

Signs of Glory

Studies in John's Gospel

Brian Arthur

Study 2

Water into Wine

The First Sign (John 2:1-12)

Remember, signs are given that we may 'read' them and believe that Jesus is the Son of God and have life (presumably the life of true sonship, His glory). The signs of Jesus portray the power and presence of God the Father for His people. They showed that the Jesus was from God and not self appointed, and they gave a taste of what was to come in the outworking of God's Kingdom *Truly, truly, I say to you, he who believes in Me, the works that I do, he will do also; and greater works than these he will do; because I go to the Father* (14:12). John has the ministry of Jesus beginning with this sign. It heralds the end of the old and the breaking into the world of something extraordinarily new, strong and effusive. Israel and in turn all humanity lay in a helpless, 'old' condition that only Father's Messiah could turn around. So as with all the signs there is a strong element of judgement upon the old worn out and perverted systems of man's religion. This, as demonstrated in the case of Israel, could not simply be revived; it must be resurrected from the death in which it was held.

Without drawing too long a bow John has been careful to set out the diary of events leading to this first sign. The sign occurred seven day after the beginning narrative when John the Baptist was quizzed about his identity (1:19). This may be John connecting the first miracle of Jesus with the whole idea of a new creation. He has already opened his Gospel with a reference to the first creation (1:1).

The Wedding

Wedding celebrations often lasted for a week. So the welfare of the bride and the wedding party demanded careful planning and attention. All this was the responsibility of the bridegroom (Vs. 9). After the wedding ceremony the bridal couple were escorted via the longest way round the village, to their new home. They did not have a honeymoon as we know it today, but for many days had an open home for all their friends and family. During that time they were feted as a king and queen with their word being law in their home. No indication is given as to who the married couple were. It does appear that Mary was well known for she felt free to command the servants (Vs. 5). Jesus and His disciples had been invited. From the beginning the Lord was connected with people in the ebb and flow of daily life. His was a love of participation with us, and that freely. Unlike the religious leaders of His day He did not withdraw from life but entered into it, and there engaged in the conflict for the hearts and love of the people who were subject to the evil one.

The Shame of no Wine

The wine ran out. There is an old rabbinical saying, 'Without wine there is no joy'. The Psalmist said, *And wine which makes man's heart glad, so that he may make his face glisten with oil, and food which sustains man's heart* (105:15). They did not mean that without wine everybody remained sober and had no fun. Wine was a staple part of their table fellowship. Not to have wine to offer would have been an insult to the guests. Why the wine failed we are not told. Whatever the reason the Father had His plans for this eventuality. We could apply the words later spoken by Jesus to this

event as well *"This sickness (problem of no wine) is not to end in death (shame for the bridegroom), but for the glory of God, so that the Son of God (the Father's Bridegroom) may be glorified by it."* (John 11:4).

That Mary was the one to take up the issue, and what her expectations of Jesus were have long been debated. It may simply be that Joseph was not there, possibly because he had died, and that she was accustomed to simply look to Jesus for help.

Likewise our Lords reply to His mother has puzzled some. ***Woman, what have I to do with you, my hour has not yet come (Vs. 4)***. We note that the Lord's replies to people often moved the conversation into another level (See 3:3; 4:14ff; 5:6, 7; 6:32, 33, 41; 11:22-24). Not that His replies were simply 'spiritual', but they related to the purpose of the Father in His actions and teaching.

Jesus addressed His mother impersonally but not with coldness. He used the same word from the cross. The implication was that He could not just do what His mother wished but was first about His Father's business. ***His hour*** was primarily the hour of the cross (see 7:6, 8; 7:30; 8:20; 12:23; 13:1; 17:1). His hour on the cross would be the Father's great hour of holy love revealed 17:1). So the mild rebuke of His mother was a reminder that His family connections were first and foremost with the Father. As the Father's Redeemer He was the Mediator for humanities welfare not her. This would mean that Mary could be free from imposing herself on His ministry, and begin to see and trust Him as her Lord. Reflecting her heart for God's way, Mary made no protest. So for those who impose sentimental interpretations on Jesus reply and brand Him uncaring, should heed Mary's response.

This little exchange with Mary helps us to see that we must move from sentimentality to simple faith as expressed in Mary's final words, ***Do whatever He says***.

The transition in our Lord's mind between His hour being 'not yet' and then being 'now' is interesting. After the Greeks came seeking Him (12:20f.), and just before the celebration of the Passover He knew His hour had come. Then in His High Priestly prayer He publicly announced that the hour had come (17:1). The entire Gospel of John is a series of steps to the Cross, resurrection and ascension. The signs on the way all lead us to the nature of what the Father would do for the world in those events.

Water but no Wine

Israel's religion had been reduced to a formal, Father-less, outward duty. There was no wine in her life, no joy, and no delight. Her shame was great as she was the recipient of all the Father's covenant love and grace. Now finally she had been given His Beloved and still she turned to wine to water.

The six water pots, all up containing about 500, 750 litres, were used for the ceremonial cleansing and washings required by the guests at the wedding. On entry their feet were washed and then hands were washed before meals and between courses, as well as utensils. External purification had been given Israel as a mercy but they had turned it into a way of getting mercy. This was still a hot issue as John shows in 3:25. For all those wanting to turn religion into their 'glory road' (see last study) it is far easier to deal with inert 'water' than feisty 'wine'. This may manifest in the church as keeping things in order, an avoidance of submitting to the ministry of the Holy Spirit, of keeping the faith within our culturally comfortable group etc. At its root it is a refusal of the presence of the King who is on His mission, not ours.

John had declared in 1:16 that there was a feisty new fullness in the person and faith of Jesus. The life of faith seen there was over the top, not inert and predictable *For of His fullness we have all received, and grace upon grace*.

Jesus said fill the water-pots with water, and they filled them to the brim (Vs.7). In the first instance this must have appeared a strange command. They were out of wine and Jesus seems to be getting more water for purification rites. Imagine their amazement when their actions were included in the transformation of water to wine.

Not only was the wine good wine but better than previously on offer, a reversal of custom (Vs. 10).

Something effusive, totally new, beautiful and totally appropriate to the need is revealed in the miracle. The sudden and excruciating shame of their winelessness had disappeared totally with the freely provided, bottomless well of new wine. The miracle of Jesus fitted seamlessly into the wedding banquet. He made no dramatic pronouncement, drew no attention to the actual miracle itself. The object in the first place was to remove the shame upon the bridegroom and enable the wedding banquet to conclude in joy. But there was a prodigality about the wine provided. No wedding party could ever drink all that wine, especially when we realize that the custom was to dilute the wine with water by up to thirty percent.

Jesus ..manifested His glory. Interestingly the disciples saw through the sign to the glory of the Father's King. They read the sign, seeing a manifestation of Christ's glory. We see that for John the revelation of Christ's glory is the revelation of the only begotten of the Father.

And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, and we saw His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth (1:14). Something glorious about the Son's action led John and the other disciples to see through it to the glory of the Father. This was the 'wine' they so desperately needed. Only this wine could end their shame. Their response must have so gladdened the heart of Jesus. He had come for this very purpose, to reveal the Father. Faith began to bud.

This beginning of His signs Jesus did in Cana of Galilee, and manifested His glory, and His disciples believed in Him (2:11). Faith is never a leap into the dark, but a response of the heart to the truth of God revealed. Our Lord shows us clearly that the Father does not remain hidden and isolated (never has), demanding that we jump, trusting Him to be there somewhere in the dark below. Here was a direct intervention specifically planned and executed to bring clearly into focus the object of our faith. Life with the Father is rich, free, surprising, overflowing and thus glorious.

This beginning of His signs Jesus did in Cana of Galilee (2:11). John has many more to tell, but this first sign has something of the embryo of all Christ would be doing, and how He would be doing it. It heralds a whole new Kingdom (rule and power) breaking into sinful man's world.

Water into Wine – A sign to be read

As with the parables we must resist the urge to find something theologically significant behind every word. How many at the wedding read the sign we are not told. From John's comment probably not many. So we must remember that the signs of Jesus do not compel or automatically produce faith. Having said that we understand from our Lord's own words to His mother that His agenda at the wedding was different to hers (recall His use of the term MY hour).

Several elements of the glory revealed point to the full picture to be revealed in and after the passion and ascension.

- The old systems of man's 'glory road' religions are all out of 'wine'. This miracle is a strong judgement first on Israel and then the nations as they seek to squeeze unobtainable wine from their idols.
- The Father intervenes at the point of our greatest shame, seamlessly in His Beloved, who in our flesh and by His shed blood (the true wine) executes the wondrous exchange of our shame for His glorious sonship.
- Christ as true Bridegroom will provide all that is required for the Heavenly Marriage Feast, and that with prodigality.
- Those at Christ's Banquet will be surprised by joy and delight in the Groom's provision. This foretaste is their passion for a future with Him.

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Questions for discussion and further reflection

1. What questions do you have from the study?
2. Events like this first sign fill us with praise. Perhaps our response to this sign could be to write a hymn of praise to the glory of Christ!
3. As you read this first sign what is it that powerfully reveals the glory of Christ and therefore the glory of the Father to you?
4. We spoke briefly last study about how sinful humanity concocts many different glory roads to reach God. They are not truly glorious for they lead to deeper indifference to the Father of mercies. How does Jesus deal with our 'glory roads'?
5. If Jonathan Edwards is correct that the prime reason for Christ coming in our flesh is to court and win a bride for Himself that He may include her in the glory of the Father's life with the Son and Spirit, then how does that change or enlarge our understanding of Christ's ministry?
6. In what ways may this sign be a judgement upon our own life and loves? Or the life and loves of our churches?
7. How important does it appear from our Lord's action at the wedding, that His Kingdom be marked by joy and delight?
8. If these are essential responses to His glory and not simply the icing on the cake then what factors inhibit or detract us from joy and delight in the Son and thus the Father.
9. Could it be true that we *Christologize* the New Testament (see everything beginning and ending with Christ? How would that be opposite to what He came for and what He did?