

## John 2:1-11

### Introduction

When we come to the second chapter of John's Gospel and look back at where we've been, you might say we've been "handed off," now, from John the Baptist to Jesus. So we begin, now, in chapter two with the first "sign" that Jesus performs and in which, John tells us, He manifested His glory (cf. 2:11).

#### **I. John 2:1a — On the third day...**

"*On the third day*," John says, "there was a wedding at Cana in Galilee." This time-marker is the last in a very conspicuous series of five total "time-markers." After the opening prologue, the main body of John's Gospel began with the visit of the priests and Levites from Jerusalem asking John the Baptist who he was and why he was baptizing. That would be the first day. Then we read in verse 29:

- John 1:29 — **The next day** he saw Jesus coming toward him, and said, "Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!"

That's the second day. Then we read in verse 35:

- John 1:35 — **The next day again** John was standing with two of his disciples...

That's the third day in the sequence. It was on this third day that Andrew and the other unnamed disciple left John to follow Jesus. We read in verse 39:

- John 1:39 — They came and saw where [Jesus] was staying, and **they stayed with him that day, for it was about the tenth hour.**

That seems to indicate that when Andrew went to find Simon, his brother, he did this the very first thing the next morning—on the fourth day. And then we read in verse 43:

- John 1:43 — **The next day** Jesus decided to go to Galilee. He found Philip and said to him, "Follow me."

This would then be the fifth day. So when we read, now, "on the third day," the point seems to be, "on the third day after this fifth day." Because of the Jews' inclusive way of counting days, this would be the seventh day in the sequence (five, six, seven).

What we see in all this, at the least, is the genuine touch of an eyewitness to things that really and truly happened in history (cf. Jn. 4:40, 43; 6:22; 11:6; 12:1, 12; 20:26). But it's possible that John is also subtly drawing our attention to the significance of a week of days, with the climax coming on the seventh day. Now, on the one hand, if this was John's *intent* he might have been more clear. He could have said explicitly that it was "*the next day*" (the fourth day) that Andrew went to find Simon. On the other hand, he does specifically say that Andrew and the other disciple

stayed with Jesus that (third) *day* because it was the about the “*tenth hour*” and he does (on our interpretation of *proton*) specifically say that Andrew went “first thing” to find his brother Simon (implying first thing in the morning; cf. the variant reading: “In the morning”). John might have been satisfied that the transition to the fourth day was already obvious. We might also wish that John would have explicitly mentioned the “seventh day.” On the other hand, John does explicitly say, “on the third day.” This might, therefore, be a subtle invitation for us to go back and see from what day he’s counting, which in turn invites us to go further back and see what was on the day before, and so on until we arrive all the way back at the first day and find that what we’ve arrived at now is the seventh day. After this, all of John’s careful dating comes to an end and nowhere else in this Gospel do we have another sequence of days like this.

I say all these things because I don’t want to encourage fanciful readings that aren’t carefully rooted in the text – even if those readings might be otherwise “true” enough. For myself (cf. Morris and Carson; contra Ridderbos and others), I’m inclined to believe that John is inviting us to see a parallel here with the creation week. Remember that John began this Gospel with an obvious allusion to Genesis. Moses writes in Genesis:

➤ Genesis 1:1 — In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.

And now John begins his Gospel:

➤ John 1:1 — In the beginning was the Word...

In verse five, John says that “the light shines in the darkness,” reminding us of the first day of creation.

➤ Genesis 1:3–4 — And God said, “Let there be light,” and there was light. And God saw that the light was good. And God separated the light from the darkness.

The emphasis in this sequence of seven days would be only on the seventh and last day (no other parallels are evident). We know that for God the “rest” of that original seventh day is an everlasting rest and that Adam and Eve were meant to one day share fully in that rest with God (cf. Exod. 20:8-11; Heb. 3:7-4:13). For Israel after the fall, the seventh day (the Sabbath) was also a regular reminder of their redemption from the slavery and hard labor of life in Egypt (cf. Deut. 5:12-15) and so in this way, too, it was pointing them ahead to that ultimate rest of the redemption that Christ would bring. The seventh day was a day crying out for eschatological fulfillment. As we come in this sequence of days to the seventh day, I’m inclined to believe that John is subtly inviting us to read what happens now in the light of this original goal of creation.

**II. John 2:1b–2** — On the third day there was a wedding at Cana in Galilee, and the mother of Jesus was there. Jesus also was invited to the wedding with his disciples.

Cana is only mentioned four times in the Bible, and all four of those times Cana is specifically identified as “Cana *in Galilee*” (cf. Jn. 2:1, 11; 4:46; 21:2). The point seems to be that without this bit of information, most people wouldn’t have any idea where Cana was. Just like Nazareth,

Cana was an insignificant, no-name, “off the map” village in which nothing truly good or wonderful could ever be expected to happen (cf. Jn. 1:46).

“There was a wedding at Cana in Galilee, and the mother of Jesus was there. Jesus also was invited to the wedding with his disciples.”

**III. John 2:3–5** — When the wine ran out, the mother of Jesus said to him, “They have no wine.” And Jesus said to her, “Woman, what does this have to do with me? My hour has not yet come.” His mother said to the servants, “Do whatever he tells you.”

When Jesus says, “My hour has *not yet* come,” Mary hears her faith affirmed: He *is* the Messiah, and He *will one day* fully reveal His power and glory. When Jesus says, “My *hour* has not yet come,” Mary hears an invitation to believe that prior to that ultimate “hour” there might still be the *beginnings* of the revelation of His glory. And when Jesus asks, “Woman, what does this have to do with me?” Mary hears not a rhetorical question intended to shut her down, but an invitation to reorient her thinking and then watch to see what *He* will do. And so with Mary’s instruction to the servants, “Do whatever He tells you,” we, too, should be ready now to watch and see what He will do.

**IV. John 2:6** — Now there were six stone water jars there for the Jewish rites of purification, each holding twenty or thirty gallons.

Most of these stone water jars were probably borrowed from other family and friends for the wedding since a typical home would only have one jar. We can imagine an assortment of different sizes— John says anywhere from two to three “measures” (twenty to thirty gallons). They were stone jars because that way if the jar itself became unclean, it wouldn’t have to be destroyed – as opposed to a jar made out of clay (cf. Lev. 6:38; 11:32-33). John tells us that the purpose of these six stone water jars here at the wedding was for “the Jewish rites of purification.” In the Old Testament, water was often prescribed for ceremonial purification. In Exodus thirty, the Lord said to Moses:

- Exodus 30:17–19 — You shall also make a basin of bronze, with its stand of bronze, for washing. You shall put it between the tent of meeting and the altar, and you shall put water in it, with which Aaron and his sons shall wash their hands and their feet.

For the cleansing of a leper we read in Leviticus fourteen:

- Leviticus 14:8 — He who is to be cleansed shall wash his clothes and shave off all his hair and bathe himself in water, and he shall be clean.

In Numbers nineteen we learn that there was a special “water for impurity” – water mixed with the ashes of the heifer that was sacrificed on the day of atonement (Num. 19:9; cf. 31:23). Water for ritual or ceremonial purification was a major part of Israel’s religious life.

But the “rites of purification” for which these stone water jars were intended were not actually prescribed anywhere in the law. The water here would have been used for all the guests at the

wedding to purify their hands before eating. They would dip their cupped hands in the water and then take their hands out and let the water run out between their fingers. The point here was not sanitation, but a ritual or ceremonial purity. One commentator explains:

“The biblical mandate that the priests had to wash their hands and feet prior to entering the Tabernacle... provided the foundation for the wide-spread practice of ritual washings in... Judaism. At least as early as the second century B.C. many Jews *voluntarily* assumed the purity laws of the priests and regularly washed their hands before morning prayer... The custom of washing the hands before eating bread was also grounded in priestly practice, in the conviction that daily food should be eaten as if it were priestly food” (Lane, on Mark 7).

We should be able to see that there’s nothing wrong with this practice in itself. As long as it’s completely voluntary, and as long as it’s not viewed as a way of earning “points” with God, and as long as it’s not made to take the place of obedience to the “weightier matters of the law” (Mat. 23:23), then these ritual washings could be wholly pleasing to God – the expression of a heart wanting to sanctify all of life to the service of God. This practice among many of the Jews might have been a response specifically to the reality of living among the Gentiles – whether dispersed among the nations or living in Roman-occupied Palestine (cf. Mk. 7:3). Of course, the problem is that it can be very easy to let these “additional” external practices degenerate into marks of “ultra-spirituality” or even legalistic rules to be imposed on others (cf. Mk. 7:1-8). For many, even the ritual washings *prescribed in the Law* were used to justify a merely external religion. But the true point of all these typological “washings” prescribed by the typological Old Covenant was to point ahead to the washing of the heart and conscience that would be finally “accomplished” in the New Covenant. The writer of Hebrews explains:

- Hebrews 9:13–14 — For if the blood of goats and bulls, and the sprinkling of defiled persons with the ashes of a heifer [the water for impurity], sanctify for the purification of the flesh, how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God, purify our conscience from dead works to serve the living God.

So what does the water in these six stone jars stand for? It stands for the entire period (dispensation) of the typological Old Covenant. In the best-case scenario, the water itself was an Old Covenant “type” pointing the people ahead to the new and better things that were coming. It’s not that the Old Covenant believer couldn’t have his or her conscience purified from dead works to serve the living God, but his apprehension—and therefore his experience—of this reality couldn’t be the same as ours who look back now on Christ’s finished work on the cross and who also see Him now, by faith, risen and seated at the right hand of God. What does the water in these six stone jars stand for? Not only does it stand for the entire typological “dispensation” of the Old Covenant (the shadows versus the substance), it also seems to represent the tendency to a merely formal religion – an arid and dry religion of externals that’s made to take the place of a true religion of the heart. On the one hand, the water might represent something negative: the tendency to an externalized religion. On the other hand, the water represents something very good: all the external types and shadows of the Old Covenant that were always pointing ahead to the new and better things that were coming. Speaking from our perspective today, we would say that the water in these six stone jars is wholly bound up with the

“old.” But, of course, at this wedding at Cana in Galilee on the seventh day that’s not at all apparent to the bridegroom or to the bride or to any of the invited guests.

Remember that the crisis here is the wine that’s run out. So why does John tell us that “there were six stone water jars there for the Jewish rites of purification, each holding twenty or thirty gallons”?

**V. John 2:7** — Jesus said to the servants, “Fill the jars with water.” And they filled them up to the brim.

There’s obviously no shortage of water for the Jewish rites of purification. With the jars “filled... up to the brim” what we have now is anywhere from 120 to 180 gallons of water. But it’s not more water that’s needed, is it? It’s wine. The provision of water for the external, ceremonial purification of all the wedding guests is a small and easy thing. The provision of wine for this number of guests is apparently—for all practical purposes—an impossibility. So we go on, now, to read in verses 8-10:

**VI. John 2:8–10** — And [Jesus] said to [the servants], “Now draw and take it to the master of the feast.” So they took it. 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.”

There’s never any “sensationalism” in any of the true, biblical miracles, but in this case what we seem to have is the very opposite of sensationalism. The fact that this is a display of miracle-working power is an important assumption, but as essential as that assumption may be, it’s not at all what John emphasizes. The miracle is so “assumed” that we’re only told that it happened in passing, after the fact: “When the master of the feast tasted the water *now become wine*...” Notice, too, that in the context of John’s account, the “master of the feast” is left entirely in his ignorance (not knowing where the wine came from) and the reaction of the bridegroom isn’t even hinted at. Did any of the guests ever find out what had happened? The point, here, is obviously not the eliciting of wonder and awe at simply a bare display of power.

The point isn’t primarily the miracle, but the miracle *as* a “sign” that’s pointing us to something deeper and more wonderful. Notice what John does carefully choose to record for us— the words of the master of the feast to the bridegroom. “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.” All the emphasis here is on the fact that it’s *wine* that Jesus has provided, and wine of the most *superior quality*, and wine in *abundant measure* – six jars, each holding twenty to thirty gallons, all filled to the brim.

If we see in the water for purification a picture of the entire period of the typological Old Covenant, what are we meant to see here in the wine? We should know that wine in the Bible was always diluted with water (usually one part wine to three parts water). That’s not to say that

you couldn't get drunk on this diluted wine,\* but you would obviously have to drink a whole lot more of it before being affected. This tells us that quite apart from any level of “affectedness,” wine—even diluted with three parts water—was in and of itself a symbol of happiness and joy. In our day, we might have wine hobbyists and connoisseurs, or wine might be a symbol of fine dining and high culture, but the simple reality is that wine doesn't symbolize for us what it symbolized in the Bible. This is the result of differences in culture and probably also—indirectly—the difference in alcoholic content in the wine.

In the Bible, wine as the “fruit of the vine” symbolized God's good and abundant provisions for the enjoyment of this life (cf. Gen. 27:28; Deut. 33:28). That's why we see wine often associated with the simple joys of the earth's harvest of grain and the yield of the olive tree.

- Psalm 104:14–15 (cf. 4:7) — You cause the grass to grow for the livestock and plants for man to cultivate, that he may bring forth food from the earth and wine to gladden the heart of man [vine], oil to make his face shine [tree] and bread to strengthen man's heart [grain].
- Joel 2:19, 24 (cf. Deut. 7:12-13; 11:13-15) — Behold, I am sending to you grain, wine, and oil, and you will be satisfied; and I will no more make you a reproach among the nations... The threshing floors shall be full of grain; the vats shall overflow with wine and oil.

The writer of Ecclesiastes says:

- Ecclesiastes 9:7; 10:19 (cf. Zech. 10:7) — Go, eat your bread with joy, and drink your wine with a merry heart... Bread is made for laughter, and wine gladdens life.

We read in Proverbs chapter three:

- Proverbs 3:9–10 — Honor the LORD with your wealth and with the firstfruits of all your produce; then your barns will be filled with plenty [grain], and your vats will be bursting with wine.

If wine in abundance was a sign of the fullness of God's blessings and therefore of great joy, then the absence of wine pointed to God's judgements and was a symbol of distress, and sorrow, and mourning (cf. Hos. 7:14; 9:2; Amos 5:11; Joel 1:5; Zeph. 1:13; Hag. 2:16).

- Joel 1:10 (cf. Hag. 1:11) — The fields are destroyed, the ground mourns, because the grain is destroyed, the wine dries up, the oil languishes.
- Micah 6:15 — You shall sow, but not reap; you shall tread olives, but not anoint yourselves with oil; you shall tread grapes, but not drink wine.
- Isaiah 16:10 — Joy and gladness are taken away from the fruitful field, and in the vineyards no songs are sung, no cheers are raised; no treader treads out wine in the presses; I have put an end to the shouting.
- Isaiah 24:7–9 (cf. Jer. 48:33) — The wine mourns, the vine languishes, all the merry-hearted sigh. The mirth of the tambourines is stilled, the noise of the jubilant has ceased, the mirth of the lyre is stilled. No more do they drink wine with singing.

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\* The “master of the feast's” reference to people who have “drunk freely” is the usual word for being drunk although here it probably only refers to being “affected” to some extent (cf. Morris).

If wine was associated with the favor of God and the abundance of all His blessings and joy in His presence (cf. Deut. 12:17-18; 14:23-26; Isa. 62:8-9), and if the absence of wine was a sign of the terrible judgments of God and of distress and mourning and sorrow, then how do you think the future days of the Messiah might be described by the Old Testament prophets?

- Isaiah 25:6-8 — 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, of aged wine well refined. And 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.
- Joel 3:18 — In that day the mountains shall drip sweet wine, and the hills shall flow with milk, and all the streambeds of Judah shall flow with water; and a fountain shall come forth from the house of the LORD and water the Valley of Shittim.
- Amos 9:13-14 (cf. Jer. 31:10-14; Hos. 2:21-22; Zech. 9:16-17) — The plowman shall overtake the reaper and the treader of grapes him who sows the seed; the mountains shall drip sweet wine, and all the hills shall flow with it. I will restore the fortunes of my people Israel, and they shall rebuild the ruined cities and inhabit them; they shall plant vineyards and drink their wine, and they shall make gardens and eat their fruit.

It's only in the light of all this background that we can understand the true meaning of this *first* of Jesus' signs. It's only in this light that we can understand the true meaning of Jesus' provision of *wine*—wine of the most *superior quality* (“you have kept the good wine until now”) and wine in the most *abundant measure* (six jars, each holding twenty to thirty gallons, all filled to the brim).

In Jesus, the water of the Old Covenant has been replaced with the infinitely superior wine of the new and better things that were coming. In Jesus, the old has gone, and the new has come. The point here is not ultimately wine for the stomach, but Jesus Himself as the true spiritual wine and the true provision for all our true happiness (cf. Ps. 4:6-7). He is the substance of which all the types of the Old Covenant were, comparatively speaking, the very faintest of shadows. In Jesus, all the distress, and mourning, and sorrow associated with God's judgment is taken away forever. In Jesus, all the true blessings of God's favor and kindness are promised to us forever. In Jesus, there is a never-ending, lavishly abundant supply of the very best “wine” – “already” and “not yet.” And so we see that it truly is in Jesus that the “seventh day” is fulfilled, and the original goal of creation is achieved, and we share in the joy of God's own eternal rest. Only when we've come to see all these things can we understand what John says in verse eleven:

**IV. John 2:11** — This, the first of his signs, Jesus did at Cana in Galilee, and manifested his glory. And his disciples believed in him.

Now we begin to understand more fully what John meant when he wrote in chapter one:

- John 1:14 — And 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.

And where did Jesus first manifest His glory? At Cana in Galilee. Who, then, can come to drink of the wine that Jesus provides? Anyone who will—even the lowest and weakest and most “despised” among men can “come,” as Isaiah says, and “buy wine... without money and without price” (cf. 1 Cor. 1:26-31; Isa. 55:1). Have you seen His glory? Are you drinking from Him? Is this all your happiness and joy?