

9. THE SON OF GOD'S FIRST SIGN (2:1-12)

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION OR STUDY

1. Since the last study, have you had any opportunities to share the Gospel? What was that experience like?

Every good story has a catalyst or inciting incident – an event that sets the main plot into action. But before you first have the introduction or the set up of the story where you are introduced to the protagonist, the main character or hero, who is just living an ordinary life, going about everyday business until something happens and everything changes. That is kind of what is happening in this the greatest story ever told, as presented in the Gospel of John. We have already been introduced to our protagonist from 1:1, Jesus Christ. However, He is not an ordinary man, but is none other than the Son of God, the Creator of everything.

A good introduction also introduces us to the antagonists, the supporting characters in the story. In the previous two studies we were introduced to six such characters: John the Baptist, Andrew, an unnamed disciple (probably John), Peter, Philip, and Nathanael. As the story unfolds in 2:1-12, we are introduced to the next antagonist, Mary, the mother of Jesus.

Another important element to a good introduction is the setting of the scene and details of earlier events that give further information about the protagonist or explain the catalyst. In John 1 we learned of Jesus' baptism and the role that John the Baptist played in pointing people to Him, as well as the calling of the first disciples. We are also given details about the location. In John 1 Jesus is baptised at Bethany beyond the Jordan where He calls His first disciples, and then moves up to the region of Galilee (where specifically is not mentioned), where He calls a further two disciples.

Before we dig into the text itself, we will consider several geographical and historical matters that help to set the scene for the catalyst that follows.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

As John 2 opens, we learn that sometime in their journey to Galilee, Jesus and His disciples arrive in Cana for a wedding (2:1). After the wedding, they then go to Capernaum (2:12).

Cana

The town of Cana is only mentioned in the Gospel of John and nowhere else in the New Testament. Its exact location is unknown, but scholars and archaeologists agree that Cana is only half a days journey from Capernaum (cf. 4:46-54), and is about 14,5 km north of Nazareth. The name means "place of reeds" and its typography includes marshes. Cana is also the setting of a second sign by Jesus in 4:46-53

when He performed the long-distance healing the son of the official from Capernaum. The only other mention of Cana is in 21:2 where we are told that it is Nathanael's home town.

Capernaum

Capernaum means "village of Nahum", and Nahum in turn means "comfort", making the town's name to mean "village of comfort". This is quite appropriate considering this is the town that Jesus used as His base for His ministry, performing several healings here and giving some of His important teachings. However, the people were generally unresponsive, leading Him to condemn the town for its unbelief (cf. Mat. 11:20-24).

Capernaum is located in the tribal territory of Naphthali on the northern shore of the Sea of Galilee. Five disciples lived here; Peter, Andrew, James, John, and Matthew (cf. Mat. 4:18-22; Luke 5:27-32). Jesus' move to Capernaum is also the fulfillment of a prophecy given by Isaiah (cf. Isa. 9:1-7; Mat. 4:13-16). It also exposed the Kingdom of God to an international audience, as the International Highway linking Asia, Africa, and Europe passed very close to the town. Merchants from throughout the world used this highway to transport their goods (i.e. olive oil, aromatic spices, and wool). It was also the road by which the latest news would be spread across the region.

Archaeologists have uncovered a synagogue in the town dating from AD 300, which is built on top of the foundations of an earlier synagogue dating back to the time of Christ. They have also uncovered a building that is traditionally believed to be Peter's house.

Weddings in Biblical Times

The groom would arrive the night before the wedding, accompanied by the bridesmaids and was served by male companions, one of whom served as his best man (cf. Jud. 14:20; John 3:29). Upon his arrival, the groom's family would begin a feast (cf. Mat. 22:2) which would typically last for seven days (cf. Jud. 14:12). The next morning, the groom's men go and fetch the bride, who would be carried into the wedding feast in a sedan chair. The marriage would be consummated in a bridal chamber (cf. Psa. 19:5; Joel 2:16) on the first night of the banquet. A steward was placed in charge of the arrangements for the feast, orchestrating the festivities and serving the wine and other refreshments. To separate these gatherings from others, a special wedding garment was required for admission (cf. Mat. 22:11-13). The host would invite as many guests as possible, including distinguished guests like prominent teachers.³⁴

The women's quarters were located near the place where the wine was stored, thus when the wine runs out, Mary is in the vicinity of the stewards and learns of the shortage of wine before word reaches Jesus and the other guests.³⁵

INTRODUCTION

In verse 1 we learn that the wedding feast takes place on the third day. This is not a reference to the third day of the week as some commentators claim, as weddings did not occur on the third day of the

³⁴ NIV Archaeology Study Bible notes; and Matthews, Victor H.. 1991. *Manners and Customs in the Bible* (Rev. ed.). Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers.

³⁵ Keener, pp267-268.

week – virgin weddings were held on Wednesdays (4th day of the week), whereas weddings of widows and widowers took place on Thursdays (5th day of the week). It, therefore, more than likely refers to the third day following the discussion with Nathanael and is probably on the Wednesday.³⁶

Another explanation for John referring to the third day is that he using a writing technique used by ancient writers to bracket segments of information together by starting and ending with the same note, what is known as an *inclusio*. Thus John may be using this designation to point toward 2:10 and link this account with the prediction of Jesus' death and resurrection.³⁷

We are also told that Mary was present. This implies that Mary somehow knows the family, though no specifics are given how (see last study where a couple of options are discussed). Based on Mary's interaction with the servants, there is also the possibility that she has some authority or role at the wedding.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION OR STUDY

1. The fact that Jesus attends a wedding implies that He was not afraid of attending fun family events. However, in the African and Western contexts, attending family weddings can have some challenges. What are some of the challenges that you have faced when attending weddings?
2. How should you as a Christian handle such situations? Do you attend and participate in all the activities? Do you not attend at all in order to avoid a sinful or difficult situation? Or is there a response somewhere between the two that keeps both God and the family happy?

A PROBLEM

The party runs out of wine. This is a social embarrassment for the host as the family has an obligation to provide all meals and drink for the seven day feast and has to meet a high social standard. But this problem starts a very curious conversation between Mary and Jesus.

Mary begins by turning to Jesus and stating that there is no wine. Why would she make such a statement to Jesus? There are at least three possible reasons:

1. It is likely that Joseph is already dead by this time. This would make Jesus the head of the home. So if Mary does indeed have a role or is a close friend of the bride or groom, she turns to Jesus to appeal to Him as the head of her home to do something about the situation.
2. Unlike with modern weddings where guests are literally guests who are served at a wedding feast, in Biblical times, non-distinguished wedding guests had a responsibility to protect the host from embarrassment. So Mary turns to Jesus to do something to help defray the expense of the wedding with their gifts, and it seems that their host needs a gift of wine to avoid shame.³⁸

³⁶ Keener, p268.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ *Ibid.*

3. Because Mary knows who Jesus is, perhaps she wants him to do something extraordinary. The question, however, is why would she presume that He would do something extraordinary? After all, this is the first of His signs. She has not witnessed anything before. Perhaps she has grown impatient and is tired of waiting for the great things He is destined to do.

Whatever her reason, be it any one or a combination of them, Jesus knows her heart and knows her intentions. What is important to note here is that Mary does not command Jesus what to do, but rather implies that she would like Jesus to help with the situation.

Jesus' responds, "*Woman, what does that have to do with me?*" This question has often left people wondering if Jesus is being rude to His mother, but the contrary is true. The term "woman" that Jesus uses is actually a respectful address similar to using the terms "Sir" or "Ma'am" today. He used similar language on the cross when He addressed her (19:26) and to Mary Magdalene at the tomb (20:13).

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION OR STUDY

1. When the wine runs out, Mary's immediate response is to ask Jesus to resolve the issue. What does this teach us about how we ought to respond when we encounter problems?
2. Many people these days live with shame or seek to shame others. How does the Jewish culture of Jesus' day to protect the shame of one's host challenge the honour and shame culture of today?

Then Jesus makes a strange comment, "*My hour has not yet come*".

The word "*hour*" in this context refers to Jesus' death on the cross and His exaltation that goes with it (see 7:6, 30; 8:20; 12:23, 27; 13:1). This meaning is clearly seen in His high priestly prayer in 17:1, when He prays, "*The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified*" From that point on, with Jesus on the brink of death, the hour is said to have arrived.³⁹ In effect Jesus is saying, "Once I begin doing miracles, I begin the road to the cross".

Carson states it well in his commentary when he writes, "We must not avoid the conclusion that Jesus by rebuking His mother, however courteously, declares at the beginning of His ministry, His utter freedom from any kind of human advice, agenda or manipulation. He embarked on His ministry, the purpose of His coming; His only lodestar is His heavenly Father's will (5:30; 8:29)."⁴⁰

It is interesting that even after Jesus tells Mary not involve Him, she still says to the servants, "*Do whatever He tells you*". This shows Mary's faith in Jesus that He is able to resolve the situation and save hosts from shame. However, she has no idea how He will deal with the situation. Despite her knowing that Jesus is Immanuel, she could not possibly expect that Jesus would change water into wine. Rather it is similar to the disciples interaction with Jesus before the feeding of the five thousand – simply making Him aware of a problem and then trusting Him to resolve it (cf. 6:1-15). Mary has the utmost confidence

³⁹ Carson, p171.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

in Jesus. She knows He is able to solve the problem. However, although she is His mother, she remains submissive as she does not tell Him what to do or take control. She brings the matter to His attention, tells the servants to obey Him, and then leaves it to His discretion.

What is also important to note is that although Jesus does solve the problem as Mary asks, He does not show the public that He performed the miracle. The master, the bridegroom and guests do not know that Jesus is the one who supplies the wine or how He supplies it. Only the servants knew, and it is apparent they do not tell others at the feast. Here we see Jesus as a servant. His goal is not to be a celebrity, but a servant (see Mark 10:45). He also shows that although pressed by His mother that there is a time and definite plan for His ministry and does not hasten that time forward.

THE SOLUTION (THE CLIMAX OF THE STORY)

And Jesus does indeed do something about the situation. The Bible tells us there are six stone water jars there that were used for Jewish purification rites. We know that the Jews were very particular about when people considered clean or unclean. It was tradition for Jews to wash regularly as part of the process of ritual purification. Although Pharisees forbade storing such water in jars, some Jews were less strict, thus these jars were being reserved for ritual purposes. Using the jars for another purpose would defile them, showing that Jesus is more concerned with his friend's wedding than for contemporary ritual.⁴¹ The practice of purification is alluded to in Matthew 15:2. According to Mosaic law all kinds of items were to be purified, including pots, pans, houses, clothes, if anything unclean touched them (Lev. 11-15).

If one does the math, six jars each holding about 20 or 30 gallons (20 gallons = 75 litres, 30 gallons = 113 litres) and converting gallons to litres, that is between 450 and 678 litres of water. That is enough water to fill a Jewish immersion pool used for ceremonial purification (several of these pools have been uncovered in Cana by archaeologists). Jesus told them to fill the jars and they filled them to the brim. Jesus does not do things halfway. He does not leave any room for doubt. The servants drew some and took it to the master of the feast as Jesus instructed. The water was turned into wine and from master's interaction with the bridegroom we know that it was the finest wine. It had to be because the Creator and Sustainer of heaven and earth, who has dominion over everything changed water to wine. Remember John 1:3 *"All things were made through Him and without Him was not anything made that was made"*.

One question people often ask here is, did Jesus turn the water into alcoholic wine or non-alcoholic grape juice? The Greek word implies wine, however, wine's alcoholic content then is not as high as today as it simply served to preserve the wine – it was also merely fermented and so contained naturally occurring alcohol only without any being added as is typically done today. It most certainly would never have been distilled wine. What we see here then is that Jesus is above time and time restraints as it would normally take a long time for grapes to ferment and become wine. However, He turned this water to wine immediately. There was no lapse in time. None is required because as Creator Jesus simply wills it to happen. He does not need to stand over it and recite some "magic" words. Nor does He ask to taste

⁴¹ Keener, p269.

it first to make sure that it “worked”. He confidently tells them to draw it and take it to the master of the feast.

In verse 11 we get to the crux of this specific story. Through His first sign, Jesus manifests His glory. He reveals His *Doxa* (i.e. His brightness, honour, opinion, reputation, or outward human splendour). Chiefly the word refers to the revelation of God in Christ: “*the Son is the radiance of God’s glory*” (Heb. 1:3; cf. John 1:14). As a result, His disciples believe in Him. This does not mean that they did not believe in Him before, but rather their immature faith is confirmed and validated. Jesus told Nathanael just three days earlier that he would see greater things, and here His prophecy is already being fulfilled. The sign is simple and private.

This ties in with John’s purpose for the writing the book John, “*that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name*” (20:30-31).

This is the first of seven signs recorded in the gospel that reveal Christ’s glory. Yet these seven signs pale in comparison to the glory that is to come at the end of His earthly ministry when He is crucified. His hour is yet to come, but the journey towards that hour has begun here in 2:1-12.

TO CAPERNAUM

This section ends with Jesus, His mother, His brothers and disciples going down to Capernaum. If you look at a map you will see that Capernaum is north-east of Cana but Capernaum is on banks of the Sea of Galilee, so one would have to go downhill from Cana.

CONCLUSION

So Cana in Galilee is where Jesus begins the process of revealing His glory and sends a strong message to Jesus’ early disciples, and indeed any others who spoke of the event, that Jesus truly is the Son of God. Moses’ first sign was turning water into blood (cf. Exo. 7:20), Jesus’ is turning water into wine.⁴²

As chapter 2 opens, only seven people in the story so far are aware of who Jesus is, but as the story unfolds, the catalyst thrusts Jesus into the limelight and everything changes from this point onwards.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION OR STUDY

1. Why do you think Jesus chose this as the first occasion to “*reveal his glory*” (v11)?
2. How does this first sign help bolster your faith and understanding of who Jesus is so that you may believe and have eternal life in His name?

42 Keener, p269.