

UNDERSTAND THE SIGNS

John 2:1-11

If you are a Christian on planet earth, you probably have read one of the books in the *Left Behind* series by Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins. I'm the only person in Georgia who has not read at least one. They have been on the "Best Sellers" list forever and, at last count, had sold some 6 billion copies. It seems that there is no end to these volumes discussing the signs and events of the end-time, and a lot of people have "left behind" lots of money to learn about them. Rumor has it that they are going to do a spin-off series entitled *Left Behind: The Millennium* reported to have one volume dedicated to each year of the millennium. They write fast.

We certainly need to understand the signs. In fact the Gospel of John was written to give us signs, signs about Jesus that are far more valuable to our daily living than those of end-time speculation. "Many other signs therefore Jesus also performed in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these have been written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing you may have life in His name" (John 20:30-31).

John records seven of the miracles of Jesus, but he never uses the word "miracle." (Though the word is found in the King James translation, it is an incorrect translation of the Greek.) The term John chooses is the term "signs" as is seen in verse 11 of this text, along with 4:54; 6:2 etc. It is a purposeful choice of words by John. The miracles are "signs" which point to something far greater than the miracle themselves. Just as the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) record the parables of Jesus to communicate great spiritual truth, John uses these seven miracles as signs pointing to great spiritual truth. (By the way, John does not record a single one of the parables.) In reading the Gospel of John, we need to understand the signs. They show us who God is. The miracles are a means of teaching spiritual truth, pointing beyond the material to the spiritual, specifically pointing people to God.

Consider the miracle of turning water to wine in John 2. John calls this a sign. It "signifies" some things we need to understand. It shows us some things about God, and John writes so we can understand who God is and what He is like. I can see at least five spiritual truths that can be understood from the miracle of turning water to wine at the wedding feast at Cana in Galilee.

1. The miracle is a sign pointing to the transforming power of God. Jesus changing the water into wine is a picture, a sign, of the way He can change your life. Beginning with initial conversion, the transformation continues as we more and more about who God really is. We are changed as salvation (not justification, but sanctification) continues from faith to faith (See Romans 1:17). Marvelous transformations of my heart and life have come through learning the deep and lofty doctrinal truths of who God is: basically that He is a God of amazing Grace. As age sweetens the wine, so learning the deep and lofty truths of God over time sweetens the life. The old gospel hymn rightly said, "The longer I serve Him, the sweeter He grows." Does *He* grow sweeter? Not really; He is the same. It is my understanding of and experiences with Him that have grown sweeter. This is the transforming power of God.

2. The miracle is a sign that the life of God in us. The guests at the wedding drank the wine. It became a part of their bodies. The Christian faith, in contrast with the religions of the world, is the only one that claims that the adherents can have a personal relationship with its Founder. God becomes a part of our lives. He literally comes to live in us. This is taught in so many ways in the New Testament:

- o The vine and branch analogy of John 15
- o The indwelling of the Holy Spirit In John 16
- o Paul's uses the phrase "in Christ" 164 times in 12 of his 13 letters.

The ultimate teaching of God being in us is the Lord's Supper. Not a few scholars of the New Testament see a direct relationship here in the miracle of turning the water to wine and the wine of the Lord's Supper. We eat the bread, symbolic of the body of Jesus, and we drink the wine, symbolic of the blood of Jesus. The Lord's Supper is an acted out parable. It symbolizes that the life of Christ Jesus is in me. This is what this sign is pointing to: If you are a Christian, God lives in you. You never face life alone. A sign worth understanding!

3. The miracle is a sign of the lavish ways in which God supplies our needs. Verse 6 mentions that there were 6 water pots each holding between 20 and 30 gallons. Jesus turned the water in all of them into wine. This means that they had between 120 and 180 gallons of wine. And according to verse 10, the wine was the most excellent of wines, and Jesus gave to this poor couple just beginning their life together: a magnificent gift! John wants us to see in this a sign, a picture of who our God is. He is a God who lavishly supplies our needs. God often does not supply my needs the way I want Him to or when I want Him to, but He always supplies them lavishly. Many of the lavish blessings of God, we take for granted: life, health, housing, intelligence, education, food, national security and safety. If you doubt that God has lavishly supplied these things to us, go with me to a third world country which has none of them. This miracle is a sign to us that whatever our needs, God working in us and with us to supply them lavishly.

4. The miracle is a sign of the surpassing excellence of life in Christ. Verse 6 says that these 6 water pots were used for ceremonial purification. The Old Testament laws of purification were many and detailed. Judaism taught that it was through these ceremonies and ritual cleansings that the Jews were made ceremonially clean and could enter religious services and receive religious blessings. Jesus overturned all of that (just as he overturned the tables in the Temple in the following verses). Just as there is tremendous difference between the taste of common water and the sweetness of fine wine, so there is tremendous difference between the deadness of religious ritual and the richness of life in Christ. My friend, the Christian faith is not about religion, rules, and rituals. It is about having a relationship with God through Jesus Christ. Its not about ceremony, it is about intimacy. There is as much difference in an intimate relationship with Jesus Christ and the rules and regulation of religion as there is between brackish water and fine wine. Are ceremony and ritual worthless? No. But they are of value only in as much as they lead us into intimacy with Christ.

5. The miracle is a sign of the great joy found in life with Christ. Jesus turned water into wine...fine wine. I think the Baptists (who, of course, for the most part are literalists) have a miracle of their own turning the wine into Welch's. No, it wasn't grape juice; it was wine. What's more, verse 10 says that the people had "drunk freely." Conservative New Testament scholar Leon Morris says that the phrase "have drunk freely" means "are drunken." They were having a party at a wedding feast. They were having a wonderful time: happy, full of joy, full of wine, at a delightful celebration. And John says that this is a picture of the Christian life, of life with Christ. (Cf. Ephesians 5:18) It is a joy, a life of abundant joy. Like the wine, the joy works from within. It comes with the presence of Jesus and rest in the comfort of our Sovereign of God, who is a loving, "Abba, Father." Even in the deepest crisis of life, there can be joy. I Peter, which is part of what is known as "persecution literature," speaks in 1:8 of "Joy unspeakable and full of glory." Even under persecution and sorrow there can be "unspeakable joy."

Fyodor Dostoevsky in *The Brothers Karamazov* gives a powerful insight into the love, goodness, and character of God in a chapter entitled 'Cana of Galilee.' One of the brothers, Alyosha, has been overcome with grief after a terrible ordeal surrounding the death of a very godly monk, Father Zossima, a close and trusted mentor. It was the custom when a revered monk died to read the Scriptures around the clock until the burial of the dead. Alyosha returns to the monastery where Father Zossima's was lying in state. The attending priest was reading from the Gospel of John, in chapter 2 the wedding feast at Cana of Galilee. Alyosha falls into an exhausted stupor, half awake, half asleep and hears the reading of John 2 while at the same time his mind is flashing in and out of consciousness. Alyosha all at once is thinking and dreams and listening as the priest reads from the miracle at Cana of Galilee. Now, in this reading, Dostoevsky gives as beautiful a description of God as I have ever read:

"Do you fear Him? He is terrible in His greatness, awful in His sublimity, but infinitely merciful. He has made Himself like unto us from love and rejoices with us. He is changing the water to wine that the gladness of the guests may not be cut short. He is expecting new guests, He is calling new ones unceasingly for ever and ever.... There they are bringing new wine. Do you see they are bringing the vessels....' Something glowed in Alyosha's heart, something filled it till it ached, tears of rapture rose from his soul.... He stretched out his hands, uttered a cry and waked up."

In that vision, Alyosha came to see that Jesus Christ is a God of great joy.

The first miracle Jesus performed was to ensure the success of a wedding, that the party wouldn't end. This is what this miracle points to. A God who turned the water to wine so our joy could continue...always.

Finally, in verse 11 John points out two results of the miracle: "(He) manifested His glory and His disciples believed in Him." First, the glory of God was seen. John's Gospel has no record of the transfiguration of Jesus where His glory shown "white as light." It seems that John wants us to see the entire life of Jesus as a shining forth of the glory of God; at least, it was seen in this sign. We, too, show the glory of God when we are joyful, joyful even in the hard times, when sickness comes, when hearts are heavy, when the future uncertain. I believe that such joy comes when we understand what kind of God our God is: a God of transformation, who changes water to wine so the joy will not stop, who fills us with His own presence, and who transforms our lives from bland and bitter to wonderfully sweet. When we know God like this and live with joy like this, we, too, will be winsome and inviting witnesses of Christ and the joy of His redemption, and some will believe because of our testimony.

The German atheist and arch foe of the Christian faith, Friedrich Nietzsche, wrote of the Christians he had encountered: "They must sing better songs ere I learn belief in their savior; his disciples must look like the saved." When we can be joyful in the hard times, we "look like the saved."

This miracle in Cana of Galilee is rich in truth -- a sign - not speculation about the end-time, but a sign pointing us to who God is for this time. When we "Understand the Signs" we, unlike the Christians Nietzsche observed, will "sing better songs." "Understand The Signs" and your song will be as sweet as His most excellent wine.

Grace to you.

Stephen N. Johnson

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