

The Life of the Party

In the name of him who brings his people pleasure eternal, dear friends in Christ: The first miracle of Jesus at the wedding of Cana has long been the source of confusion, disappointment, and maybe even a little bit of embarrassment for many Christians and Christian teachers. They would rather that our Lord's first miracle be something big and impressive like stopping a raging storm with a single spoken word or feeding thousands of people with a couple loaves of bread. That, or at least it could've been a miracle that revealed the heart of God toward fallen and suffering mankind; like the cleansing of a leper or the healing of someone who was sick—or even go all the way and raise someone from the dead. Either way, it would have been great, they think, to have for the first miracle something that would have really set the tone for Jesus' ministry and mission. But no; instead of something grand and glorious or tender and compassionate we get a miracle in which Jesus provides the drinks for a party. And not just drinks; but specifically, wine laden with alcohol—that really sticks in the craw of some people, especially our Christian friends who condemn the use of alcohol in any form. They really hate that this is Jesus' first miracle. Why, they want to know, couldn't it have been something that said, "Jesus the Almighty Lord of creation" or "Jesus the healer and redeemer"? Why did it have to be something that said instead "Jesus the bartender", or "Jesus the party animal", or (my favorite) "Jesus the life of the party"?

As it turns out, there is a good reason for it – several, in fact. Jesus very deliberately chose this for his first miracle, and to understand why you have to know that the miracles of Jesus are always something more than merely a demonstration of divine power: they all pack a spiritual message. In his Gospel, John always calls the miraculous works of Jesus "signs"; that is, they all have something to say about who Jesus is and what he has come to do. This first miracle is no exception. So, what is the message here? Well, the traditional take on this is that Jesus wants the world to know that he approves of marriage and that he knows how to give lavish wedding gifts – both of which are true, I suppose; but then he would hardly need to perform a miracle to say that. No, I believe he had something else in mind.

You see, a Jew living in Jesus' time understood that the Holy Scriptures give certain common things a deeper symbolic meaning. Blood, for example, was often used as a symbol of guilt and the penalty that God extracts for sin. It represents God's wrath and judgment. So, for example, in the Old Testament story when Moses brought the first plague on Egypt and changed the water of the Nile to blood, the Lord was painting a graphic picture of the world we live in: one awash in blood, guilt, sin, and death. And then you remember that he delivered his people from bondage in that terrible place and took them to a land described as overflowing with milk and honey – two things that symbolize God's goodness and blessing. So, using the concepts of blood, and milk and honey, he was communicating a spiritual message.

Similarly, *wine* is something that the Scriptures invest with symbolic meaning; and strangely, it's used to two opposing ways. On one hand, it can be the cup of God's wrath: that is a harsh, astringent wine that God forces his enemies to drink. It makes them drunk and causes them to stagger and fall. It reveals their folly, shame, and nakedness. On the other hand, there is the cup of God's blessing that represents the Lord's abounding love for his people. It stands for his grace and favor. This is a good, well-aged wine—like the wine Isaiah says we will be served when we gather at the heavenly banquet table; which not coincidentally, is often pictured as a wedding banquet.

Wine can have this dual meaning because of the way it behaves naturally. When it is first produced and still quite young, it's so rough that it can hardly be consumed. High levels of tannic acid make it bitter and disagreeable. Consequently, new wine was pretty cheap—and so in Jesus' day it was the favorite of alcoholics, who are generally more interested in the effect than the taste. But in time, at least six months or more, the wine matures and becomes smooth and pleasant—a real joy to drink. Then, of course, it would be more expensive and harder to find. So, depending on its age, wine can be either good or bad, and therefore can represent both God's love or his wrath. Knowing that wine has this double symbolic value may help us understand the message of the miracle at Cana.

But there's a bit more here, and it has to do with a Jewish prayer called *Kiddush*. To a Jew, this would have been as well-known as our own common table prayer; he would have said it often, but it was especially associated with the Passover feast celebrating the delivery of God's people from bondage in Egypt (some of you may remember it from one of the times we celebrated a Seder meal on Maundy Thursday). For this prayer, the head of the house would raise a cup of the very best wine at the beginning of the feast and say, "Blessed are you, Lord God, King of the universe, Creator of the fruit of the vine." Understanding wine's symbolic meaning, we can see that this prayer sums up God's relationship with man: He's God, the Creator and King of the entire universe, which means he's so high above us that we can't imagine it; and yet for some incomprehensible reason he goes to great lengths to shower unlimited blessings on us – even giving us the gift of good wine from rotten grape juice – just to say how much he loves us. So when Jesus makes the wine at Cana, he's making a profound statement to anyone who knew the Kiddush prayer (and everyone there would have). He's saying, "Look! *I'm* the Creator of the fruit of the vine ... and therefore *I am* the Lord God, King of the Universe ... *and I love you*". Jesus begins his public ministry with a miracle that states exactly who he is and what he's about; and this, at least in part, is his reason for choosing this seemingly insignificant miracle to be his first.

But now, armed with these insights, let's return to the Wedding at Cana to see if we can uncover more of the message of this the first of his miraculous signs. It's interesting that we don't know anything at all about the bride or groom, or what connections they might have had with Mary, the mother of Jesus, though she seems to be more than just another guest at the affair. Nor do we know why the couple invited Jesus and his disciples. What we do know is that the groom had been responsible for purchasing the wine for the celebration. And knowing how important wine would have been for a wedding feast such as this, we can safely assume that the groom bought what he thought would be enough, and that he bought the very best wine he could afford. Weddings, then as today, are the kind of things that people tend to splurge for, and they usually end up spending more than they can comfortably afford. So, we have this groom on a very special day, doing the very best he can to please his new wife, his guests, and Jesus ... and now he's running out of wine. This is going to be a big embarrassment for him, so he's probably pretty worried. And not only is he running out of wine, we soon discover that the wine he's been serving isn't nearly as good as he thought it was.

And what I want you to see is that this groom is a lot like you and me. We too want to please our family, our friends, and Jesus. We do the very best we can to please them because we want to earn the love and respect. That's because we think of love as something that has to be earned. This is especially true of God's love. We want God to love us because of the things we do for him: because we're basically good and try to live right and follow his commandments, and go to church, and give him part of our income, and so on. We think that God *ought* to love us because we are worthy of his love—we've earned it. Bought and paid for it with our own good intentions and behavior. To use the symbolism of the wine, we try to buy God's cup of blessing. The only problem is that it's not for sale. When we go shopping like this what we buy instead is the wine of God's wrath.

The Wine of God's wrath is that long list of commands you have to obey in order to keep God happy, and it's all the penalties you pay for not obeying. And because we never obey the commands completely, we always want something else to do: we want another drink from the cup. We're like that rich man who came to Jesus asking what he had to do to be saved. He thought he had kept the law, but he had this nagging doubt that he hadn't done enough—and of course, he hadn't. So, like an alcoholic craving another drink, he thought he could measure up to the standard if he had just one more thing to do to satisfy God. But one more thing is never enough. It never makes up for past failures, and it is never done well enough itself. When you drink from the Cup of Wrath you just get more thirsty, so you want to buy more. You always need "just another drink".

And not only do we get it for ourselves: when we buy the Wine of Wrath that's all we have to serve to the other people in our lives. Think about it: is there someone out there who's really offended you? Someone with whom you are not on speaking terms? What would they have to do to gain your favor again? How much of the Wine of Wrath do you want them to drink to settle the score? And suppose they drank it all and did everything you required; would you be satisfied then? Or would you always remember

how they had hurt you and serve them another glass from time to time? When we serve the Wine of Wrath we never have to worry about running out: we order more every time we pray the Lord's prayer and say, "forgive me as I forgive others", which is to say, "serve me what I've been serving others".

Trafficking in the Wine of Wrath is a business we all participate in. The problem is that even though there's plenty of it to go around, there's never enough to satisfy our thirst. The more you drink, the more you want. So you drink more and serve more to those around you. And to top it all off, it isn't very good wine. We really hate the taste of the stuff—but somehow, we like the way it makes us feel even while it makes us sick. It does serve a purpose, though. It's harsh wine that makes us stagger and fall. It reveals our shame and our inability to meet the requirements of the Law. It puts us on a downward spiral until finally like an alcoholic on his last and worst binge, we hit the bottom where there is nothing to do but cry for help. It's when we're choking down the bitter dregs of the Cup of Wrath that we come to realize that by ourselves we can do nothing. Only Jesus can give us what we really need, so it is to Jesus that we plead for help.

So, it is that, when the wine is running out, Mary goes to Jesus to solve the problem. But Jesus waits until it's all gone before he acts, and when he does, he demonstrates the true nature of God's love and God's Cup of Blessing. First, note that he makes wine from water that was used for ceremonial cleansing; that is, water that wasn't used to wash away dirt, but rather to symbolize washing away sin. So Jesus makes the good wine, the symbol of God's love, from water that symbolized forgiveness. That's the way God's love works. He doesn't expect us to make up for our sin, we can't. Instead, he forgives our sin. Next, notice that he makes a lot of wine, far more than is needed for the celebration under way. And considering the source, we know that the supply is endless. That too is the nature of God's love: it has no limits. It's what the Psalmist had in mind when he said, "My cup overflows. Surely the Lord's goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life." We see too that the wine is absolutely free, just as is God's love; and we remember the words of Isaiah: "Come, all you who are thirsty, come to the waters; and you who have no money, come buy and eat! Come buy wine and milk without money and without cost. Why spend your money on what cannot satisfy you?"

Finally, we see that the wine is of the very best quality. It's flawless in character and perfect in balance; it exists to serve and give pleasure, to be cherished and enjoyed by all. So, Jesus doesn't allow the servants to stand around admiring his handiwork, he tells them, "Take it out and serve it!" And he tells you and me the same thing. God's love does no good stored inside jars—we aren't to be reservoirs for it, but pipelines that take it to others; so we forgive because we've been forgiven, serve because we have been served, and love because we are loved, and we know that God's love flows from a fountain that never dries up.

We don't have to drink from the Cup of God's Wrath anymore. The miracle Jesus performed at Cana is the same miracle he performs for you. He fills your cup until it overflows with his forgiveness and love, and he supplies you with more than enough to share with those around you - especially those who are still staggering under the influence of the Wine of God's Wrath. But now take a look inside the overflowing cup Jesus has poured for you and you'll make an amazing discovery. Why, it isn't wine at all—it's blood! But what's that doing in the Cup of Blessing? Blood has to do with guilt, condemnation, and the penalty of death. This looks more like the Cup of God's Wrath! ... And in a way, it is.

You see, Jesus drank the Wine of God's Wrath: he's the one who perfectly kept the Law, and he's the one who suffered all the penalties for our failure to obey. Now, it was a very difficult thing for him to do. We hear him praying in the garden, "Father, if there's any other way, let this cup pass from me." But, of course, there was no other way; so he accepted the cup his Father gave him and he drank long and deep. It made him stagger and fall. It made him bear our naked shame and disgrace. And still he willingly continued to drink from the cup that only made him thirst all the more for the love of God—which he could not have. And he continued to drink as he hung nailed to the cross until at last he saw the bottom of the empty cup, and he cried out, "I'm so thirsty!" Never before has there been a thirst so intense, because never before has there been anyone so completely drained of God's love. Responding to the Savior's cry, in an act as symbolic as it was cruel, one of the soldiers offered Jesus a sponge soaked in wine that had soured into vinegar. So, Jesus drank the last bitter mouthful and died.

The blood in our Cup of Blessing is the blood of Jesus poured out for us for the forgiveness of sin. In it we see the wrath of God poured out upon Jesus and God's love for us in what he suffered to save us. It is the same Cup of Blessing that is frequently offered from this altar—and it's not a symbol: it's the real thing. To we who often fall into temptation and find ourselves buying the Wine of Wrath, Jesus calls, "Come, drink deeply from this Cup of Blessing". To we who often serve the harsh wine to others, he intervenes and says, "Stop buying and serving that stuff! Take this and let it flow through you to the people around you".

So, taking all this into consideration, I hope you see that this first miracle of Jesus at the Wedding of Cana packs a powerful spiritual message. It's nothing less than a complete summary of the Christian message: namely that by ourselves we can only earn God's anger and judgment; but through Jesus and his bloody sacrifice on the cross, all the blessings of heaven are ours as a free gift. And his coming to this nameless couple to overturn what was soon to become for them an embarrassing social disaster, and his bringing increased joy and pleasure to their celebration is indicative of what he wants to do in each of our lives. He wants the wine of God's love to overflow from him to you – and from you to all the people you come into contact with. He wants to be the life of your party too. So, may it be that by God's grace we make this our daily prayer: Come, Lord Jesus, be our guest. In his holy name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!