

John 2: 1-12 (for 3/22/2020)
The Wedding at Cana

- 1) Introduction. The miracle of changing water into wine, the first public act of Jesus' ministry in John, is unique to the fourth gospel. John's presentation of the miracles of Christ is different than what can be found in the other three gospels. There are fewer miracles in John and the author refers to each of them as "signs." By using this term John is emphasizing that the miracles are performed not just for a spectacular show, but in order to point beyond themselves to the glory of God and to the true identity of Jesus. Like a road sign the miracle occurs in order to point to something else. There are seven miracles that are included in John's book of signs: Chapter 2 – changing water into wine, Chapter 4 – healing the Roman officer's son, Chapter 5 – healing the paralytic, Chapter 6 – feeding the multitude and walking on water, Chapter 9 – healing the blind man, and Chapter 11 – the raising of Lazarus. There was a standard form for the telling each of these miracle stories used by John: 1) the setting or context, 2) statement of need, 3) the miracle in itself, and 4) the people's response to the miracle. Let's look at each of those components of John's miracle stories as we consider the celebration of the wedding at Cana.

- 2) 2:1-2 – The Setting. Jesus and his disciples in addition to Jesus' mother are guests at the wedding. They are not the hosts of the celebration, but it was the practice in first century Palestinian weddings that the guests would provide some of the food and drinks. This would not have been a brief reception following the religious service, but was probably a multi-day event, maybe as long as a week usually held at the home of the groom. Since neither Mary, Jesus, nor the disciples lived in the village of Cana, it is a good assumption that either the groom or the bride was kin to Mary and Jesus, and that would be the reason for their attending and for feeling some sense of responsibility for the wedding celebration.
 - a) What it meant to be a Groom or Bride at a 1st Century Palestinian Wedding.
 - i) Almost all marriages would be arranged carefully by the parents. The groom's family would pay a bride-price to the father of the bride. In the

traditional culture I am most acquainted with (the Shona people of Zimbabwe), the bride price was referred to as “labola” and it could be a sizable amount. I remember a bride’s father beaming with pride because he had a “three cow daughter”, that is, a daughter whose bride-price was the gift of three cows, a significant payment in that culture. In a Palestinian wedding a ring would often accompany the gift and thereby mark the woman as betrothed or engaged.

- ii) A period of betrothal would last from six months to a year’s time. During this engagement period the bride and groom would not have sexual relations, but the bride would be considered the groom’s wife in every other way, bound by her exclusive relationship to her future husband. Often a friend or brother of the groom would be assigned the responsibility of assuring the future bride was safe, taken care of and remained faithful.
- iii) The wedding celebration could last a full week. On the day of the wedding the bride would bathe and cover herself in perfume. She would then adorn herself with her very finest garments and lots of jewelry. Her face would be covered with a veil.
- iv) The groom and his friends would process to the home of the bride’s father with great fanfare. The bride’s attendants gathered outside the entrance of her father’s house keeping watch for the groom crying out when he appeared: “Behold the bridegroom comes.” The couple and everyone attending the wedding would then process together to the groom’s home, usually with the bride being carried on a platform or chair. This would be done with great fanfare including the playing of musical instruments and dancing.
- v) Arriving at the groom’s home, the ceremony would proceed with the couple standing under a canopy, often just the groom’s coat, and making their vows and commitments to one another. When the ceremony concluded the newly married couple would immediately proceed to the groom’s bed chamber where they consummated the marriage. The bed

sheet would then be hung outside the bed chamber's window as proof of the bride's virginity and as a signal for the party to begin.

- 3) 2:3-5 – Recognition of Need. It was Mary the mother of Jesus who first recognized the problem, the wine had run out. As a relative she may well have felt responsibility if they were expected to supply some of the refreshments, especially since the disciples of Jesus came with them and might well have been responsible for drinking a great deal of the wine. There are two important things to notice in John's telling of the story and the role that Mary plays. First, in the fourth Gospel this is the only time where the mother of Jesus appears until the crucifixion. Second, John never uses the name of Mary anywhere in his Gospel. In bringing the situation to Jesus' attention Mary makes no immediate demand upon her son, but clearly expects something to be done. One dear friend suggested to me that any mother can communicate what they want just with their eyes. So picture Mary giving Jesus "the look" that something needed to be done. Jesus' strange response to his mother's request raises several questions. He says to his mother, "Woman, what concern is that to you and to me? My hour has not yet come." This seeming rebuff of Mary may seem harsh, but it does fit a common pattern in John's Gospel where Jesus refuses to do what others asked of him; then later he will do it of his own accord and in his own time. In John's Gospel Jesus is never coerced into doing anything, even by his mother.
- a) To address one's mother as "woman" is certainly a strange way to talk. It would not have been understood as rude or offensive to address other people in this way. In John 7:1-10 Jesus refers to other family members in the same type of manner. One thing it clearly signals is that Jesus does not feel obligated to respond immediately to the crisis. (Remember the old wine commercial, "I will make no wine before its time"?) The title "woman" is better understood by remembering the numerous references to the book of Genesis in the early verses of John's Gospel. The prologue of John in chapter 1 begins with the words, "in the beginning"; those words are the same as the Hebrew title of the book of Genesis. Secondly, the prologue of John's Gospel also speaks of light and darkness; those same words are a key theme of the creation story in Genesis. Thirdly, as John describes the

baptism of Jesus in chapter 1 he speaks of a spirit descending and remaining on Jesus, just as a spirit of God moved over the face of the chaotic waters in Genesis. Fourth, the time between the baptism of Jesus and the miracle at Cana is often seen as seven days matching the seven days of creation in Genesis. This constant reference to the Genesis story is used elsewhere in John's Gospel to picture Jesus as the second Adam. So the Catholic biblical scholar Raymond Brown concludes, "In calling his mother "woman," Jesus may well be identifying her with the new Eve who will be the mother of his disciples, as the old Eve was the "mother of all the living."

- b) Jesus also responds to his mother's request by saying, "My hour has not yet come." The terminology of the appropriate hour is especially important for John. It is used a few times simply to speak of the time of day, but it is also used to refer to the time for the coming of God's kingdom. Most importantly the term "hour" is used as an eschatological term, a word pointing toward the culmination or end of time, most particularly to the death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus. For John the term "hour" is the most important eschatological term that he uses. This statement helps to understand the importance of this miracle as a sign pointing far beyond itself. When Christ is hanging on the cross and near death, when his hour has finally come, he addresses his mother in exactly this same way, asking her to see the beloved disciple as her son and as the one who will care for her. Raymond Brown comments, "By the strange use of "woman" at Cana, John seems to indicate that Jesus rejects a purely human sphere of action for Mary to reserve for her a much richer role... of a mother caring for those who would follow him."
- 4) 2:6-8 – The Miracle Itself. The miracle is told very quickly and with little fanfare. That is the case for most of the miracles of Jesus we read about in the New Testament. Jesus did not perform miracles to impress us, but to redeem us. The best description of the actual miracle may well come from a medieval commentator who stated, "The water recognized its creator and blushed." The jars are filled with water and then wine is poured out, but the actual moment of transformation is never mentioned. There are 6 large stone jars that together could hold about 150 gallons. The water in those jars would usually have been used for religious purification services. The number 6 is like our unlucky

number 13 and may well symbolize the imperfection and ineffectiveness of the water's ability to purify. To have 150 gallons of wine at any party seems to be a wild exaggeration. But the exaggeration is not just a literary device; it is one of the key lessons of this miracle story. The point being made is one of extravagance and abundance as stated earlier in the prologue of John's Gospel where the spirit of God is described as providing an abundance of care, "grace upon grace." One other thing that is peculiar to John's Gospel is how often water is used as a metaphor for lifelessness. Remember the Samaritan woman at the well drawing lifeless water up in her bucket, while Jesus offers to her "living water" that will completely transform her life. Or there is the case of the disabled man waiting by the pool at Bethesda, where he had waited for 38 years for the useless waters to cure him. Healing only occurs when Jesus commands the sick man to get up and walk – and he begins to dance.

- 5) 2:9-11 – The People's Response to the Miracle. It was the steward's role to serve food and wine to all of the guests, but now Jesus takes on the role of the party's host and has wine served to the steward. To heighten the miraculous event the steward does not understand where the wine has come from, so he asked the bridegroom himself, "Where did you get this great tasting wine? You saved the best wine for the last of the party! "
- 6) The Lesson of the Miracle. This is the first of Christ's miracles, not just first in time, but in importance as well. This is the central message of the Christian faith: you can begin again. There is a Hasidic story where God whispers a secret into Adam's ear as he is forced out of the garden. It is not the secret of how to begin; only God knows the secret of creation. But it was the secret of how to begin again. For John's Gospel, this is the first sign of the Kingdom. The wedding celebration has come to an abrupt and premature end. The wine has run out. All that is left to drink are gallons and gallons of tasteless water and who wants to drink that? Imagine the disappointment and shame of the groom that day. All of these people have come to his house to celebrate his wedding and he's already run out of wine. The guests came expecting a party that should last for days, and now it's coming to an end after a few hours. The guests are beginning to leave! How can this be happening? Then, right then, the miracle occurs. The water is transformed into wine and the wine steward insists that this

is the best wine he's ever tasted. This is a sign pointing far beyond itself. It is a miracle pointing to one of the most important truths of our faith: life can begin again in a new and marvelous fashion. That's the good news for our world, for us individually and for the church. There are times in life when it seems that the party is over, when the wine is all gone, when they're turning out all the lights, locking the doors, and going home. But hear the gospel message: life can begin again. Too often we see ourselves at a dead end with no possibility of redeeming an awful situation. We have all been there: as the doctor gives us a frightening diagnosis, as relationships crumble, as our family members disappoint us, as we fail and disappoint ourselves, and even as we face death itself.

- 7) Conclusion: Picture the bride and groom years later having encountered some very tragic experiences in life. I wonder if they ever said to one another: remember the time we thought that the wedding party was finished, when all the wine was gone, and people were starting to leave. But with Jesus there, we witnessed the miracle of starting all over again, and his wine made things better than ever before?" In each of our lives we have all faced difficulties much greater than running out of wine: our sinful acts, our failure, accidents, sickness, disappointment, broken relationships, even death itself. In all of those situations, don't forget the wedding feast at Cana and the truth that life can begin again.