

“The First of His Signs”

The Eighth in a Series of Sermons on the Gospel of John

Texts: John 2:1-12; Isaiah 25:1-12

Jesus' first disciples heeded his invitation “to come and see.” They soon confessed that Jesus was Israel's Messiah, the one promised throughout the Old Testament, and the Son of God. Jesus had promised them that they would see angels ascend and descend upon him—just as Jacob (Israel's great patriarch) had seen in his vision. During their first two days with their new master, Jesus promised the disciples that “you will see greater things than these.” The time has come for them to witness Jesus' first miracle, when our Lord turned water into wine at a wedding in Cana, an event which points to the great messianic wedding feast yet to come.

After spending seven Lord's Days in the first chapter of John, today we make our way into the second chapter of John's Gospel and the account of Jesus' first miraculous sign which he performed at a wedding in the village of Cana. Just as his calling indicated, John the Baptist now fades into the background. Although we will read of the Baptist later on in chapter 3, that greater one than John, and who was before John, has now come. John must decrease and Jesus must increase. As we saw last time, this shift in redemptive history can be seen when the Baptist directs two of his own disciples (Andrew and likely, John, the disciple and author of this Gospel) to leave him and instead follow Jesus, marking the beginning of the Messiah's public ministry.

In chapter two of his Gospel, John's account of Jesus public messianic mission is under way. In fact, John (the disciple) will focus upon the messianic ministry of Jesus in the next eleven chapters (2:1-12:50). John will demonstrate how Jesus' preaching and miracles reveal the glory of God, which has been veiled in his incarnation as indicated in verse 14 of the prologue. “*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.*” Jesus will reveal the glory of God through his words and deeds—but supremely at the cross.

In this section of John, the scene shifts from the wilderness east of the Jordan River (out in the sticks, where John the Baptist had been preaching) to the more populated area on the northwest side of the Sea of Galilee, in the area around Nazareth. Jesus has a group of disciples numbering at least five now traveling with him. When John the Baptist directed two of his own disciples to follow Jesus, Jesus then asks these inquirers to “come and see.” They do so, and one of them, Andrew, went and told his brother (Simon Peter), that he had found the Messiah. Andrew invites Simon to come and meet Jesus (he does) and Jesus renames him Peter, which means “rock” in Aramaic. When Andrew encourages Peter to “come and see,” we see the theme of John 1:35-51 now emerge: “witness bearing.”

Andrew also went and found Philip, urged him to “follow me,” to “come and see” for himself about Jesus. Philip went to Jesus, Philip believed, and in turn, he went and found Nathanael (likely the personal name of Batholomew), telling him in verse 45, “*we have found him of whom Moses in the Law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph.*” Despite Nathanael's scepticism about the possibility of anything good coming out of Nazareth, he accepts Philip's invitation to meet Jesus. When Nathanael approaches Jesus, Jesus not only identifies Nathanael as an honest man and a true seeker, but Jesus also reveals his supernatural knowledge, informing Nathanael that Jesus saw him sitting under a fig-tree without ever laying an eye upon him. Nathanael responds with his own confession of faith in Jesus: “*Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!*”

According to verse 50 of chapter 1, “*Jesus answered [Nathanael], ‘Because I said to you, ‘I saw you under the fig tree,’ do you believe? You will see greater things than these.’ And [Jesus] said to [Nathanael], ‘Truly, truly, I say to you, you will see heaven opened, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man.’*” Jesus acknowledges Nathanael’s confession and promises him that he will see something much greater than Jesus’ foreknowledge of Nathanael sitting under a tree. Nathanael and the disciples will see angels ascending and descending on Jesus.

This was the same vision which Jacob (one of the famed patriarchs of Israel’s history) saw at Bethel. This vision is a divinely-given confirmation that Jesus is the Son of Man (from the vision in Daniel 7), but it also confirms Jesus is himself the true holy place of God, upon whom angels ascend and descend. But there is more involved in this—something which the disciples will learn and understand over time. Jacob’s twelve sons were the heads the twelve tribes of Israel. In seeing the same vision Jacob saw, Jesus is telling the disciples that because Jesus is himself the true temple of God, as well as the true Israel, his own disciples will supercede the twelve tribes. Jesus is affirming that a dramatic moment has come in redemptive history, and that in following Jesus, the disciples will become men who will both witness and participate in the dawn of the messianic age.

As I also mentioned last time, John has been setting out a careful chronology of these events. On day one, John the Baptist was confronted by a delegation of Jews from Jerusalem (vv. 19-28). On day two (vv. 29-34), John the Baptist identified Jesus as “*the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!*” The Baptist also recounts how when the Holy Spirit descended upon Jesus when John Baptized him, he recognized that Jesus is that one about whom John was called as witness. Jesus is Israel’s Messiah and the Son of God. On days three and four, Jesus meets the first group of disciples (Andrew, John, Peter, Philip and Nathanael [aka Bartholomew]). So, when in verse 1 of chapter two, John reports that the events which follow occur on the third day (specifically, the first miraculous sign performed by Jesus), there is a span of seven days. While there is no doubt that John alludes to a number of Old Testament events in this section, and there are citations from Old Testament texts (i.e., Genesis 28), we should not go beyond the text looking for a hidden and deeper meaning. There are all kinds of fanciful attempts to allegorize the text at this point, and we need to be careful not to do so.

The point of the narrative so far (from verses 19-51) and continuing into chapter two (vv. 2-12) is that John is striving to convince his readers that Jesus is the Christ, and that by believing in him we may have the forgiveness of sin and eternal life. John draws upon various Old Testament themes and images, an indication that symbolic “deeper” meanings are not more important than what is going on in the narrative itself. I know it can be interesting and compelling to look for all kinds of secret things and hidden mysteries, but that is not John’s purpose. John is recounting what Jesus did so that we (the reader) might see God revealing his glory in various ways through the person and work of his Son.

The way to proceed then, is to attempt to understand what John’s use of the Old Testament means to those first century Jews to whom he is writing.¹ When we do that, it becomes clear that events at Cana are the culmination of a seven day period climaxing in the creation of new wine on the seventh day (the Sabbath). This fits well with Old Testament prophecies speaking of the messianic age as a wedding feast with much wine and rich food. In other words, when Jesus turns water into wine, he is tying his own mission to messianic prophecy. This miracle is the first sign that something new has begun.

¹ See the discussion in: Carson, The Gospel According to John, 166-167.

John has already alluded to the creation account in the prologue, and we have seen that John has already made a connection between God creating all things (light when there had been darkness), and that with the coming of the word become flesh, light shines in the post-fall darkness—a new creation theme. Throughout John’s Gospel, Jesus will perform his redemptive work on the seventh day—the Sabbath (John 5:16 ff., 7:21 ff., and in chapter 9:16). Those who were familiar with the language and theology of the Old Testament should have come to this conclusion, and made the connection between Jesus and the messianic promises and significant themes of the Old Testament like the creation account.²

In the previous section, John told us that Nathanael was from Cana, a thriving village in John’s day some nine miles north of Nazareth. It is now in ruins. It is here that Jesus performs his first miracle—not out in the Judean wilderness, but in what appears (at least from the archaeological record) a thriving village on the main Roman road between two prominent cities of the region. According to verses 1-2 of John 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.*”

Since marriage is itself a creation ordinance, the very fact that Jesus chose to perform his first miracle at a wedding no doubt raises the creation account in the reader’s mind once again. Mary is not named, and some say this was done by John so as not to confuse the reader because other Marys appear throughout his gospel. Nathanael was from Cana, Jesus was there with his disciples to attend a wedding (Jesus was an invited guest), and Mary was there as well. It may very well be that this was the wedding of a close acquaintance or family member. In fact, given what is said in verse 3, Mary seems to be involved in serving of guests. During this time, a wedding celebration could last as long as a week, and was paid for the groom’s family. It was common to invite special guests—prominent families, teachers, and public officials—to show the family’s prestige and to bless the newly married couple. It was a serious social *faux pas* to run out of food and drink, or to have guests who are not properly fed and watered. In fact, failing to do so was grounds for a lawsuit on the part of the bride’s family, because they have been shamed.³

While Jesus and his new disciples were in attendance, Mary approaches Jesus expecting her son to do something about a situation which might lead to potential embarrassment. We learn in verse 3 that “*when the wine ran out, the mother of Jesus said to him, ‘They have no wine.’*” Christian tradition and circumstantial evidence throughout the New Testament points in the direction that Mary was widowed by this time (Joseph had died), and since Jesus is identified as a carpenter (in Matthew 6:3) he may have been supporting Mary. And now Mary, who depends on her son for support, presumes upon Jesus to deal with the potential embarrassment of not having enough wine to serve all the guests.

Lest anyone wonder—despite the efforts of many to argue that this wine was non-alcoholic—fermented grapes were diluted with water (they were not distilled, so as not to become strong drink) and such wine was about the strength of modern beer—weaker in strength than modern wine. Jews used such wine for celebration, and drunkenness at such celebrations would bring great shame to any family whose member imbibed too much. But there was enough alcohol in the wine that the good wine was served first, and the

² Carson, The Gospel According to John, 168.

³ Carson, The Gospel According to John, 169.

less expensive stuff was served after everyone's taste buds were dulled a bit by food and drink.⁴

Jesus' seemingly stern answer to Mary's question in verse 4 has been the subject of much debate and speculation. "*And Jesus said to her, 'Woman, what does this have to do with me? My hour has not yet come.'*" When Jesus addressed Mary as "woman," it takes us back a bit because Jesus seems impolite or even rude. Neither is the case. But neither is this the way a son would tenderly or affectionately address his mother. This is a mild rebuke as becomes evident when Jesus asks her "what does this [the lack] of wine have to do with me?" The question is a Semitic expression which was used when people fail to mind their own business and insert themselves into a situation in an objectionable way.⁵

Mary had come to depend upon Jesus and she assumes that Jesus will help her obtain more wine and avoid a potential embarrassment. There is no hint here that Mary is expecting that her son will perform a miracle (as though Jesus had been doing miracles at home, and Mary now wants him to perform one in front of her friends). But Jesus had been taking care of household business, and Mary mistakenly assumes that Jesus will continue to do so. Jesus' answer indicates that as difficult as it will be for her, like the other followers of Jesus, Mary too must learn that Jesus has begun his public ministry and things cannot be as they were before—even in their household. In Matthew 12:46-50, Matthew recounts a similar instance in which Jesus also reminds Mary that she now must realize the nature of his mission, and that she too needs to see him as Israel's Messiah who will save her from her own sins. After Jesus begins his public ministry, the relationship between mother and son has now changed.

The key to Jesus' answer (and mild rebuke of his mother) can be seen when he says to Mary "*my hour has not yet come.*" Jesus must go to the cross and suffer and die for the sin of the world. No one yet knows this. But there is more to this "hour" than the cross. The hour of which Jesus speaks surely includes his suffering, his returning to the Father, and his glorification—all the things which will unfold later on in this Gospel. The phrase "my hour" is a reference to the "end of his earthly career, embraces the fulness of his glory, of which his death is only a part." As used here, Jesus is directing Mary's attention to the fact that his hour is not yet. His messianic ministry is just now beginning.⁶ Until that hour comes (the climax of his messianic mission), Jesus must be about his Father's business, not his family's. Mary can no longer assume that Jesus will take care of things like a shortage of wine at a wedding.

Lest we forget, as Jesus is about to die for our sins, and while hanging in agony upon the cross, in John 19:25-27, we learn that Jesus directs John (the author of this Gospel) to care for Mary. "*Standing by the cross of Jesus were his mother and his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene. When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing nearby, he said to his mother, 'Woman, behold, your son!' Then he said to the disciple, 'Behold, your mother!' And from that hour the disciple took her to his own home.*" Despite his mild rebuke of Mary at Cana for not understanding the nature of his mission, Jesus did ensure that she was cared-for, a responsibility which falls to John (the author of this gospel).

⁴ Craig S. Keener, The IVP Bible Background Commentary (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 268.

⁵ Ridderbos, The Gospel of John, 105.

⁶ Ridderbos, The Gospel of John, 105-106.

Mary, apparently, understands Jesus' intention and reacts accordingly. According to verse 5, "*his mother said to the servants, 'Do whatever he tells you.'*" Mary does not know what Jesus is about to do, but she accepts Jesus' rebuke and directs those serving the food and drink to the wedding guests to do what Jesus tells them. As one commentator notes, in verse 3 Jesus approaches Jesus with the presumptions of a mother and is mildly rebuked, but in verse 5 she responds as a believer—she trusts that Jesus will do the right thing in light of his mission, and her faith is honored.⁷

In verse 6, John sets the scene for the miracle which follows. "*Now there were six stone water jars there for the Jewish rites of purification, each holding twenty or thirty gallons.*" Stone jars were reserved for ceremonial occasions. These were too heavy to use easily, and were not subject to wear or pollution like the clay pottery used for daily purposes. The six stone jars collectively held between 100-150 gallons of water, and were most likely used for the ceremonial washing of the bride and groom before the wedding night, for the washing of ceremonial utensils used throughout the wedding itself, and for the ceremonial washing of the guest's hands before eating. But a new age of redemption has come. Jesus takes the vessels used for specific ceremonial purposes under Jewish law, and instead uses them for an entirely new purpose—the creation of the new wine of the messianic age. The law came through Moses. But grace truth comes through Jesus Christ.

Jesus' miracle is described in verses 7-10. "*Jesus said to the servants, 'Fill the jars with water.' And they filled them up to the brim. And he said to them, 'Now draw some out 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.'*" The servants do as Jesus asked, filled the jars, and took some to the master of the feast (the head caterer—to use a modern equivalent), who, in turn, called for the bridegroom, who was footing the bill and responsible for providing for his guests. The wedding steward can only marvel at the generosity of the bridegroom, who has provided gallons of "the good stuff," unlike most weddings where the good stuff is brought out first, and followed by the cheap stuff for the rest of the celebration. The steward does not know that a miracle has occurred.

But the water drawn from the well miraculously has been turned into wine. Very good wine. Between one-hundred and one-hundred fifty gallons of very good wine. This is a theologically loaded event. In several well-known messianic prophecies, the prophets speak of the abundance of wine as symbolic of the dawn of the messianic age. One such example is found in Isaiah 25:1-12 (our Old Testament lesson) where we read that "*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. It will be said on that day, 'Behold, this is our God; we have waited for him, that he might save us. This is the Lord; we have waited for him; let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation.'*"

In fact, Jesus himself speaks of this new wine in a similar fashion. In Mark 2:22, Jesus says, "*no one puts new wine into old wineskins. If he does, the wine will burst the skins—and the wine is destroyed, and so are the skins. But new wine is for fresh wineskins.*" In other words, Jesus is the new wine of a

⁷ Carson, The Gospel According to John, 169.

new redemptive era. In Matthew 22:2, Jesus speaks of the messianic age in terms of a feast, “*the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding feast for his son.*” The kingdom of heaven is now present because Jesus is present. The implication of the parable is “let the feast begin!”

By creating so much of this fine wine in celebration of a wedding, Jesus is blessing the wedding of the couple who had invited him to attend their wedding and giving them a very expensive wedding gift, by the way. But Jesus is also indicating that the longed-for messianic age had dawned and that one day the great messianic feast will become a reality (which John calls the marriage supper of Christ the Lamb in Revelation 19). On that day God will put an end to sin, and overturn its curse, death. When Jesus turns water into wine, he is revealing who he is (the Messiah), and pointing ahead to what he will do to save us from our sins (die on the cross), and preparing his disciples for the institution of the Lord’s Supper, the sign and seal of that blood which was shed for the complete, final, and total remission of our sins.

And so John ends the account of the wedding at Cana in verse 11 with an explanation of the events just described. “*This, the first of his signs, Jesus did at Cana in Galilee, and manifested his glory. And his disciples believed in him.*” In turning water into the new wine, we see that the miracle at Cana is but the first in a series of miracles which become the foundation and pattern for everything to come in this Gospel.⁸ By referring to this miracle as a “sign” John is using a word (*sēmeiōn*) used throughout the LXX in reference to the miracles which God displayed before Egypt during the time of the Exodus. In performing turning water into wine, Jesus indicates that his messianic mission is now fully underway and that he is that one foretold throughout the Old Testament. Here is the first manifestation of God’s glory hidden in our Lord’s incarnation. Here is the first of the “greater things” Jesus had promised to the disciples in the previous section—several days prior according to John’s chronology.

Just as Mary accepted Jesus’ mild rebuke and saw her desire for more wine honored in a way beyond her wildest expectations, so too we read that the disciples likewise “believed” in him. They had much yet to learn, and they did not even remotely understand all of that which was to come, but nevertheless, they trusted that Jesus was who he said he was (they believed in him) and they have confessed Jesus as the Messiah, Israel’s king, and the Son of God. For the disciples, it is just beginning. Other disciples will be added. And Jesus’ mission (leading to “that hour”) will take him to Jerusalem. But for now, we read in verse 12, “*after this he went down to Capernaum, with his mother and his brothers and his disciples, and they stayed there for a few days.*”

Because Jesus has come, the great hour of salvation will come to all those believe in him and are granted authority to become sons and daughters of God. Because Jesus has come, the messianic age has come. The rich food and fine wine of the messianic feast has been sampled, and Jesus’ disciples (and all the wedding guests) have been given but a small taste of the future wedding celebration yet to come—the same purpose the Lord’s Supper serves for Christ’s church until Jesus returns to judge the world, raise the dead, make all things new. On that day, the messianic feast becomes the marriage feast of Christ the Lamb and we become Christ’s bride.

Because Jesus has come, the law of Moses will be fulfilled and the glory of God will be revealed through his preaching and various signs and wonders. Jesus is establishing his messianic credentials, and revealing to his disciples “the greater things” he had just promised them. They saw and they believed. Do you? Although this is the first of his signs which he did in Cana, many more will soon follow.

⁸ Ridderbos, The Gospel of John, 113.