

## The First Sign: The Wedding Feast at Cana

### John 2:1-11

The Gospel of John is organized around seven miracles. The word he uses for these miracles is “signs” (semeia) whereas the other Gospel writers prefer the term “wonders” or “miracles”. John shares a common understanding of these events with the synoptic writers but some differences are apparent.

<b>The Synoptics</b>	<b>Gospel of John</b>
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. The miracles are historical and supernatural events.</li> <li>2. The miracles are occasions when God’s Kingdom breaks into human experience.</li> <li>3. Miracles are signs of the defeat of Satan.</li> <li>4. The miracles are largely eschatological in that they anticipate a future event when God’s Kingdom will be fully realized.</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. The miracles are historical and supernatural events.</li> <li>2. The miracles are symbolic because they point beyond themselves to Jesus and they shed light on who He is.</li> <li>3. Miracles are christological rather than eschatological.</li> <li>4. John regards miracles (displays of the supernatural) as an inadequate basis for faith but they reveal Christ’s glory which is an adequate basis for faith. See John 2:23-25; 4:48; 6:26</li> </ol>

**IMPORTANT NOTE:** Because this incident has such christological significance the details that John includes are deliberate and purposeful. Each points to an important theological truth that John wants his readers to see and believe concerning the nature of Jesus and his work. However, as we recognize the richness of the text, we must be diligent in our reading so we do not read into John’s narrative what is not there.

**1:1-3** John begins his account of this incident by continuing the creation theme motif with the phrase “On the third day....”. This expression points forward and

backward at the same time. John is linking this incident with what he has already said in his prologue. He is letting his readers know that this public event will reveal aspects of what he has already written about in 1:1-18. In the prologue he painted with a broad brush but now he uses a finer one. It is as if he is saying to his readers, “Now I tell you more about the word that has become flesh”.

In addition, John’s early readers may have recalled the third day of creation where God began to create living things. Therefore, his introduction to the wedding feast suggests a profound significance to the wedding; Jesus, because he is the word of God, has come to create new life in those who believe and obey him. Just as God created new life on the third day so Jesus creates new life in the lives of those who believe and follow him. Water becoming wine is a sign of this work.

There is another theological importance contained in John’s phrase, “On the third day” because it directs the reader’s attention to his death and resurrection. The resurrection is the confirmation that God, by his Son’s death, purifies (the water was in jars that contained water used for purification) those who accept the benefits of his saving work on the cross.

Right from the beginning of John’s account of the first sign he makes it clear to his readers that this miracle has an underlining meaning that goes right to the heart of the meaning of Jesus life, death and resurrection.

In verse 2 John tells us that Jesus was accompanied by his mother and his disciples but he does not bother to tell us why they were invited. The fact that he did not come alone but with his disciples may indicate that the miracle is a sign that God is establishing the new people of Israel. The wedding has joined two people in a new relationship just as the messiah joins people in a new relationship with each other and with his Father. Since marriage is the most common metaphor for God’s relationship with His people in the Older Testament, John

might be asking his readers to see that what Jesus did at the wedding signify a reaffirmation and a deepening of the relationship that He established with Abraham. In time the apostles will come to see that all of mankind is included in the work that the Messiah of Israel does.

Verse 3 presents a serious problem in the first century Jewish life. Jewish weddings could last as long as one week so much wine was needed. Running out of it was serious because it would bring shame to the bridegroom. It was so serious that a law suit could result. The possibility of running out of wine is so disturbing to Jesus' mother that she says to her son, "They have no more wine", assuming that he can do something about this embarrassing problem. At first Jesus response to his mother seems rather enigmatic and even disrespectful.

**1:4-5** Jesus addresses his mother as "woman" and then he asks her why she is involving him in the problem. Why Mary is so concerned is not explained by John but it could be that she was the caterer. In any case, Jesus' question to his mother creates the initial impression that either he is disinterested or that he is taken aback by her desire to seek a solution from him. Apparently, Mary believed that Jesus was capable of helping but it is unclear whether or not she is expecting an actual miracle. It is clear from the Gospels that Mary did not yet have a complete understanding of her son's messiahship but it is obvious that on this occasion she is aware of the uniqueness of her son.

Most readers would expect Jesus to address his mother as "mother" but instead he calls her woman. The term he uses here is obviously said deliberately so there must be a reason for his use of the term "woman". The reader can also safely assume that John finds great importance in this detail.

**NOTE:** Jesus addresses his mother compassionately in the same way when he is on the cross. (19:26)

Jesus is not denying or undervaluing his earthly relationship. However, he is pointing out that his mother's earthly relationship is profoundly less important than her relationship to him as Lord and Saviour. In this sense the parent relationship is of no advantage to her and she must eventually respond to him in repentant faith like any other person. The work he will do on the cross is for her salvation also.

Jesus asks Mary, "Dear woman why do you involve me?" David J. Ellis writing in International Bible Commentary (page 1236) says that these words are a translation from an idiom in classical Greek and Hebrew which really means, "Leave me to follow my own course." If Ellis is correct then Jesus is saying that his authority for acting is not parental guidance or authority but the authority of his Father. Jesus' response gives his mother an opportunity to respond to her son in faith without reference to her earthly relationship. This is exactly what she does in verse 5!

What is the meaning of our Lord's words in 4b? When Jesus asserts that his "time has not yet come," more than one meaning is involved. There is the obvious realization in Jesus' heart and mind that his work will end on the cross and that his death will complete the work that the changing of water to wine illustrates and looks forward to. Secondly, he is making it clear to his mother that he is acting according to a divine timetable that informs his actions because the work he does is also the work of the Father who sent him. At the end of this chapter Jesus cleanses the temple and he is asked to justify and give an explanation for what he has done. They are looking for the basis of his authority and they want a miracle as a sign. Jesus response is that he will tear down the Temple and build it back up after three days. From the readers perspective we know that he was actually referring to his death and resurrection as the sign of his authority. The fact that both these events contain a clear reference to his death means that John wants us to interpret both events in the light of the crucifixion and resurrection. The miracle at the wedding as well as his cleansing of the temple indicates what Jesus

will accomplish by his death and resurrection. In this sense both have a Christological significance.

**1:5** At first Mary approached Jesus as his mother but now she responds in faith by telling the servants to do as he says because she recognizes his authority over her and them as well. Mary's words to the servants also indicate that she has come to the realization that only her son is able to solve a most difficult and embarrassing problem. The understanding she displays here will eventually become the faith of the church when they come to trust in Jesus' death as the only means of solving the problem of human sin.

**1:6-7** Jewish law required that the hands be washed before meals as an act of purification. The containers also needed to be cleansed. Invited guests at a wedding feast were made worthy by the ritual purification using the water contained in the jars. These jars were made from stone rather than clay so they would be more impervious to uncleanness. The water contained in these containers is what Jesus used to perform the miracle and his actions have great symbolic value that John wants his readers to see.

This entire event is highly symbolic in that there is a layer of meaning underneath the text that is contained in the details that John includes in his narrative. Some commentators have seen significance in the number of jars. The number six is less than the perfect number seven and this detail may suggest the perpetual inadequacy of the purification rites of Israel. If this symbolism is truly there it fits well with the overall meaning of the narrative because it suggests that only the life, death, and resurrection can finally purify. There is no aspect of religion that can provide a means by which men and women can be saved and enter into the joy of the wedding feast that God offers in Christ. When the church loses confidence in the effectiveness and uniqueness of this aspect of the Christian proclamation it turns wine into water.

**! :8-10** Now Jesus directs the servants to fill the jars with water and they fill the jars to the brim. Following Jesus command, they take some out and take it to the person in charge. He finds that the water has been turned into wine but, unlike the servants, does not realize where the wine had come from. Finally, the master calls the bridegroom aside and congratulates him for saving the best to the last, a practice rarely followed.

The total amount of wine now available to the guests was now between 120 and 180 gallons. This amount was more than sufficient to satisfy the demands of the guests and save the bridegroom from embarrassment. John is pointing out through these details a great spiritual truth that he has already mentioned in 1:16-17; Jesus, by his death and resurrection, “will replace the inadequate rites of purification established amongst the Jews with the reality of a communion (marriage) with God achieved through his own sacrificial death for all.” (John Marsh, page 147) Wine is left over symbolizing the complete sufficiency of Jesus’ accomplishment on the cross. Just as there were loaves and fish left over so there is more than enough wine for everyone.

**2:11** John brings this first miracle to a conclusion by saying that Christ’s glory is revealed and faith is made possible. It is not the miracle per se that is important; it is the meaning behind it. Faith does not come as a response to the supernatural. Rather, it is a response to what is revealed concerning who Jesus is. The invisible nature of God is made visible by the miracle that he has described in such detail.

In the Old Testament the most common metaphor for God’s relationship with Israel is marriage so it is significant that Jesus first action following his baptism occurs at a wedding. The narrative shows that the covenantal relationship that God began with Abraham is now deepened, fulfilled, and made universal in Jesus. John has already proclaimed in his prologue that God has invited all of humanity

to the wedding, not just Israel so he wants us to see the universal importance of what occurred.

This entire wedding scene has an eschatological meaning. The idea of a feast or banquet is used by Jesus to denote the time when God's kingdom is fully realized. His teaching in Luke 13:22-30 contains the severe warning that close proximity to him does not guarantee an invitation to the feast. However, he finishes his teaching by saying that people will come from the north, east, south, and west. One thing they have in common; they are the "last". In other words, their invitation depends on a faith response that recognizes that they are completely without merit save for the provision of the new wine provided by Christ alone.