

WATER TO WINE

by Ray C. Stedman

In the second chapter of John's gospel we have the account of the first miracle of our Lord. The scene has now shifted from Judea, where John the Baptist was baptizing in the river Jordan, to seventy miles north, the area of Galilee. Jesus and his disciples have walked all that way.

On the third day there was a marriage at Cana in Galilee, and the mother of Jesus was there; Jesus also was invited to the marriage, with his disciples. When the wine gave out, the mother of Jesus said to him, "They have no wine." And Jesus said to her, "O woman, what have you to do with me? My hour has not yet come." His mother said to the servants, "Do whatever he tells you." {John 2:1-5 RSV}

It is rather significant that John mentions the "third day." He is referring, of course, to the third day after Jesus had left Judea. (It was a two-day walk to Galilee, and they would have arrived on the morning of the third day.) John has particularly noted this because the third day has a symbolic meaning. Remember that John the Apostle wrote his gospel much later than the other gospels were written -- some thirty or forty years after these events took place, in fact. By then he had opportunity to review carefully the events that he had been teaching and preaching about for all that time, and to select from that running memory the important things he wanted to stress. Thus everything in the Gospel of John is particularly put there for a reason.

This mention of the third day is a reference to what is clearly evident elsewhere in the Scriptures: it is a reference to the fact of the resurrection. The resurrection of Jesus had not yet taken place, of course, but even in the prophetic Scriptures of the Old Testament there is a reference to the third day as being the day in which Israel would be spiritually healed and returned to her Lord (Hosea 6:2). Here, then, is the first hint in this account of the significance of this miracle of changing water into wine: it was a miracle of transformation, of bringing life out of death. We are given here a hint of what this miracle symbolizes.

The occasion was a wedding, an Eastern wedding. Eastern weddings are very different from Western affairs. In Western weddings the bride is the prominent figure. When she enters, clad in all her glory, the whole congregation stands and the organ thunders, "Here comes the bride; fair, fat and wide!" or whatever it is, and every eye is focused on her. But in Eastern weddings it is the groom that is prominent. He is the featured one; the bride merely shows up for the wedding. (She is like the bridegroom in a Western wedding -- a sort of necessary evil.)

Not only is the groom the featured person, but he also pays for the whole affair! Some of those weddings went on for two or three days -- some for as long as a week -- with all the relatives of both sides of the family joining together for a big celebration. This is the kind of wedding John is talking about here. (By the way, I think it is a very good idea to have the bridegroom pay for everything. As the father of four daughters I have been trying to introduce that into our culture here, but it has not taken hold yet!)

As Mary figures rather prominently, it is likely that this was the wedding of one of Jesus' younger brothers or sisters. But there is a little complication mentioned, in that Jesus shows with five disciples whom no one expected! He had just called them to himself, and they had then walked two days from Judea. No one had time to send word that there were additional members in Jesus' party. But, as is ordinarily true in these rural settings, people do not make a great deal of fuss over such things. They are always ready to put a little more

water in the soup and thus take care of any unexpected guests that show up. So the disciples come with Jesus as unexpected but welcome, invited to join when they appeared.

That explains, of course, why the wine ran out. A two-or-three day celebration called for so much wine, and when an additional five or six people showed up the wine ran out. Mary seized the occasion to say, very significantly to Jesus, "They have no wine." She does not ask him to do anything about it; she merely tells him, "They have no wine." Some of the commentators suggest that what she meant is that Jesus and his disciples ought to leave; that this was a gentle hint to them that they were unwanted additions to the marriage feast; that they had strained the hospitality of their hosts and they ought to leave. Others say that Mary did not expect any miracle because Jesus had done no miracle up to this point. That, of course, is true. There are apocryphal gospels that speak of Jesus doing miracles as a boy; of his making clay pigeons and then waving his hands and they fly off, leaving his playmates' pigeons lying in the dust, etc. But those are purely imaginative accounts. John clearly says that this is the first miracle that our Lord did.

But the account makes rather clear that Mary did expect Jesus to help. She comes to him with a problem and expects him to do something about it. Personally, I believe she did expect him to do something startling and supernatural. We must understand that at this time Mary's expectations had been greatly awakened. Undoubtedly she had been told the accounts of what happened in Judea; how Jesus was baptized by John the Baptist, how the heavens opened and a dove lighted on Jesus' head, and a voice uttered those remarkable words, "This is my beloved Son," {Matt 3:17}. She remembered the promises when he was born that he would be the Messiah. Undoubtedly she expected him to act. Along with all the other Jews of that day she doubtless expected him, as the Messiah, to claim the throne of David; to somehow drive out the Romans and to fulfill all the Messianic prophecies of the Old Testament. (These included, by the way, miracles of healing, of even dealing with nature -- the desert would blossom like the rose, the lion would lie down with the lamb, etc.) Now that Jesus has taken the initiative and has called his own disciples, she has a right to expect that he is beginning to fulfill his destiny.

The fact that Jesus clearly understood her can be seen from his answer: "Woman, what have you to do with me?" That answer was not rude or disrespectful, though it may sound that way to us. If a young man today called his mother "woman," he ought to have his ears boxed. Here Jesus was using a common title of respect. (He addresses Mary from the cross in the same way, "Woman, behold your son!" {John 19:26 RSV})

When he says, "What have you to do with me," that is simply a Hebrew way of saying, "You don't understand." So what he is saying is not that he will not do something -- he does not mean that he will not act -- because he did act. He means, "What I do will not accomplish what you are hoping. It will not persuade the nation that I am the Messiah." Miracles were indeed part of the plan of God. They would be performed, but they would not convince the nation. God's program oftentimes includes checking the box that says, "None of the above." That is what Jesus is doing here with Mary. She already has in her mind what he is going to do, but he is saying, "None of the above." Another hour is coming. Perhaps he means to suggest to her the fulfillment of that prophecy that was given her when Jesus was presented at the temple, "A sword must pierce your own heart also," {cf, Luke 2:35}. Jesus is reminding her that there is coming a time when those words must be fulfilled as well.

She seems to be satisfied with his response, and says to the servants, "Do whatever he tells you to do." I have often pointed out to Catholic friends who talk about asking Mary to intercede with Jesus that the only time Mary ever is recorded as interceding with Jesus, she ends up by telling men, "Do whatever he tells you to do." That is good advice!

As always, Jesus begins with whatever is at hand.

Now six stone jars were standing there, for the Jewish rites of purification, each holding twenty or thirty gallons. Jesus said to them, "Fill the jars with water." And they filled them up to the brim. He said to them, "Now draw some out, and take it to the steward of the feast." So they took it. {John 2:6-8 RSV}

Notice the simplicity of this account, how easily, how quietly, with such dignity this was done. He says simply, "Fill the jars with water." And they filled them to the brim -- not with decaffeinated coffee, but with 120 to 180 gallons of plain, pure water. Then Jesus said, "Now draw some out, and take it to the steward of the feast." There was no prayer, no word of command, no hysterical shouting, no pleading with screwed-up face, no laying on of hands, no binding of Satan, no hocus-pocus or mumbo-jumbo -- nothing. He did not even touch the water. He did not even taste it afterward to see if it had happened. He simply said, "Take it to the governor of the feast." What a beautiful, simple dignity! The water simply became wine.

Yet this happened within the limits of a natural process. It is very important to see this. The water did not become milk, nor did it change into Coca-Cola. What happened was something that happens also in nature. Water is being changed into wine in every vineyard in Northern California right now! It involves a long process of growth, of gathering and crushing; it involves the activity of men and the process of fermentation. But it is a natural process. This is characteristic of the miracles of Jesus.

In his very helpful book *Miracles*, C. S. Lewis has pointed out that every miracle of Jesus is simply a kind of short-circuiting of a natural process; a doing instantly something which in general takes a longer period of time. Lewis says, "Each miracle writes for us in small letters something that God has already written, or will write, in letters almost too large to be noticed, across the whole canvas of nature." That is what Jesus is doing: he is overleaping the elements of time, of growth, gathering, crushing and fermenting. He takes water -- an inorganic, non-living, commonplace substance -- and without a word, without a gesture, without any laying on of hands, in utter simplicity, the water becomes wine, an organic liquid, a product of fermentation, belonging to the realm of life. Thus he demonstrated his marvelous ability to master the processes of nature.

Some claim that Jesus did not change water into real wine, that all he did was change it into very good grape juice! I consider that claim so ridiculous as to be hardly worthy of an answer. They do not serve grape juice at Jewish weddings! They never have and they never will! In fact, in other places in the New Testament where we have warnings against the overuse of wine -- of "not being given to much wine" {1 Tim 3:8, Tit 2:3 KJV} -- we have clear indication that the wine of that day was indeed intoxicating. People had to watch it then, just as they must watch it today. Wine was a commonplace drink, one that believers partook of along with everyone else in that culture and climate. Our Lord certainly did change water into real, true, genuine wine.

Actually, the very force of this miracle depended upon the fact that it was good wine. This is confirmed by the amazement of the steward of the feast when he drank the wine. Can't you see him taking a cup and sipping it, then swirling it around, smelling of it, drinking it again, smacking his lips and saying, "That's Paul Masson, 1979! It's the best wine I ever drank!" The servants, according to John's account, were smiling to themselves. They knew what had happened. They remained silent -- it was not their place to speak -- but they confirmed the fact that this good wine came from jars that had been filled with water.

The account even hints at the bewilderment of the bridegroom.

When the steward of the feast tasted the water now become wine, and did not know where it came from (though the servants who had drawn the water knew), the steward of the feast called the bridegroom and

said to him, "Every man serves the good wine first; and when men have drunk freely, then the poor wine; but you have kept the good wine until now." {John 2:9-10 RSV}

We are not told what the bridegroom said. He evidently did not say anything; he must have been bewildered at this event. But he was smart enough to keep his mouth shut and to take credit for the whole incident. He was probably thinking to himself, "We will serve no wine until its time!"

The significance of this miracle is recorded in one verse:

This, the first of his signs, Jesus did at Cana in Galilee, and manifested his glory; and his disciples believed in him." {John 2:11 RSV}

Three factors call for our attention in that verse:

First, John says that the miracle was a sign, i.e., it was an acted parable. Signs are not merely miracles; they are miracles that have a meaning. They are intended to convey truth that would not otherwise be known.

I returned yesterday from San Antonio, Texas. While I was there I remembered my first visit to Houston when I was a student at seminary. As I was interested in history, I visited the battlefield outside the city. There, at San Jacinto, General Sam Houston defeated the Mexican army and won independence for Texas. The Texans have erected a huge memorial tower -- it looks much like the Hoover Tower at Stanford University -- and with typical Texas modesty placed a sign in front of it that says. "This tower is ten feet taller than the Washington Monument."

That is what signs are for: to tell you something that you would not otherwise know; to manifest a significance that might otherwise be hidden. That is what John means when he says that this miracle was a sign. What it pictured was the normal outcome of the combination of human and divine activity. Men can fill water jars; only God can turn water into wine! Men do the ordinary, the commonplace, the normal activity, but God touches it, and brings it to life and gives it flavor, fragrance and effect. That is the meaning of this sign: it is an indication of what the ministry of Jesus is going to be like whenever he touches a human life, not only during his lifetime on earth, but also through all the running centuries to come, whenever his ministry would be present in the world.

Thus it affects us today as well. Bring God into your situation and all the humdrum, commonplace activities are touched with a new power that makes them fragrant, flavorful, enjoyable and delightful, giving joy and gladness to the heart. That is the meaning of this sign.

According to John, the second thing is, "it manifested his glory." Already, in Chapter 1, John has told us what the glory of Jesus is: it is grace and truth; the fullness of grace and truth. Here in this event we will see both his grace and truth. His grace is manifested in the fact that he brought with him five (including himself, six) unexpected guests to the wedding. They had no gifts to bring, so he seizes on the fact that there are six stone jars waiting. That is why he has them filled to the brim with water and then changes the water into wine, thereby giving the most generous gift anybody gave at the wedding. He gives this newly married couple a gift of the best wine in the whole countryside, one jar for each of the unexpected guests. What a gracious touch that is! That is our Lord's grace.

But with it comes truth: the glory of Jesus is the fullness of grace and truth. In that event there was manifested truth about himself, that he was the Lord of nature. As I have already pointed out, he was merely carrying out a natural process in a short period of time.

Here is another fine quotation from C. S. Lewis' book, *Miracles*:

If we open such books as Grimm's Fairy Tales, or the Italian Epics, we find ourselves in a world of miracles so diverse that they can hardly be classified. Beasts turn into men and men into beasts, or trees. Trees talk, ships become goddesses, and a magic ring can cause tables richly spread with food to appear in solitary places... If such things really happen, they would, I suppose, show that nature was being invaded. But they would show she was being invaded by an alien power. The fitness of the Christian miracles, and their difference from those mythological miracles, lies in the fact that they show invasion by a power which is not alien. They are what might be expected to happen when she is invaded not simply by a god, but by the God of nature; by a power which is outside her jurisdiction; not as a foreigner but as a Sovereign. They proclaim that he who has come is not merely a king, but the King, and the King of nature, her King and ours.

That very eloquently says what the meaning of this sign as, and the truth that it brought out.

We humans have a strange habit of ascribing the wonders of the natural world around us to some undefined power or force that we call *Nature*. People say, "What a wonderful thing is Nature, which can produce such beautiful scenery." Or, "Nature is responsible for the wonders in the animal kingdom." We look at a redwood tree and say, "Isn't that wonderful! Nature made it." But that is a tautology. The redwood tree is nature, it is part of nature. To say that *Nature* made it is saying that the tree made itself, which is ridiculous.

Someone has well said, "Nature is the glove on the hand of God." We see the glove at work and we think it is marvelous. Many of you ladies use gloves when you work in your gardens, to spade up the earth, pull weeds, whatever. Wouldn't you think it strange if somebody came along and, seeing what you had done, said, "Isn't it marvelous that your gloves can do a thing like that!" Imagine a glove being able to spade up a garden, and pull up weeds! You would want to say, "Glove, nothing! There is hand inside that glove, and behind it an arm, and a head and a heart and a will behind those. That's what did it."

That is what we should be saying about the natural world around us. We see lakes, hills, woods, flowers, trees and animals, all the marvel of living, growing things. We see storms, the cycles of snow and rain; the stars wheeling in the heavens, the sun and the moon, the infinite marvel of life, and say, "Who did it?" The glove? No. All these things *are* the glove. They *are* nature. But behind it is a mighty hand and a powerful arm, a mind and a will -- a God, if you please, the God of nature, the King of nature. One day he stood quietly, and with dignity and confidence, took water and quickly ran it through its natural course and it became wine!

No wonder that the third factor John brings out is: "his disciples believed in him." They believed that here was God's Man, ruling over all the works of God's hands, put in dominion and authority over the natural world and doing with it whatever he pleased, within the limits of nature itself. That is the sign, the meaning of this miracle. When the disciples saw it they believed more deeply in him than before. They saw that here was One who could handle life. Here was One who could take a commonplace thing, nothing out of the ordinary, simple water, and make of it wine, make it a source of joy, of glory and of warmth.

I have discovered that the world is constantly telling us, in one way or another, that youth is the time when one can drink the wine of life; the "days of wine and roses." Youth is the time one can really find excitement, adventure and worthwhileness. But the other evening I was sitting at our table for the evening meal with my family; my dear wife, (who becomes more beautiful the older she grows), my daughters and their children, my grandsons, all there with us. We were having a wonderful family time, talking, laughing and sharing things, sitting in a comfortable home in a beautiful area of the country. The richness of it all came home to me. I found my heart lifted up and saying to God, "You have kept the best wine until last." I think so often of Robert Browning's words,

Grow old along with me,
The best is yet to be,
The last of life
For which the first was made!

This is the significance for us of this sign.

Our Lord is able to take the humdrum, commonplace, ordinary, normal events of any life and with his touch make them full of flavor, fragrance, strength and beauty; to turn them into wine. He will do this with any of us as we faithfully walk with him, follow him, and believe in him. That is why John highlights for us, "there the disciples believed in him."

Prayer:

Thank you, Father, for this look at this simple event of that day in Galilee. Help us to find in it meaning for our own lives, knowing that he who without a word, without any ostentation, transformed, silently, quietly, with dignity, the water of that day into wine. So can he take the water of our commonplace lives and change it into wine, rich and full and tasty. We thank you for that, and pray this may be the experience of all here. In Jesus' name, Amen.

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