

# The Gospel of John

Text: John 2:1-22 — “Greater Things”: The Opening of Jesus’ Ministry

Reading: *Daring Faith*, pp. 44-50

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## The Wedding at Cana (2:1-12)

This text begins a series of chapters which establish the central themes and tensions of the entire Gospel: the possibilities of new life and faith made available through the words and works of Jesus, and the decisions individuals are called to in the face of those possibilities.

### A. Setting the Scene

1. The miracle at Cana is the inaugural event of Jesus’ ministry. Jesus begins his ministry with a vivid presentation of the gift he has to offer.
2. John provides the reader with only essential details: when (on the third day), where (Cana of Galilee), who (the mother of Jesus, Jesus, his disciples), why (a wedding feast).
3. The reference to “the third day” locates the Cana story in the sequence of days begun in John 1; the wedding should be understood as occurring three days after the day referred to at 1:43. This reference suggests that John wants the reader to see that the promise made by Jesus in 1:50-51 was fulfilled very soon.

### B. Water to Wine

1. The story is driven by a specific problem: the wine has run out. The statement made by Jesus’ mother implies that she assumed her son would somehow attend to the problem.
2. How might we explain Jesus’ response? “Hour” is an important noun in John. Many times in John, as in 2:4, Jesus uses “hour” symbolically to refer to the hour of his death, resurrection, and ascension (see also 7:30; 8:20; 13:1).
3. Jesus’ actions will be governed by the hour set by God, not by anyone else’s time or will. Jesus is free from all human control. Any act of self-revelation by Jesus during his ministry is connected with Jesus’ self-revelation at his “hour.”
4. Jesus thus initiates the action, and the miracle itself begins with a description of the water jars. The six stone water jars would hold ~150 gallons of water! The overdrawn description mirrors the size of the jars to emphasize the extravagance of the miracle that is about to take place.

**Imagine yourself as one of the disciples. What are you thinking as Jesus tells the servants to fill the jars with water?**

**The steward of the banquet doesn’t know where the wine came from, but John tells us that the servants knew — what might they be thinking as they watch the steward taste the wine?**

5. The steward is perplexed by the sudden appearance of wine of such quality. He summons the bridegroom, the host of the party, because he assumes that the wine can be explained by conventional reasoning. He attributes the wine to the unprecedented hospitality of this man.
6. The miracle of the wine shatters the boundaries of their conventional world. Yet unlike the steward, Jesus’ disciples are willing to entertain the possibility that this miracle marks the inbreaking of God’s glory and presence in the world.

### C. “Jesus revealed his glory, and his disciples believed in him” (2:11)

1. The steward tried to reshape the miracle to fit his understanding of the world, but the disciples allowed their understanding to be reshaped by this extraordinary transformation of water into wine. As a result, the disciples “believed in him” (2:11) as the revealer of God.
2. In the OT, an abundance of good wine is a symbol of the joyous arrival of God’s new age (Amos 9:13; Joel 3:18). For John, this miracle is the inaugural act of God’s promised salvation.
3. Jesus’s gift of wine illustrates a truth of the prologue, **that from Jesus we have received “grace upon grace”** (1:16). The miracle itself runs outside conventional expectations. It challenges us to see the new possibilities ushered in by the incarnate Christ.
4. “Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee and revealed his glory and the disciples believed in him” (2:11). The signs in the Gospel of John are not just miracles to prove Jesus’ power, they also seem to have some kind of theological or symbolic meaning imbedded into them. They indicate Jesus’ true identity. They intend to evoke a believing response to the claims of the one who does them.

What is this story calling us to believe? The transformation from water to wine is meant by John to signify the transforming effect that Jesus can have on people’s lives.

Where do we see Jesus’ transforming power at work in our world today?

### The Cleansing of the Temple (2:13-22)

#### A. The story of Jesus’ “cleansing” of the Jerusalem temple is found in all four Gospels.

1. The Synoptic Gospels associate the story with the end of Jesus’ life, but John places it at the beginning of Jesus’ ministry. It is unlikely that Jesus performed the bold act twice, so the two traditions probably narrate the same event.
2. John moves the temple scene to the beginning because it serves a symbolic function for him. As the second act of Jesus’ ministry, the “cleansing” of the Jerusalem temple provides a striking contrast with the Cana miracle.
3. **In Cana**, John reveals the grace and glory of Jesus and the abundant new life Jesus offers. **In Jerusalem**, John highlights the challenge and threat that new life poses to the existing order.
4. In other words, the gift of God’s presence and the challenge that it brings to the ways of the world go hand in hand. John reveals the fullness of Jesus’ ministry right from the beginning.

#### B. *Read John 2:13-25.*

1. The temple was the beating heart of Judaism. It was the center of worship and music, of politics and society, of national celebration and mourning. It was the place where Israel’s God, Yahweh, had promised to live in the midst of his people.
2. Passover is celebrated in early spring. Large crowds of pilgrims would come to Jerusalem for the festival from all over the region. The distances that the pilgrims traveled meant that they could not bring their own animals to sacrifice in the temple but had to buy them there.
3. The temple fees could only be paid in the temple currency, so money changers were necessary to convert the other currencies that the pilgrims would have with them.

What do Jesus' words and actions tell us about what the temple had become (vv. 15-16)?

4. In driving the merchants out of the temple area, Jesus makes it impossible for pilgrims to make their Passover preparations. Jesus completely disrupts the mechanisms for celebrating Passover in the temple and poses a very serious challenge to standard religious practices. **Unlike the Synoptics, Jesus confronts the system itself, not just its abuses** ("den of robbers" Lk. 19:46).

How might you have responded if you had been a Jew worshiping in the temple on that day?

C. The people demand a sign from Jesus, to which he responds: "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up."

1. The people who question Jesus interpret Jesus' words on a literal level: they talk about the physical construction of their current temple (v. 20). They challenge Jesus with the actual timing of the renovation and rebuilding of the temple. As we shall see in later parts of the Gospel, Jesus often encounters resistance when he uses metaphors to speak about who he is.
2. But there is no doubt what John thinks it all means. It is Passover time. He has already told us that Jesus is God's passover lamb (1:29), and now he goes to Jerusalem at the time when liberation, freedom, rescue from slavery in Egypt (the exodus) was being celebrated. Somehow, John wants us to understand, what Jesus did in the temple is a hint at the new meaning he is giving to Passover. **John's temple story is ultimately about Jesus' fate, not the Temple's.**

So what does it mean for Jesus to speak metaphorically of the temple of his body?

D. The key to understanding the metaphor is stated matter-of-factly: "He was speaking of the temple of his body" (v. 21).

1. Often throughout John, the narrator will provide the reader with information or a way of looking at things that the characters in the Gospel do not have.
2. For Jewish practice, the temple is the place where God's presence is said to dwell. But as the incarnate Word of God, Jesus' body, the Word-made-flesh, is where God's presence dwells (1:14).
3. Jesus is the new temple, the place where God now can be found on earth. When "temple" is read this way, the three days of verse 19 refer to Jesus' own death and resurrection.

E. Verse 22 is important in another way as well.

1. This verse points the Gospel readers to the time after Jesus' resurrection as the time when the disciples "**remembered**" and "**believed.**" This comment helps us to see that the disciples' experience is the same as our own: both groups reflect back on the life and death of Jesus from a point after the resurrection.
2. Thus, telling the Jesus story is not enough for John; he is also concerned with how the meaning of the Jesus story can come alive for the Gospel's readers. This verse suggests that over time and through retelling and remembering the stories of Jesus, one engages the Word-made-flesh, the revelation of God in Jesus, in ever-deepening ways.

At this point in your encounters with Jesus through John's Gospel, what is your response to him and his signs?

## **Reflection**

1. What word, phrase, or event stands out to you in this story?
2. What do you think the story is saying to the audience that originally received it?
3. What is the story saying to us today?
4. What is the story calling us to believe?
5. What is the story calling us to do?

## **Points for Home**

1. Jesus' gift of wine illustrates a truth of the prologue, that from Jesus we have received "grace upon grace" (1:16). It reveals the grace and glory of Jesus and the abundant new life Jesus offers. The miracle challenges us to see the new possibilities ushered in by the incarnate Christ.
2. Like the disciples, we are invited to share in the wonder of this miracle, to enter into the joyous celebration made possible by Jesus' gift.
3. We are also invited to see what the disciples see—that in the abundance and graciousness of Jesus' gift, one catches a glimpse of the identity and character of God (2:11).
4. The cleansing of the temple shows that the gift of God's presence and the challenge that it brings to the ways of the world go hand in hand. God, through the Word-made-flesh, is doing a new thing from within the old system.

## **Sources:**

Gail O'Day, *The Gospel of John*

NT Wright, *John for Everyone, Part 1*

R. Alan Culpepper, *The Gospel and Letters of John*

Robert Kysar, *John the Maverick Gospel*