

**The Light and the Lamp**  
**Part Three: Jesus the New Wine**  
**John 2.1-12**

**October 24**  
**David Henderson**

Walker Percy wrote an award winning novel called *The Moviegoer*, in which he tries to capture that sense of being caught in the staleness, the flatness, of life – “sunk,” as he says, “in the everydayness of his own life.” (13)

The 29 year old narrator of his story describes visiting his childhood home and sleeping in his childhood room:

It is a good place, but good as it is, my old place is used up (places get used up by rotatory and repetitive use) and when I awake, I awake in the grip of everydayness. Everydayness is the enemy. . . . Perhaps there was a time when everydayness was not too strong and one could break its grip by brute strength. Now nothing breaks it – but disaster. Only once in my life was the grip of everydayness broken: when I lay bleeding in a ditch. In a sudden rage and, as if I had been seized by a fit, I roll over and fall in a heap on the floor. . . . I vow: I'll be hanged if I'll be defeated by everydayness. (145)

It's not unlike the Slough of Despond into which Christian finds himself sinking in *The Pilgrim's Progress*, a best-selling book that came out three hundred years earlier.

Can you identify with that? Does that connect with you?

\* \* \*

Two Sundays ago we began a new sermon series that has us walking through the first three chapters of John's gospel, allowing them to stretch and challenge the way we think about Jesus and the way we think about ourselves.

**John 2.11**

What Jesus did here in Cana of Galilee was the first of the signs through which he revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him.

Sign: suggests a deeper layer of meaning

It is one thing that points to another deeper thing that is going on

An exit sign: it's a green sign with a name and an arrow, but it tells you that this exit ramp is the way to this destination

Something else is going on at another level

In the bible mysteries are always revealed and signs are always interpreted and understood

Not something hidden but something revealed

Let's see the way this event points to something else, something deeper

### **John 2.1-2**

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 2.3-5**

When the wine was gone, Jesus' mother said to him, "They have no more wine." "Woman, why do you involve me?" Jesus replied. "My hour has not yet come." His mother said to the servants, "Do whatever he tells you."

Up to this point in his life, as a child and as a young man, Jesus has related to his mother as Jesus, the son of Mary

Now, at the threshold of his ministry, he shifts, and relates to her as Jesus, the Son of God

Clearly she understands his divine nature, though it's clear she doesn't fully understand yet what his ministry will involve

### **John 2.6-7**

Nearby stood six stone water jars, the kind used by the Jews for ceremonial washing, each holding from twenty to thirty gallons. Jesus said to the servants, "Fill the jars with water"; so they filled them to the brim.

We're not told any other details about the house or its furnishings, so it's interesting that John zeroes in on this one specific detail. Somewhere, probably lined up just inside the courtyard where the festivities were held, were six huge stone jars, each one half the size of a fifty gallon drum – jars like these.

### **Ancient Stone Jars**



We're told the stone jars were used for ceremonial washing. These would have been filled with water and used by the guests to ritually wash their hands before and after every meal – not to get dirt and germs off, but to make themselves ritually pure before God before they ate their meal.

And because a wedding feast usually involved the whole village, and lasted for an entire week, that meant a lot of meals, which meant they needed a lot of water.

Why stone jars specifically? Because of ritual purity issues.

There were two kinds of jars used in ancient Israel, pottery jars molded from clay, which were a lot cheaper and much more common, and stone jars, like these, cut out of rock.

The reason Jewish people sometimes used stone rather than clay jars and bowls and cups was because they believed they could not be ritually contaminated. If clay jars came in contact with something or someone that was impure, they became impure too, and they would have to be smashed and thrown away. Not stone jars. The Jewish teachers believed they retained their purity no matter what they came in contact with.

Here's something really cool.

### **Stone Jar Workshop – Reina, Israel**



They're making new discoveries all the time in Israel and Palestine. Well, just five years ago archeologists discovered an ancient chalkstone workshop where they made stone cups and jars that's only two miles away from Cana.

It is not unreasonable to think that the stone jars at the wedding in Cana came from this workshop.

What surprised the archeologists when they rummaged around the ruins was discovering how many stone vessels had been made there. It was clear to them that many of the Jews in the area were really scrupulous about fulfilling the ritual purity laws.

Keep that in mind. We'll come back to that a bit later.

Jesus said to the servants, "Fill the jars with water"; so they filled them to the brim.

### **John 2.8-9**

Then he told them, "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.

This is really interesting. Why did Jesus have the servants take the wine to the master of the banquet?

Because the banquet master was the local wine expert, Of all the individuals who were there at the wedding, he was the person best qualified to evaluate the quality of the wine.

So to get a feel for what that moment might have been like, I went to our local wine expert. Some of you have had the opportunity to meet Andy Bridge, Tom and Beth's son, who is a doctor in Indy. Andy is also a certified sommelier, which means he's an expert at identifying and evaluating wines.

I talked to Andy this week about this passage and I asked him what he would do if someone brought him a glass of wine and asked him to evaluate it.

He said the first thing he would do is to check to see if it was fit to serve or if it was flawed in some way – if it was improperly stored and had stewed, or if a bad strain of bacteria or yeast had gotten into it and spoiled it, causing it to become vinegary.

If it wasn't faulty, then he said he would ask: "Okay, there's no flaw, but is it good?"

To answer that he would consider three things: the color, the smell, and the taste.

Was the color brick-orange, or inky purple, or was it a deep nuanced spectrum of reds?

Then he would smell it, to see if the aroma was pleasing and balanced and didn't have a bite.

And last he would taste it. A good wine, he said, is not too fruit dominant, or too hot – tasting too strongly of alcohol – or too grippy or acidic tasting. The best wine balances those elements in a really pleasing way that doesn't call attention to any of them.

Picture the banquet master at the wedding at Cana. It's the fourth day of a full week of festivities, and he's tired and distracted, busy seeing to the baking the next batch of bread or the washing the last meal's utensils. One of the household servants walks up and hands him a stone cup filled with wine, seeking his approval. He glances at it, gives it a quick swirl, and takes a quick sip, his thoughts elsewhere. Then his eyes widen and he stops and becomes more attentive. This time s down, inspecting the contents of the stone cup more carefully. He takes in its aroma deeply, looks at its color in the torch light, sips it slowly, closes his eyes, savoring it, shaking his head.

### **John 2.9-10**

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 2.11**

What Jesus did here in Cana of Galilee was the first of the signs through which he revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him.

So we come back to this comment from John, in which he describes this event as a sign. What is the deeper layer to this event?

I think we can see that there are at least three different layers of significance to this water to wine moment.

First, at its most basic level, this was an act of great kindness, revealing the loving heart of Jesus.

In the ancient Near East a wedding was the most important social event there was, a lavish week-long feast for the whole village that either reflected well or reflected poorly on the host, and in a culture based so deeply on categories of honor and shame, that meant a great deal. To have run out of wine would have made the host the subject of village talk and scorn for years.

Jesus supplying wine was an act of great grace and generosity, especially as he did this before he believed it was time to unveil his ministry.

Second, at a supernatural level, this was a miracle, revealing the divine power of Jesus.

Without even a spoken word, Jesus takes a single simple chemical consisting of hydrogen and oxygen molecules, and transforms it into an incredibly complex chemical mix of between 800 and 1000 different molecular compounds: ethanol, glycerol, anthocyanins, tannins, flavans, and more.

He takes a common, everyday liquid that has no color, no taste, and no smell, and turns it into a drink that is prized for its beautiful color, its nuanced aroma, and its rich and satisfying taste.

The second person of the Trinity, the Word through him all things were made, remade water into wine without even a wave of the hand.

So this was an act of love and a miraculous display of God's power.

John also says this event was a "sign through which Jesus revealed his glory" (10).

Remember we said a sign is something that points to something else. In what sense was this miracle a sign? What was the something else that this miraculous gift was pointing to?

A lot of people see the setting of this story and assume that the sign had something to do with the wedding banquet imagery.

But I'm convinced there is something else going on here, something that picks up a different biblical thread. It's not the wedding but the wine that is the sign.

To understand this, there are three different things we need to know about wine from a biblical perspective, and one important historical detail we need to know about water.

### **1. First, wine was often a sort of biblical shorthand for joy, festivity, and celebration.**

That might not be how we think about wine, especially within the evangelical part of the church. We might be more likely to think of wine negatively, connecting wine and drunkenness in our minds.

But while the Scriptures are clear in denouncing drinking alcohol to the point of getting drunk (Proverbs 20.1, Ephesians 5.18), wine is seen more often in a positive light than in a negative one in the pages of the Bible.

It's true that wine in the ancient world was rarely fermented for long, and it was often diluted with water, so it usually had a fairly low alcohol content.

But in a desert land with few fruits and fewer options for drinks, wine was considered a rich and satisfying drink, and the ease with which grapes grew in bible lands meant wine was a central feature in every celebration, connecting it permanently with the ideas of joy and celebration.

For example,

Ecclesiastes 9.7 says "drink your wine with a joyful heart"

And Ecclesiastes 10.19 says, "Wine makes life merry."

In fact, the bible teaches that wine is a gift from God to humanity.

Psalms 104.15 says God gives "wine to gladden the heart of man."

So whenever the Jewish people drank wine, they thanked God for it.

*Barukh ata Adonai Eloheinu melekh  
ha'olam borei p'ri hagafen.*

ברוך אתה יי, אלהינו מלך העולם,  
בורא פרי הגפן.

Blessed are You, Lord our God, Ruler of the universe, who creates the fruit of the vine.

## 2. Second, wine became a symbol of God's blessing for covenant faithfulness.

During the time between when the law was given to Moses on Mount Sinai and when the people were sent into exile for failing to observe the law, a period of time when God himself ruled directly over Israel and there was a direct connection between actions and consequences, faithfulness led to blessings, and disobedience led to those blessings being removed. And new wine became one of the standard examples of God's blessing for keeping the covenant.

Deuteronomy 7.12-13 says (see also 11.14 and 33.28)

If you pay attention to these laws and are careful to follow them, then the LORD your God will keep his covenant of love with you, as he swore to your ancestors. He will love you and bless you and increase your numbers. He will bless the fruit of your womb, the crops of your land—your grain, new wine and olive oil—the calves of your herds and the lambs of your flocks in the land he swore to your ancestors to give you.

**3. Third, bringing these two together, wine as a gift and a symbol of joy, and wine as a blessing and a symbol of covenant faithfulness: during the exile, wine became a symbol of joyful hope, it was a metaphor for the new day that would come when God would visit the earth, and establish a new covenant with his people, and put all things right.**

The exile, you may remember, was the time when God removed his people from the land because they had rejected him and each had turned to his or her own ways. So God honored their desire to have nothing to do with him, and he removed them from the promised land and sent them into exile

That was a painful time for God's people. There was a profound sense of loss, and they felt far from God.

During their time in exile, God sent messengers, the prophets, who announced the coming of God's new day, when all would be put right, and it was not uncommon for them to use the imagery of wine being poured out to capture the joyful hope of all that was wrong in the world being made right, and of humanity being restored to right relationship with God.

The book of Joel is a good example. First in chapter one, using the symbol of the covenant blessings that had been withheld, he describes the sense of spiritual bleakness they feel while they are in exile.

### Joel 1.10

The fields are ruined,  
the ground is dried up;  
the grain is destroyed,

the new wine is dried up,  
the olive oil fails.

Then he describes the day when God himself will come to them, breaking into the spiritual dryness and flatness and bringing joy to their relationship with him.

Here's how Joel anticipates that in chapter three.

### **Joel 3.14, 18**

The day of the LORD is near. . . .  
In that day the mountains will drip new wine,  
and the hills will flow with milk;  
all the ravines of Judah will run with water.

You see something very similar in Amos 9.13 which also speaks of new wine dripping from the mountains and flowing from all the hills.

Obviously that isn't meant to be understood literally. It's a metaphor for the abundant and unceasing joy and satisfaction that will be ours when the Messiah comes and establishes a new covenant between us and God and ushers us into his realm of eternal joy.

What a powerful image, in a land that is dusty and dry, with most stream beds empty and dried up for most of the year, with the little that comes from that stark land that is sweet and refreshing, where much day to day is difficult, and little relieves life's burden – what a powerful image to think of the mountains running with wine!

I expect by now the sign that John is referring to is beginning to become clear to you.

### **4. So here's the interesting historical detail about water that I wanted to put in alongside this.**

During the bleakness of the exile, a group of very religious Jews began to form. They called themselves the Pharisees, the separate ones, the holy ones. They got the idea that the best way to get themselves out of their spiritual desert, out of the flatness of life with God feeling so far away, would be to work themselves out of it, to obey themselves out of it, to self-righteous themselves out of it.

So they took all the Old Testament laws, and set about trying meet those, and then they surrounded those with several more layers of added requirements, and set about trying to meet those too, thinking that was the way they'd bring God near.

Well, one day the Pharisees came across Psalm 24.3-4, which asks, "Who may ascend the hill of the Lord, and who may stand in his holy place?" and answers, "He who has clean hands and a pure heart."



Instead of understanding the expression “clean hands” metaphorically, meaning not engaging in sinful actions, they took it literally.

They knew that in Exodus 30.17-20, God directed the priests who were serving in the temple to wash their hands in special basins before they offered sacrifices. The Pharisees said, “Well, then, if God wants clean hands, let’s make that a requirement not just for the priests but for everyone, and let’s do it not just for once-a-year sacrificial meals, but for every meal we ever eat.”

So those massive stone jars filled with water were there for the wedding guests to wash their hands before every meal during the seven day celebration, not to wash off the dirt and germs, but in order to satisfy the requirements of a holy God, in the hopes that their efforts would bring them close to God.

You know this. What happens when you turn a relationship into an obligation? Any relationship – a marriage, a friendship, a relationship with a teacher or a coach or a scoutmaster or bible study leader. The relationship dries up, and what’s left in its place is just the flatness, the dryness, of rules and requirements and expectations.

The Pharisees thought the way to bring God near was with water. If they could just keep scrubbing themselves and scrubbing themselves, maybe they would get clean enough for God to accept them and draw near.

When water is way we seek to draw near to God, each new day is robbed of its joy, and becomes a weight instead. Here we go again.

Even with all that water around, we become only more and more spiritually parched and thirsty, because it doesn’t quench our soul or satisfy us.

But the Old Testament prophets knew that the way to bring God near was with wine: the “wine that makes man merry,” the “wine that gladdens the heart of man,” that only God can give.

What was the deeper reality that this taking of water and turning it into wine was pointing to?

That in the coming of Jesus into this world we come to the hinge point of human history. That in Jesus God has indeed saved the best for last. That in Jesus, there is joy abundant, joy filled to the brim.

That this Jesus who transformed those 150 gallons of stale water into fine wine is nothing less than the Promised One who opens the door and brings thirsty and unsatisfied humanity into the rich wine of joyful abundance and abundant joy that God holds out to us, a life that no amount of scrubbing and scraping and wringing and rinsing can bring about in ourselves.

**John 1.14-17**

And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth. . . . For from his fullness we have all received grace upon grace. For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.

\* \* \*

Do you find yourself in a place of spiritual dryness? Are you trapped in the flatness of the everyday, and do you long for joy?

Isaiah, one of the prophets who looked ahead to the coming day of the Lord, when the Messiah would come and fulfill God's purposes on earth, offers this invitation that still stands today:

**Isaiah 55.1-2**

Come, all you who are thirsty. Come buy wine and milk without money and without cost. Listen, listen to me, and eat what is good, and your soul will delight in the richest of fare. Give ear and come to me; hear me, that your soul may live.

All that is necessary to receive the wine is to open ourselves to him.

When we do, when we invite him in, we can't just scoot some things over in the pantry and make a little room for him on a shelf somewhere, alongside all of our other priorities and allegiances, all the other things we turn to to quench our thirst and satisfy our appetite.

We need to make our whole lives into vessels ready to receive him, to take in and to pour out the joy that is Jesus.

**Mark 2.22**

No one pours new wine into old wineskins. Otherwise, the wine will burst the skins, and both the wine and the wineskins will be ruined. No, they pour new wine into new wineskins.

Have you ever opened your life to that which alone is able to give your soul life? Would you pray with me?

**Prayer**

Lord Jesus, this morning I admit my thirst for something more. I confess that I have turned to many places to satisfy the hunger and thirst deep within me, but my soul remains parched and unsatisfied. I realize now that the deep thirst of my heart is a thirst for you.

Jesus, I believe that in you God comes to quench the thirst for himself that God has placed in every human heart. I open my life to you, the new wine. Bring joy to my weary heart, Lord.

Thank you that through your death in my place you purchased the forgiveness for the sin that has made me an unfit vessel for your presence in my life. I receive your forgiveness and open myself to your loving presence.

By your spirit I pray that you would fashion my life into a vessel suited to receive you. Fill me with the joy of your presence, and make me into a vessel fit to pour that life into the lives of others.

### **Lead in to communion**

Listen to the song

Think about the gift of the body broken

Think about the gift of the wine poured out on the land

### **Prayer setting up closing song**

#### **Song of Solomon 2.11-12**

See! The winter is past;  
the rains are over and gone.

Flowers appear on the earth;  
the season of singing has come.

Linger downstairs  
Benediction