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The First Sign

These Things are Written that You May Believe Series

John 2:1-12

Pastor Bryan Clark

John, the Gospel writer, has told us that the eternal Son of God, the Creator of the universe, at a point in time actually took on human flesh and walked on this earth. John the Baptist publicly announced Him as the Lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world. Jesus has now gathered disciples, and John will reveal what he calls a *sign*, the first evidence to validate his claim that Jesus was actually God in the flesh. And in so doing, we get a glimpse of what He came to do for us. So, if you have a Bible, turn with us to the Gospel of John, Chapter 2. Verse 1:

On the third day there was a wedding in Cana of Galilee, and the mother of Jesus was there; and both Jesus and His disciples were invited to the wedding. (*NASB, John 2:1-2)

So, **the third day**—this has gotten confusing in John's Gospel. We keep getting “the next day,…” “the next day;” it all gets kind of confusing. But most scholars agree that the *first day* started when the delegation came to John the Baptist, and basically four days have passed. So then, the trip up to Cana—it's about nine miles north of Nazareth—would have taken two days, and that would make this the *seventh day*. So that will become significant; we'll talk about it in a few minutes.

On the third day there was a wedding in Cana. Cana is a small village up in the hills, but to really understand the story, you do have to understand a Jewish wedding. This is not like it's an hour ceremony that they attended and went on their way. Jewish weddings weren't like that. As a matter of fact, a Jewish couple would first become betrothed. A betrothal was actually kind of like our engagement, but far more binding. To get out of a betrothal, you actually had to go through a legal divorce. So a couple was betrothed, and on a day of the groom's choosing—commonly at night to add to kind of the pageantry of all this—he would put together a procession. If it was dark, they would light torches. They would make their way through the streets and end up at the house of the bride. She would be picked up, taken back to the groom's house; there would be some sort of a ceremony, and then the party would begin. And it was an all-out party. It ran for days, up to seven days. So we're not talking about just showing up for an hour ceremony and on your way. We're talking about—in a world where life was pretty difficult and not a lot of happiness—weddings were like the highlight of the year for these people.

So, there's a wedding in Cana and **the mother of Jesus was there**. One of the consistent patterns of John is that nowhere in his gospel does he ever refer to Mary as Mary. She's just simply referred to as *the mother of Jesus*. He never refers to himself by name; he never refers to Mary by name—and probably the primary reason is because the Gospel isn't about Mary. The Gospel isn't about John. It's about Jesus, and so he consistently stays focused on Jesus. So, the mother of Jesus is there; Jesus is there, and His disciples are there. And it tells us, specifically, Jesus was invited to the wedding. We know who His disciples are at this point, because He picked them up in the previous paragraph. So, we know this is Andrew; it's John himself—so he's writing as an eyewitness—it's Peter; it's Phillip; and it's Nathanael. There's some discussion as to how Jesus and the disciples got invited. Most people think it was a relative. That seems most likely. It's not that far between Nazareth and Cana. Mary seems to have a vested interest in the crisis at the wedding so that makes the most sense. The other possibility is that, we find out later in the Gospel of John, that Nathanael was actually from Cana, so

he could have been the point of invitation. But, probably, most likely, these are some of Jesus' relatives. Verse 3:

When the wine ran out, the mother of Jesus said, "They have no wine."

Now, again, to understand this story, you really have to understand the Jewish wedding feast. This isn't like they're running short on refreshments. It was the responsibility of the bride and groom to provide wine and food for the duration of the party. Again, understand this was like a highlight of the year, and these people loved these celebrations. For someone who was poorer, which this was a pretty poor village, they often would save a lifetime to have enough money to provide wine and food for the duration of the feast. In an honor/shame culture, which this was, to run out of wine was a social disgrace; it was a point of shame. It was entirely possible this couple would be shamed for the duration of their marriage because of it. It was even possible for attenders to file a lawsuit against them for running out of wine. So, you kind of get the seriousness of this. So, when Mary comes to Jesus, there's certainly a note of panic in her voice. **"They have no wine."** This is a disaster. And, again, most people think it's because it was a relative that Mary was so involved in this. Verse 4:

And Jesus said to her, "Woman, what does that have to do with us? My hour has not yet come."

So, this is a difficult verse to translate, because the word **Woman** just sounds kind of, in our world, so disrespectful. But this isn't a disrespectful Greek word at all. The problem is we simply don't have an English word to use. Different translations use different words, but we really don't have a word that captures it. It's a strong term, but a very respectful term. So, to give you some sense of that, it's the word Jesus used for the woman at the well. It's the term Jesus used in John 8 for the woman caught in adultery. When Jesus is hanging from the cross and He addresses His mother, it's the word He uses. When Jesus encounters Mary Magdalene after the resurrection at the tomb, it's the word He uses. So, you just kind of get a sense this isn't a disrespectful word, but it's a pretty strong term. And He's basically asking the question, "Why did you come to us?"

At this point in the story, it's fairly evident Joseph is dead. So Jesus, as the oldest son, would have carried a lot of responsibility. But Jesus is about thirty years of age, and part of what He has to communicate to Mary is it's time to fulfill the mission for which He came. He's reminding her that who He was, as the eternal Son of God in the flesh, was not merely there for their convenience, but there was a greater mission, and that would have to now take priority. It's really hard in these Gospels to figure out what exactly people understood to be true of Jesus. So, for example, people go back to Mary and the announcement by the angel and the virgin birth and all of that, and they just assume she understood it all. But that was thirty years ago, and how do you actually come to grips with the fact that your son is the eternal God of the universe in human flesh? So, the process is just trying to come to grips with what, exactly, does that mean?

We have no biblical evidence that Jesus had performed any miracles up to this point. The closest thing was seeing Nathanael under the tree, and Jesus says, *"You're going to see so much more than that."* So, was Mary asking for a miracle? Given Jesus' response, I would suggest probably so. She's saying, "Do something!" It's like, "You're God in the flesh, do something! We're out of wine." But what Jesus is saying is that, as soon as He starts doing miracles and revealing who He is as the long-awaited Messiah, things are going to heat up quickly. So, there's great strategy in how Jesus reveals Himself until it's the appointed hour for His arrest and crucifixion. So, **hour** here is like when we

would say, “It's someone's finest hour.” It's just a term to say it was not yet time to reveal Himself and then, ultimately, go to the cross. I think Mary clearly understands what He says. Verse 5:

His mother said to the servants, “Whatever He says to you, do it.”

So, Mary understands what He said and whatever He decides, that's up to Him. That's essentially what she says. Verse 6:

Now, there were six stone waterpots set there for the Jewish custom of purification, containing twenty or thirty gallons each.

So, some people find significance in the number **six**. That's really hard to figure out. What we do know for certain is this was put forth in the book of Leviticus as a requirement for ritual cleansing. And so these pots are full of water, and they were to be stone pots. The book of Leviticus is clear. Clay pots, over time, could contaminate the water, so they were required to use stone pots, and they were large—**twenty to thirty gallons apiece**. So John specifically identifies they're **for the Jewish custom of purification**. We'll come back to that in a little bit. Verse 7:

Jesus said to them, “Fill the waterpots with water.” So they filled them up to the brim.

Now that's not to imply they didn't already have water in them. That's the whole point. They're **waterpots** with water so people could cleanse themselves for the feast. What Jesus is saying is they're not full to the brim. Now, I think John gives us these details in order to make sure we understand what's about to happen was not some sort of a parlor trick. In other words, nobody snuck in, poured some wine, and nobody knew it. The servants are to fill these pots all the way to the brim, so it would be obvious they're filled to the brim with water. There's no trick going on here. Verse 8:

And He said to them, “Draw *some* out now and take it to the headwaiter.” So they took it to *him*. When the headwaiter tasted the water which had become wine, and did not know where it came from (but the servants who had drawn the water knew), (Vs. 8-9a)

This is the first time we, as readers, understand what's going on here. This is a miracle—the water has been turned to wine. The servants who filled the pots to the brim, knew they were full of water, so they take some out, and take it to the headwaiter. The headwaiter does not know that the water has been turned to wine, but John very strategically puts in parentheses (*but the servants knew*). Again, the point of that is: this isn't a parlor trick. Jesus wasn't up to something. They were aware that they filled the pot with water. Now the water has become wine. This is kind of a quiet miracle, but the servants knew, and the disciples knew. So, the headwaiter gets the wine, and...

The headwaiter then called the bridegroom and said to him, “Every man serves the good wine first, and when the people have drunk freely, then he serves the poorer wine; but you have kept the good wine until now.” (Vs. 9b-10)

What he's talking about is, it was common practice that you served the best wine you have first. And, once people have drunk freely—the Greek word means are inebriated; they are intoxicated. So basically, there's no other way to interpret this. Once they've had quite a bit to drink, then they break out the watered-down wine and, at that point, they don't really realize it. That's what he's referring to. So he's quite surprised that the wine that's brought to him well into the feast is actually superior wine—really good wine! Verse 11:

This beginning of His signs Jesus did in Cana of Galilee,

Again, the idea of this being really quality wine carries the idea this was not watered down. This isn't some sort of a trick; nobody's up to something. The pots weren't half full of wine; this is pure, undiluted wine—and John identifies it as the first **sign**. This is the language John will use in his Gospel. A **sign** is to unveil, to pull back the curtain, to reveal something. So again, John has made some audacious claims, but he's not just asking people to believe him because he said so. He's going to go about providing evidence that this is not just an ordinary man; this is God in the flesh. **Sign** number one is: He turned the water to wine...

...and manifested His glory,

Remember what he said in chapter 1, verse 14—that *the Word became flesh and dwelt among us and He manifested His glory*. So John is saying, as an eyewitness he saw that, and this is just the first of many examples that he'll present.

...and His disciples believed in Him.

We've reminded ourselves, that word **believe** is a really important word to John. It's at the core of what he's wanting to accomplish in his Gospel, so it's significant. These disciples were eyewitnesses to what happened and the result of that is they **believed**.

So, I can imagine a skeptic coming back and just questioning this as some sort of a fictitious, made-up story. So what's helpful about this is, first of all, we know who these disciples are—they're named! We also know historically that these disciples ultimately died for the sake of believing this is true. John is the only one of these that possibly wasn't ultimately martyred or executed for their belief in Jesus. We know that historically. It is true that people will die for a lie. There are world religions that promote all kinds of things that aren't true, but the followers believe they're true. And so, yes, they will die for a lie. But we know that people will not die for what they know is a lie. So, either these disciples, as eyewitnesses, believed to such a degree they ultimately were executed for their belief or they knew that it was a hoax and a lie. The fact that they ultimately gave their lives for what they believed to be true, gives great credibility to the story.

It's also true that a skeptic would say, “Well, that's just the Bible.” I hear people say, “Well, that's just what the Bible says,” to which I would respond, “What do you mean by that?” The Gospels are historical documents. Just because they're found between leather covers doesn't suddenly disqualify them as historical documents. Every test or criteria we use to validate historical documents demonstrate that the Gospels are highly reliable historical documents. As a matter of fact, there's no question they are far superior to any other historical record we have. One scholar said, “If you're going to dismiss the Gospels as not being reliable historical records, you would have to be a historical agnostic, because they're so far superior to any other record of history, you couldn't believe anything!” But the fact is, we do believe a lot of other sources. We teach it as fact in our schools and universities. Yet, without question, in terms of number of manuscripts, quality of manuscripts, age of manuscripts, the Gospels are dramatically more reliable than any other historical document.

So, last week I encouraged us—if you are a seeker, if you're genuinely trying to figure out what's true, trying to figure out what will satisfy that longing deep in your heart—for that to really be a true search, you have to be willing to be intellectually honest. You can't just summarily dismiss things without

basis. These disciples were eyewitnesses; they believed it so much they were willing to die for it. That's a high level of credibility. There is no basis by which we could dismiss the Gospels as somehow being inaccurate or unreliable. This is the first of many signs, but is important to consider. Verse 12:

After this He went down to Capernaum, He and His mother and His brothers and His disciples; and they stayed there a few days.

So, **Capernaum** is going to be home base for much of Jesus' public ministry. This is a relatively quiet kind of a private miracle—His disciples, the servants. But what happens in the next story will change that dramatically—and that we'll talk about next week.

Pretty much all scholars are in complete agreement that this story is about Jesus doing a miracle to turn the water to wine as the *first sign*, the validation that He is indeed who John claims Him to be. Where there is much more discussion is whether or not there is more symbolism to what happened, or is it just a simple story? So, there's a wide range of opinions; you just need to know that. I'm going to share with you what I think makes the most sense, but it's fair to say there are a lot of different opinions, and we shouldn't be overly dogmatic on any of these.

But is there more to the story than just that? Well, first of all, it's very interesting that this is identified *on the seventh day*. Sounds familiar, doesn't it? John opens his Gospel, "In the beginning." What do we have in the beginning? Seven days! "*In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God. And all that is created was created by the Word.*" So, the Gospel of John opens by going back to Genesis and the original seven-day creation story. We've talked about Jesus being the author of the original creation, and He will be the author of re-creation, regeneration, new life, a new story—which is why He came. You remember the seventh day in Genesis was the day that God rested. He didn't rest because he was exhausted; He rested because the work was done. This, then, would move into this concept of the Sabbath, and we would learn in the New Testament that the fulfillment of the Sabbath was not to continue to celebrate a day, but rather to realize the fulfillment was that God had completed the work, and we rest in the finished work of Jesus. So, all of that begins to create some symbolism in this whole story.

It's not just happenstance that this happened at a wedding. What happens in Genesis, chapter 2? It's the first marriage, which is meant to be a picture of the beautiful love relationship between a husband and a wife, that is a picture of the ultimate relationship between God and His people. We've been talking about this longing or this searching of what's deep within us. Ultimately, that's what we're looking for. We were made for a love relationship with God that's pictured in marriage. We even find out at the end of the book of Revelation, there is the great marriage feast of the Lamb coming, and it will be the culmination of the story before God ushers in the new heaven and the new earth. It's not just some sort of a coincidence that this is a wedding. This is re-creation; this is a new picture. This is a reminder of the intimacy that God wants to have with us as sinful men and women.

You get, then, to verse 6, and the **waterpots**. John goes to great lengths to make sure we understand these are ceremonial, ritual waterpots. What are they full of? They're full of water. They couldn't actually cleanse people; it was ceremonial. It was just meant to be an imagery. What did John the Baptist say? I baptize you with what? With water. "I can't do anything but just symbolically cleanse you, but the One coming after me will baptize you with the Holy Spirit. He's the One that can regenerate you. He's the One that can "reborn" you. He's the One that can give you new life." So, here, we're at a wedding; we're out of wine. All there is available is water. Water can't do it. No amount of religious activity can cleanse someone before a holy God. So Jesus says, "Fill it all the

way up.” You might say *full-filled* all the way to the top, as He *fulfilled* the promise of the old covenant. The water changed to what? To wine. And what will wine picture in the New Testament? The blood of the Lamb, shed for the sins of the world. The symbolism is: what the law could not do, what the ceremonial practices of religion could never do—it's just water—but Jesus would convert the water to wine. And it would be wine—the blood of Jesus—ultimately, that would be shed in fulfillment of the old covenant in order to regenerate, in order to rebirth, in order to write a new story—just as He promised Peter He would do.

When the headwaiter is surprised by the quality of the wine, what he identifies is that this wine is far superior to the first wine. In other words, the new covenant will be superior to the old covenant. What the old covenant could never do, the new covenant would do. The new is superior to the old. Jesus promised that He would write for Peter a new story. He promised He'd be the fulfillment of the ladder in Jacob's dream that would make it possible to connect heaven and earth—sinful men and women—with a holy God. What would be required for that would be conversion—new life—which would require the shedding of the blood and the ushering in of the new that will replace the old.

The story that follows will remind us this will come with a great battle, as the religious leaders are not letting go without a fight. The story will move, though, to one who would come to understand new life requires one to be born again. I think the passages that follow confirm this is the correct understanding of the symbolism that goes beyond just the miracle of water to wine. The promise that Jesus gives, the claim that John is making, is that Jesus came to offer that which will satisfy the longing deep within our souls, to offer us forgiveness of sin, to offer us a new story, to offer us this life, this intimacy with God that our souls long for. But it would require the water to wine; it would require the shedding of the blood that would usher in a new covenant and the forgiveness of sin that would be freely offered to those who choose to believe.

Our Father, we're thankful that, when we were lost with no hope, Jesus came to be the Savior of the world. Lord, we're just beginning to see glimpses in the Gospel of John that validate the claim that Jesus was, indeed, the long-awaited Messiah. God, open our hearts and our minds to be willing to see and hear the truth, that He might write a new story in us, both now and forever. In Jesus' name, Amen.

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(Video):

It was my birthday. It was a morning of a Husker game. By 7:00 a.m. we were drinking. We were hanging around downtown all day. It was probably about 20 hours of drinking, and we ended up on a rooftop bar. It was probably like midnight, and I think we'd just had some tequila shots. We were all sitting around at a table and a stranger was sitting there. I don't know; he must have said something. I took the chair I was sitting on and hit him in the face with it.

The first time I ever took a drink, I was 11. It started once a month, and then it turned into every weekend, and then it was every day, and then I wasn't coming home for days. And, by the time I was 16, I was pretty gone. Like, I was—alcohol was my life—you know? That's all I cared about.

So my friend, he had a lawyer, and the next week we sat down together and talked for a while. It was pretty emotional. Towards the end of the conversation, he looked me in the eye and he said I had no soul, and he handed me a card and said I needed to go to Berean!

Church, for me, growing up, was never—we didn't do it. I mean, nobody; religion was—we never even talked about it. I went to Berean. Didn't know what to expect, but, when I finally got there and I sat down, it felt good to be there.

(In the background, listening to Pastor Clark speak): “Some of you here this morning, you're still trying to sort this out. And I understand that. We're actually very happy that you're here.”

I just kept going every week. I had just this need. I wanted to go. It's—it helped me so much!

Three weeks later I was being arraigned, and I remember standing in court with my lawyer, and they were charging me with felony assault 'cause I had busted the guy's eye socket! Felony assault was 10 years in jail. The only thing I could think was that everything I had worked for to that point was gone. I mean, my life is over. For the next three months, I couldn't sleep. I was just trying to figure out anything I could do to help. I was doing AA's three times a week. I was doing IOP, which is intensive outpatient anger management. I don't think I had time for anything else—and then, of course, doing church.

(In the background, listening to Pastor Clark speak): But a true seeker really wants to know the truth. There's genuine, authentic longings and desires deep within them and they're wondering, “Is it possible that Jesus could be what I'm looking for?”

And they talked about how we were all sinners, and, I mean, I was, definitely! I made all the bad choices. And now hearing how Jesus had died for our sins. And He paid that debt for us. And we don't really have to worry about that. But the reality was I'd be standing in front of a judge in three months, and he was going to be the one to decide whether my life was over.

The day of my hearing came, and I got called to the stand. The judge was looking at a screen and he said: “Misdemeanor assault is a \$500 fine,” and I remember looking at my lawyer...like...and he just pointed “Up” and that was it. I paid my fine and I was a free man. Two weeks ago, it was my birthday and it also marked six years of sobriety for me.

I actually have to stand in front of the judge one more time, and I know I'm guilty. But this time I know what's going to happen. I know I'm not going to get what I deserve because Jesus had died for my sins. He had paid my debt, and now I'm a free man. Grace is not getting what you deserve and that's through Jesus—and we just have to believe that He did that for us and we're saved. And I do accept that. I do!

*(In the background the words of this song are heard): The Lamb of God, in my place;
Your life poured out, my sin erased. It was my death You died...*

*As it turns out, my lawyer was wrong. I do have a soul...
and the reason that it's free is because of Jesus!*

The First Sign
That You May Believe
John 2:1-12
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Opening Discussion

1. Do you believe the Gospels are reliable historical documents? Why or why not? Some dismiss the Gospels simply because they are part of the Bible. How would you respond to someone who makes that claim?
2. What has John claimed to be true about Jesus so far in his Gospel? Is he asking us to simply believe because he said so or is he making a claim he intends to validate with historical evidence?

Bible Study

1. Read John 2:1-12. Locate a map of Israel in the first century and try to locate the various towns and villages in this story.
2. What do you know about Jewish wedding celebrations and why was running out of wine such a big deal?
3. What does Jesus mean by his reply to his mother in 2:4? What does He mean by His “hour?”
4. How does John record this miracle to be clear it was actually a miracle and not some sort of trick Jesus pulled off?
5. How does John summarize this story in 2:11? What is the impact on those who were his disciples at this point?
6. How does the fact that His disciples eventually died for what they believed to be true add credibility to these miracles?
7. What is the symbolism in this story that goes beyond just the details? Is there more to what Jesus was doing than just showing His disciples a miracle?

Application

1. Do you believe this story is true? Why or why not? If it is true, then why does that matter to you today?

2. What does the symbolism of this story tell you about what Jesus wants to offer you?