

Opening Words

Wine in the Bible was a symbol for blessing from God. But one day, in a village, at a time of great celebration, the wine ran out.

OSL 019 Jesus and Mary at the Wedding at Cana 1

Jesus and his small band of followers – Andrew, John, Peter, Philip, and Nathanael were invited to a wedding in Cana, just a few miles northeast of Nazareth. What a refreshing change from the wilderness of Judea!

No one knows who was getting married. Perhaps it was a close friend or family member because Mary, the mother of Jesus was there. This is the first mention of Mary in the Gospel of John as this Gospel says nothing about Jesus' miraculous birth, but being the last of the four Gospels the truth of his supernatural birth was well established and John had other purposes in writing his story of Jesus. It is also interesting to note that Mary is always called "the mother of Jesus" in this Gospel and never called by her first name.

Weddings in ancient times, as they are today, were festive occasions. One commentator tells us that wedding celebrations were not private family affairs. Everyone in the village participated. The day began with the village women washing the bride in her home. They would anoint her with perfume and dress her elaborately. In the evening, the groom would come for her and in a procession lit by torches they would make their way with singing and dancing to his home. If they had money, they might even make the procession in a carriage. If the bride was a virgin, she would wear her hair loose with a wreath upon her head and roasted ears of grain, wine, and oil would be placed in the path of the procession.

When they arrived at the groom's house, the bride would be introduced into her husband's family and the celebration would begin! Traditionally, the celebration began on Wednesday (Thursday if the bride was a widow) and would last three days. Food abounded, wine abounded, and joy abounded. It was the bridegroom's responsibility to see that everyone had everything they needed so they could celebrate.

But on this day at this wedding something unthinkable happened – the wine ran out. Because the village was invited, such a circumstance would be noticed by all. Rumor and gossip would follow. The groom's honor was at stake.

In the ancient world, and still in many places today, food and drink at such a festive occasion was an important means of communication. Was anyone not invited? Did some people choose not to attend? These were important matters! Equally important at the feast was the provision of food and drink. The type of food and drink selected, its mode of preparation, the way it was presented, and the seating arrangements were all statements and later rabbis would say that weddings were so important they could interrupt the study of a rabbi, and the groomsman and his party could be absent from other types of mandatory feasts.

Such was the importance of any wedding. With this in mind, let's read the first three verses of John 2.

On the third day a wedding took place at Cana in Galilee. Jesus' mother was there, ² and Jesus and his disciples had also been invited to the wedding. ³ When the wine was gone, Jesus' mother said to him, "They have no more wine."

With the background I have given you, I am sure you understand how important it was when Mary came to Jesus and told him that the wine had run out.

Wine in the Bible is a symbol for blessing and prosperity from God. The prophet Moses said that if God's people obeyed his covenant, God would bless the fruit of their womb, the fruit of the ground, their grain and their new wine and oil (Deut 7:13).

Wine was a symbol of joy, and it was a symbol of the age of salvation that would come. In a familiar prophecy, the prophet Amos said:

¹³ "The time will come," says the Lord,
"when the grain and grapes will grow faster
than they can be harvested.
Then the terraced vineyards on the hills of Israel
will drip with sweet wine!
¹⁴ I will bring my exiled people of Israel
back from distant lands,
and they will rebuild their ruined cities
and live in them again.
They will plant vineyards and gardens;
they will eat their crops and drink their wine. (Amos 9:13-14, NLT)

Wine was a symbol for something else, or perhaps I should say, the lack of wine was a symbol. It was a symbol of judgment if the people did not obey the Lord, Moses warned about this in Deuteronomy 28:30. He said:

"You will be engaged to a woman, but another man will sleep with her. You will build a house, but someone else will live in it. You will plant a vineyard, but you will never enjoy its fruit."

And the prophet Micah in 6:15 said,

You will plant crops
but not harvest them.
You will press your olives
but not get enough oil to anoint yourselves.
You will trample the grapes
but get no juice to make your wine.

In ancient Israel, the people were very much aware of their history and their Scripture. Their actions carried much symbolism. If they were a generous people, it meant that God had blessed them. If they did not have much to share with others, it was a sign that God's blessing was not upon them. It could be a sign that His curse was upon them.

At a wedding, therefore, it was crucial to show hospitality in abundant ways to show the blessing of God upon the families and upon the new union of the man and the woman.

At this wedding, the wine ran out.

Mary would know about this. She and the other women would be involved in food preparation and would certainly hear this news that would be passed discreetly to those working behind the scenes. We must remember, the honor of the family was at stake. In Jewish culture it was customary to have such an abundance that food would be left over. A rabbi at a later time would say that if one did not provide for guests, he was not receiving them properly and was classified with a thief!

But Mary knew what to do. Her son, Jesus, was there, and she knew of his power. She approached Jesus and quietly told him what was happening. The text says it simply in John 2:3, “They have no more wine.”

Jesus reply in verse 4 is simple. “Woman, why do you involve me? My hour has not yet come?” Many have been puzzled by Jesus’ words. Why did he call her woman? Wasn’t this disrespectful? What did he mean by “his hour?”

First, let’s talk about Jesus calling her, “woman” instead of “mother.” We must understand that in that culture the word “woman” was not a sign of disrespect, and it was not an unusual greeting for a woman. But there is more. By using this title rather than mother, Jesus is creating distance between him and his mother. In the ancient Mediterranean world, the closest bond was between a mother and her son. This bond was forged in the early years of life before the father took over the teaching of a trade and the training of children. Then, the bond between mother and son would be slightly broken. A son would always love his mother in a special way, and the mother her son, but the bond would be not be quite the same. And the same was true between Jesus and Mary. Yes, he loved her and always would, but as Augustine pointed out, “she had to learn that her relationship to Jesus as disciple was more important than her relationship to him as mother.” This was a lesson that would be repeated with his brothers and sisters as we will see later in Matthew 12 and John 7. And this is one reason why Jesus called her “woman.” She is not just his mother. She is now his disciple.

But second, Mary did not fully understand what it would cost Jesus to show his glory and to reveal to the world that he was the promised Messiah. It was a price that would end in his suffering and death. This is what he refers to when he says in verse 4 that his hour had not yet come. In John, we will see this theme about “his hour” many times.

Yet, we must commend Mary for her boldness and faith. She did go to Jesus with the problem. It wasn’t her problem. It was the problem of the hosts, and she was concerned about their honor which they were about to lose if something was not done. Plus, she said to the servants, “Whatever he says to you, do it.” Perhaps there was something else that passed between Mary and Jesus that is not in the text. A smile, a wink, or a nod of the head.

Mary had treasured so many things in her heart for thirty years. She watched Jesus grow, learn His Torah, and become the model citizen of Nazareth. And she wondered, “When will he step out and make the declaration of his true identity?”

Perhaps this would be the moment. He was now 30 years of age – mature, strong, spiritual, he was ready. And what better place than a wedding to show his power.

The wedding in Israel was a symbol for God’s coming kingdom. The prophets pictured it with a feast. Isaiah 25:6-8 says

On this mountain the LORD Almighty will prepare
a feast of rich food for all peoples,
a banquet of aged wine—
the best of meats and the finest of wines.
⁷ On this mountain he will destroy
the shroud that enfolds all peoples,
the sheet that covers all nations;
⁸ he will swallow up death forever.
The Sovereign LORD will wipe away the tears
from all faces;
he will remove his people’s disgrace
from all the earth.
The LORD has spoken.

Yes, with such prophecies, a wedding feast would be a great place for her son to show himself. And so Mary tells Jesus that the wine has run out, and she says to the servants, “whatever he says to you, do it.”

In our next lesson, which I look forward to sharing with you very much, we’ll see what happened, and the lessons we can learn from this first miracle that Jesus performed.