills will flow with it and I will restore the fortunes of my people Israel. Jesus is not just shuffling around the different elements in the world. He's not like a clever cook who goes to the cup and says, I'll take a little bit of this and a little bit of this and I'll create something out of it. He's not just taking natural life and lifting it to a new level.

[16:18] He is creating a different order of things. So, when you make wine as you do, it is a carefully controlled process of decay and fermentation for flavour and you need an ageing process to bring out the flavour, so I'm told and it depends on bottlage and storage and casks and corks and I looked this up this week and there are some very expensive bottles of wine for sale.

There's a 1945 Mouton Rothschild that's worth \$300,000. I don't know what to say about that. What Jesus does, you see, in this instant between these two verses, it's completely different from all that. It's instantly perfect. It's the best wine ever tasted. I'm always tempted at this point to say it's like Australian wine but that's a silly thing.

Do you see, this is what Jesus has come to do through his life and his death. It's to give to you and to me newness of life. It's to make us new. It's to bring us into his new creation.

It's to give a taste now of what heaven is like. Something that's constantly renewing. Newness. Secondly, his life is growing goodness.

[17:42] Goodness. I love the MC in this, the master of ceremonies in this passage. I mean, he's, you've got to love his honesty, haven't you?

I mean, he's probably a semi-professional. He's hired to cater weddings, make sure the guests are happy, the food keeps coming and that the wine keeps being served.

He knew a thing or two about wine. And when he tastes the wine, he is utterly gobsmacked. He's got no idea where it's come from but he's astounded by the quality.

He's never tasted wine like this. So he calls the groom over and he smiles, I think, and winks at the groom and he says, you crafty devil. He says, you're doing the exact reverse of what normally happens because every other wedding I've done, we serve the good stuff first and when people have drunk quite a lot, then you bring out the rubbish.

And the poor old groom, who doesn't know what's going on, says, you know, he's smiling as well. And the MC says to him, you've done the reverse, you've saved the very best till last. See, the normal way it is in our lives, the normal direction things head is decline.

[18:57] We go from life to death, we decay. But the order of Christianity is the opposite. It's from death to life.

death. When Jesus makes water into wine, he's reversing the normal order of things. And if that's the direction of growing goodness, it means I don't have to live in the past.

I don't have to wallow in regret. But Christ has come for me and he has given me his life, it means the best is in the future. He's not just fixing up the old or he's not even just replacing it, he's not adding good things into our declining lives.

He's transforming our lives with his own life, with a growing goodness. He's taking the old waters of purification, if you will, and turned them into fermenting wine, bringing life and abundance.

And you think about that, because those jars were used for purification. But the change that Jesus is bringing is different than just purification.

[20:06] purification. Let me be clear about this. What Jesus gives us in his life is more than purity and forgiveness and cleaning, as important as they are. Jesus hasn't come just to take away the sins of the world, he comes also to give us what we don't have.

Because removing dirt and stains is essentially a negative act and can never really restore something to being new. It can't bring fullness, it can't bring joy. But what Christ has come to do with his life in you and me is not just to remedy our defects, it's a new creation and it's a new life, it begins in this life as you know with the gift of eternal life and it grows and increases in hope and joy and fullness.

So the life of Jesus first means newness and second goodness fullness and finally it means fullness.

Fullness. And I take this from the quantity of wine and I don't know if you've done the math, you've looked down at the footnote there, it's always good to look at the footnotes.

Each of these water jars contains 20 to 30 gallons, it's a mind boggling, I mean it's something close to 700 litres of the best wine and the Old Testament says that God gave wine to gladden our hearts. [21 : 32] This is a lot of gladness. And I need to say that we do spoil this with our excess and like all God's gifts we do use it for evil and it's easy to become enslaved to God's gift.

Just to be clear I need to say of course that getting drunk is a sin, it's not something Christians do. But here clearly wine stands for joy and gladness and fullness and the point I'm making is and the point John is making is that Jesus doesn't just provide the bare minimum. He gives this ridiculous provision. He doesn't just cover the little embarrassment of the young couple, he gives this over the top lavish satisfaction.

It's like with the feeding of the 5,000, he doesn't give just enough, there's baskets and baskets and baskets left over. That's what the verse in chapter 1 was that we read at the beginning of the service, verse 16.

That's what this is about. It says, John says, from his fullness we have all received grace upon grace. John is talking about the fullness of Jesus filling us.

[22 : 45] We all know what it is to be filled with self-pity or with pride or with anger or bitterness or envy or entitlement. When you're filled with self-pity, it just pushes everything out, you can't really think about anything else, you've got no room for anything else.

And Jesus' deepest desire is that we would be filled with all his fullness because it's the only thing that can overwhelm our fears and our pride and our self-preoccupation.

And this is the character of the life that Jesus has come to bring for us, you see. It's not just free his grace, it's full and extravagant and plentiful.

He doesn't just give us scraps of himself, he brings himself with all of his fullness to fill us. One of the members of this congregation, David Ellis, godly man, died in the summer this last year. Many of you knew David, he was in his 90s. And each year he would take me out for lunch. And in the last few years of his life, he would bring a list for me.

[23 : 55] And the list was the advantages of growing old. And these are some of the things that he had on his last list. One, he said, I've got more time to pray for others.

Two, he said, I've got more time to go back over my life and see God's good hand of sovereign kindness to me. Thirdly, I've got more time to volunteer to help others, both around the units that he used to live and hear at St.

John's. And fourthly, he said, I've got more time to give specific thanks for specific things. That's fullness. It's what the Apostle Paul prayed for the Christians in Ephesus, that we'd be filled with all the fullness of God.

And I'm aware in the difficulties of your circumstance and some who are suffering greatly, that Christ has not come to give us a free pass from suffering. He doesn't airlift us out of our difficulties, but he so fills us with his life that in those difficulties, we know his plenty and we know his joy in the midst of our difficulties.

And my experience is the Christians who suffer most when they're abiding in Jesus are those who are most filled with his joy. So this is the first and foundation sign.

[25 : 14] It's about the change that Jesus has come to bring. And I wonder if you know this change ongoingly, inwardly, personally, really. The basis of the change is his death.

The effects of the change are the life of newness and the life of goodness and the life of fullness. And you might wonder why in verse 11 John tells us that the disciples believed in Jesus. I mean, didn't they believe in him in the first chapter? They did. Why are we told this again? And I think it is because believing is a process.

It's not a once-off signing on the dotted line. And every single one of us here are somewhere along in that process. The disciples believed in Jesus and so they began to follow him.

And as they followed him, Jesus manifested more of himself. And as he manifested more of himself, so they believed and trusted in him more. And that's exactly how it works for us today.

[26 : 17] So let's kneel and pray that God would continue to do that through us in Christ.