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Jesus, Lord of the Marriage Supper

In lighter moments, we as pastors swap stories, funny stories about what has happened to us in the ministry. Weddings, I must tell you, are often the source of some of our most memorable moments. Here are a few:

- The organist looked over her shoulder as she ended the bridal march, but there was no bride at the altar!
- A groomsman stepped on the bride's train which was pinned to her wig; off it came just as the couple was departing the platform!
- When a groomsman fainted, the startled bride lifted her veil, as if seeing him directly would change the reality of what had happened!

Two thousand years ago there was a wedding that had its own memorable moment! The wine had run out. A shortage of wine was a serious cultural gaffe in a cul-

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ture where drinking wine was considered essential to the joyous reception. Apparently, the needed amount had been underestimated. And, since hospitality was the center of the social structure, the empty pots stood as an embarrassment, even a cause for humiliating shame. In those days, drunkenness was scorned, but wine was common. “Without wine there is no joy,” said the rabbis.

“On the third day a wedding took place at Cana in Galilee. Jesus’ mother was there, and Jesus and his disciples had also been invited to the wedding” (John 2:1–2). Perhaps, as tradition has it, Mary was the sister of the groom’s mother. Or, some have suggested, this was the wedding of John, the disciple of Jesus, the man who wrote this New Testament book that bears his name. Perhaps; perhaps not.

Whatever, Jesus performed His first miracle, not at a funeral, but at a joyous wedding; not in a temple, but in a home. He was not a part of the monastic asceticism of the hermitic communities. “He came to comfort our sorrows,” writes J. C. Macaulay, “but also to sanctify our joys.”¹ Here, at an ordinary wedding in an ordinary home, He would secretly “reveal His glory.”

Wedding feasts, in that culture, would last for days. Of course, guests would come and go, extending their congratulations, bringing gifts, and enjoying wine. The final evening was the grand finale, and the couple was escorted to their home with flaming torches, walking past the adoring crowd. No honeymoon as we know it; just open house for a week, and time to become more intimately acquainted.

“The third day” John refers to is to be counted from the last event, namely the dialogue between Jesus

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and Nathaniel near the Jordan River. The walk from there to Cana could have been made in two days, plenty of time for the final wedding extravaganza.

“They have no wine,” Mary whispered to her Son sitting close by.

Possibly she had some responsibility for the catering, therefore felt an obligation to deal with the shortage. Keep in mind that her Son had not yet performed a single miracle, so Mary did not know what to expect. Her comment was probably given in faith mingled with both curiosity and doubt. (Whether or not Mary acts in the role of a mediator today, asking requests of her Son, is discussed in the “For Further Consideration” section at the end of this chapter.)

Jesus answers, “Dear woman, why do you involve me? . . . My time has not yet come” (John 2:4).

Discourteous? I don’t think so. I’m sure the tone of Jesus’ voice was soft and tender. Homer, the Greek historian used the same expression for a man addressing his beloved wife. It was the title by which Augustus addressed Cleopatra, the famous Egyptian queen. And yet, we cannot help but sense the mild rebuke, “Why do you involve me?”

Jesus was giving her a gentle hint that everything had to be subjected to the divine will of the Father. She could no longer view Him as other mothers viewed their sons; indeed, in the future Jesus will put distance between Himself and His mother. She also was a sinner and needed to be redeemed by the sacrifice of her Son. She must no longer look upon Him as her son, but as her Lord. As D. A. Carson points out, she could no longer approach him on an “inside track.”

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What did He mean by the expression, “My time has not yet come”?

Miracles were dependent on the Father’s timing and will. The Father who sent the Son scripted every task He was to do on earth; His life was marked off in detail by a divine decree. Later we will read that no one could take Him because “his time had not yet come” (John 7:30). Whether it was a miracle at a wedding or His death on the cross, every minute was subject to the divine timetable.

Though mildly rebuked, Mary wisely alerts the servants, “Do whatever he tells you” (John 2:5). She knew the servants might find it strange to receive orders from a guest. She also knew that He might ask them to do something that appeared foolish. Up front she wanted them to know that she expected them to do “whatever” He said.

Luther bids us imitate her faith: “She who was not daunted by the semblance of a refusal reads between the lines of this refusal a better answer to prayer.” Though His “time had not yet come,” she wanted the servants to be ready when it arrived. “Not until the wine was entirely exhausted would this ‘hour’ have arrived. All other help must fail, before the ‘hour’ of the great Helper will have struck,” writes R. C. Trench.²

“Nearby stood six stone water jars, the kind used by the Jews for ceremonial washing, each holding from twenty to thirty gallons” (John 2:6). Multiply 20 to 30 gallons by six and you have some 120 to 180 gallons! These water pots, used in ceremonial washings, represented the old order of the Jewish law that Jesus would replace with something better. These stone pots stood as

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symbols of that elaborate system of outward cleansing that could neither cleanse the conscience nor satisfy the deep yearnings of the soul. Perhaps we should understand that there is even significance in the number six, the number of imperfection.

And so, from those jugs, the servants drew the wine of the new epoch. As Phillip Yancey put it, "From purified water of the Pharisees came the choice new wine of a whole new era. The time for ritual cleansing had passed; the time for celebration had begun."³ Barclay put it this way: "Jesus has come to turn the imperfections of the law into the perfection of grace."⁴

Consider: The bridegroom failed to make sure that the supply of wine would last for the entire feast. Jesus now takes over this responsibility, just as He will at the Marriage Supper of the Lamb, when He shall invite us to drink wine with Him "anew in his kingdom." This wedding feast is but a small picture of the joys that await us when we sit down with Him, and He shall serve us.

"Jesus said to the servants, 'Fill the water jars with water'; so they filled them to the brim" (v. 7). The servants, bless them, obeyed Jesus' command to the letter.

They did not ask, "Why this? We need wine, not water."

Nor did they ask, "How full will do?"

They filled the water pots so that at eye level the water seemed about to spill over the edge. "Now draw some out and take it to the master of the banquet." They did so, and the master of the banquet tasted the water that had been turned into wine. He did not realize where it had come from, though the servants who had drawn the water knew" (vv. 8-9).

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When they awoke that morning, these servants, bless them, did not know that they would experience a miracle that would reveal the “glory” of the promised Messiah. What blessings a day can bring! And as Macaulay says, “A brimful of blessings comes with a brimful of obedience.”⁵

THE BENEFITS OF OBEDIENCE

Yes, a brimful of obedience does bring a brimful of blessings. These servants, bless them, would witness that Immanuel was among them. The benefits of their obedience are remarkable indeed.

An Ordinary Task Became Extraordinary

An ordinary village.

An ordinary home.

An ordinary wedding.

Ordinary water pots.

Ordinary servants.

And, yet, what an extraordinary day!

This miracle brings Jesus into the center of ordinary life. No fanfare accompanied this revelation of His glory. No pronouncement from Jesus, no flash of light; no shrine was built to commemorate the miracle. No crowd marveled at it. The miracle was subdued and hidden, and as such stands in contrast to the coming wedding feast of the Lamb.

Nothing is ordinary after Christ has touched it. The common water pots brought forth uncommon wine.

In an ordinary hospital room, with a believer near death, I have experienced the “glory of God.” Surrounded by ordinary equipment and ordinary furniture,

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there has been the touch of the extraordinary. I have felt as if I was walking into the presence of God. And I was.

In a poor home, without running water, without rugs on the rough floor, without extra clothes, and with a sick child in the one bedroom, I have seen the glory of God. This young couple was radiant, thanking God for His goodness. Such contentment in the midst of financial needs! Such peace in the midst of an uncertain future! The glory of God in very ordinary places!

Your office, your factory, and your home can become the very dwelling place of the resurrected Christ. Common water pots are filled with uncommon wine, and common hearts are filled with uncommon joy.

I'm told that Ruth Graham kept a plaque with these words in her kitchen, "Divine Service Accomplished Here Three Times Daily." Yes, ordinary dishes washed by ordinary hands can become an extraordinary work of grace.

Think of the faith of these servants! Faith to fill the huge pots and faith to give the "water" to the master of the banquet. And if the miracle occurred before they dipped their pitchers in the containers, they displayed faith that the wine would be to the liking of their master. They did what they could do, and Jesus did the rest. They were responsible for the possible, not the impossible.

Why so much wine? Would they need 150 gallons? The Supplier was seen for who He is: a Man who proved that in His presence the supply is always greater than the demand. He is the God of the "extras." The common has the aura of the divine presence.

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We Come to Know the Secrets of the Lord

Obedience also gives us insight into the hidden counsels of God. The master of the banquet tasted the water that was made wine. “He did not realize where it had come from, though the servants who had drawn the water knew. Then he called the bridegroom aside and said, ‘Everyone brings out the choice wine first and then the cheaper wine after the guests have had too much to drink; but you have saved the best till now’” (John 2:9b–10). Imagine the surprise on the bridegroom’s face!

We are invited to visualize the scene: With a jug of wine in hand, the headwaiter called the bridegroom, perhaps in jest, and we could paraphrase, “Most people serve the good wine first. When the guests have well drunk . . . had their palates dulled and are in no position to judge the wine . . . then they serve that which is cheaper . . . but you have saved the best until now.”

The bridegroom was equally confused. He could not explain where the exceptional wine had come from. But, John comments, “The servants who had drawn the water knew” (v. 9). They were close to the power and saw the miracle before their eyes. They knew they had poured water into the pots; they also knew that they dipped wine out of them. And they knew that the Son of Mary was responsible for the transformation.

“The secret of the Lord is with them that fear him” (Psalm 25:14 KJV). Those who know God enjoy hidden moments of pleasure that are unknown to the world. They have understanding, insight, and the satisfaction of seeing God in the most unlikely places.

A woman commits her unbelieving husband to

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God, and she notices that he has a renewed interest in spiritual things. She begins to see encouraging signs that his attitude is beginning to change; he is beginning to open up to God as a flower to the sun. He doesn't know why, but she does. She can interpret what is happening from a privileged point of view.

A new convert returns to his family, telling them that he has "found God." He knows that to accept Christ as Savior brings peace and a basic assurance that all is right with him and the Almighty. He is ridiculed by his relatives and friends; they accuse him of fanaticism and being spiritually gullible, but he knows what he knows. Whatever is said makes little difference, because he has experienced God's power firsthand. He knows he can trust God with his future. Others don't understand, but he has seen the glory of God.

And yet other blessings await those who are obedient.

We Are Assured That the Best Comes Last

"Everyone brings out the choice wine first and then the cheaper wine after the guests have had too much to drink; but you have saved the best till now" (John 2:10). As we have learned, the good wine puzzled the master of the banquet. It was contrary to custom to keep the good wine until the last. But when Jesus does a miracle, it is always done well. And yes, He saves the best till last.

The devil gives the best first. He makes promises he cannot keep and doles out his trinkets up front. He shields his victims from the coming heartache, pain, and impending eternity of torment. This life is the best they will ever experience. The prodigal son went to feast in

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the far country, and for a short while he had a “good time.” But when his moneybag ran out, he ate with the pigs. Those good times promise what they cannot deliver, and they do not last.

A young man who had a mountain of credit card debt chose to gamble, hoping for “the big win” that didn’t happen. As his debts grew, he increased his risk, and with it came emotional torment and hopelessness. One day he pulled a toy gun on a state trooper, provoking the officer to shoot the young man. On the seat of his car was a note, “Thank you for delivering me from my debt.” When he put his first quarters into the slot machine, he had no idea that this path would be that bitter, that evil, that destructive. But the devil never shows you where he is taking you; he shows you only the enticing next step.

If you have never accepted Christ as Savior, my advice is that you enjoy this short window of time, for it will never get better, just eternally worse. But for those who know Christ as Savior, this is as bad as it ever will get. Sometimes our heavenly Father gives us a bitter cup to begin with, perhaps the cup of conviction of sin, but its purpose is that we might take the cup of salvation. Sometimes He gives us the cup of loneliness that we might drink from the cup of His presence. Or we are asked to drink from the cup of failure that we might remember that we serve Him alone. But a day is coming in which our fortunes will be reversed: “I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us” (Romans 8:18). The best is yet to come.

In Gethsemane, Jesus drank the bitter cup of emotional trauma; hours later on the cross, He refused the

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cup of vinegar so that He might drink the cup of suffering to its dregs. All that, so that He could invite us to participate in the joy of His triumphant resurrection and ascension. See Him in heaven today, and He will say, “The best is left till last.”

If Christ can take ordinary water and turn it into extraordinary wine, think of what we will have in the future. To the disciples He said, “I will not drink of this fruit of the vine from now on until the day when I drink it anew with you in my Father’s kingdom” (Matthew 26:29). There is a day coming when there will be plenty of wine for all—and the joy that goes with it.

“They will come and shout for joy on the heights of Zion; they will rejoice in the bounty of the Lord—the grain, the new wine and the oil, the young of the flocks and herds. They will be like a well-watered garden, and they will sorrow no more” (Jeremiah 31:12).

“‘The days are coming,’ declares the Lord, ‘when the reaper will be overtaken by the plowman and the planter by the one treading grapes. New wine will drip from the mountains and flow from all the hills’” (Amos 9:13).

John describes the vision of the coming wedding feast:

Then I heard what sounded like a great multitude, like the roar of rushing waters and like the loud peals of thunder, shouting: “Hallelujah! For our Lord God Almighty reigns. Let us rejoice and be glad and give him glory! For the wedding of the Lamb has come, and his bride has made herself ready. Fine linen, bright and clean, was given her to wear.” (Fine linen stands for the righteous acts of the saints.)

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Then the angel said to me, "Write: 'Blessed are those who are invited to the wedding supper of the Lamb!'" And he added, "These are the true words of God." (Revelation 19:6-9)

F. B. Meyer wrote,

The Lord Jesus, on the other hand, is always giving something better. As the taste is being constantly refined, it is provided with more delicate and ravishing delights. That which you know of Him today is certainly better than that you tasted when first you sat down at his board. And so it will ever be. The angels, as his servants, have orders to bring in and set before the heirs of glory things which eye hath not seen, and man's heart has not conceived, but which are all prepared. The best of earth will be below the simplest fare of heaven. But what will heaven's best be! If wine in the peasant's house is so luscious, what will be the new wine in the Father's kingdom! What may we not expect from the vintages of the celestial hills! What will it be to sit at the marriage supper of the Lamb, not as guests, but as the Bride! Oh, hasten on, ye slow-moving days; be quick to depart, that we may taste that ravishment of bliss! But for ever and ever, as fresh revelations break on our glad souls, we shall look up to the Master of the feast and cry, "*Thou has kept the best until now.*"⁶

With some 150 to 180 gallons of wine at their disposal, I wonder how long the feast continued. These people knew they had been to a party! "Even as the Christian faith began at a banquet, so it will come to completion at a wedding feast."⁷ The wine will never run out.

Spurgeon wrote, "Fill the vessels up to the very

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brim. If you are to repent, ask to have a hearty and a deep repentance—full to the brim. If you are to believe, ask to have an intense absolute, childlike dependence, that your faith may be full to the brim. If you are bidden to pray, pray mightily; fill the vessel of prayer up to the brim.”⁸

Yes, we shall drink wine anew in the coming kingdom. The Master of the wedding is already prepared.

To Jesus every day I find my heart is closer drawn,
He's fairer than the glory of the gold and purple dawn;
He's all my fancy pictured in its fairest dreams and
more;
Each day He grows still sweeter than He was the day
before.

Oh! Christ He is the Fountain, the deep sweet well of
love;
The streams on earth I've tasted, more deep I'll drink
above:
There to an ocean's fullness His mercy doth expand
And glory, glory dwelleth in Emmanuel's land.
—Anne R. Cousin

“This, the first of his miraculous signs, Jesus performed at Cana in Galilee. He thus revealed his glory, and his disciples put their faith in him” (John 2:11). The word *sign* is used to refer to a miracle that points beyond the event itself to the one who did it. Or we could say that it is a physical sign of a spiritual reality. This miracle points to Christ as the Bridegroom who is preparing His bride for a blessed eternity. He is seen to be worthy of our belief, worthy of our devotion, and worthy of our love.