

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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The First sign and the cleansing of the Temple - John 2

The layout of today's chapter is very simple and straightforward.

- First of all, we are given the account of a marriage in Cana of Galilee, a town in the north of Israel. This is clearly a picture of joy and blessing.
- Secondly, we are told about the action of the Lord Jesus in cleansing the Temple in Jerusalem. This is just as clearly a picture of judgment.
- Thirdly, the impression left on those who were there was so dramatic that the ruling class of Jews was provoked to raise a very important question with the Lord Jesus. What authority did He have to be able to claim to either dispense blessing or administer judgment in this arbitrary manner?
- Fourthly, we are given an indication that no one can enjoy the blessing, or escape the judgment, as a result of either their own inherent ability or their actual endeavours or achievements.

Let us look at these important matters, one at a time.

Firstly, does the text justify the statement that the marriage in Cana of Galilee is a valid picture of the blessing that is available for those who come to the Lord Jesus and put their trust in Him?

Quite clearly, a marriage is intended to be a very happy event, a matter for celebration, sharing in the joy of the occasion. In a relatively small community like Cana, most people would know most other people fairly well. The history of the families involved would be fairly well known. Very few formal introductions would be necessary. There would be few inhibitions to be cleared away. All present would be ready to enjoy themselves from the very outset. In that part of the world, certainly in those days, wine was quite a common fluid for drinking purposes at meals. It was certainly a staple requirement in any celebration, particularly at a wedding. The usage of wine in the Bible is consistent with this. Indeed, throughout scripture, wine is used as a symbol of joy. For instance, in Judges 9:13, we read that 'wine cheereth God and man'. Again, in Psalm 104:15, we are told, 'wine maketh glad the heart of man'.

So, here we have a situation where we would normally expect people to be enjoying themselves; a happy occasion where there would be an abundant supply of good food, and an ample supply of good wine to celebrate the union of a bridegroom with his bride. All who knew them well would be very happy to be invited to be present, and to join in with the festivities. Now, whether by oversight or by lack of proper planning, I cannot say. The fact remains that the governor of the feast at the marriage in Cana of Galilee was quite disconcerted to find that the supply of wine was inadequate. Indeed, it ran out. When this came to the knowledge of Mary, the mother of Jesus, she was in no doubt at all about what to do to resolve the problem and meet the need. She went to the Lord Jesus, Who was present with His disciples, and made the simple statement, "They have no wine". Before we go any further, here we have a very basic principle demonstrated. If ever you or I have a need, the first move, not the last resort, should be to bring the matter to the Lord. He knows all about it before we come, but it is right that our very first move should be to acknowledge to Him that we have a need and that we accept in faith that He is able to meet that need.

On the surface, the response of the Lord was not very encouraging. "What has that got to do with Me? Mine hour has not yet come." Now, the 'hours' in John's Gospel are always significant. Not necessarily, or usually, the time of day registered on the clock! Rather, many significant epochs in the Lord's life and ministry are marked out by John as 'hours'. So, whenever an 'hour' is referred to in John's Gospel, we do well to pause and reflect on what important stage in the Lord's life on earth has been arrived at. In this particular instance, the Lord is referring to the 'hour', or 'moment', when the whole world will be brought into blessing because He will have taken over the reins of government, in what the Bible speaks of as His 'day', or here the 'hour', of glory. You will remember that the prophet Isaiah foretells the day when 'a king shall reign in righteousness' (32:1). The prophecy anticipates the time when peace, plenty and prosperity shall prevail, because the Lord Jesus Himself will be in undisputed sway. It will surely happen. God has said that it will. Listen to the word of God. "(God) has appointed a day, in the which He will rule the world in righteousness by that man whom He has ordained; whereof He hath given assurance unto all men, in that He has raised Him from the dead" (Acts 17:31). That king will be the Lord Jesus. Make no mistake about it. The time for that universal blessing will not arrive until the Coming of the Lord in power and great glory. At the marriage in Cana of Galilee, that moment had not yet arrived, although it was an illustration of what things will be like when it does

happen. Scripture affirms that the Lord Jesus must first suffer, and then enter into His glory. In between, He would be crucified, be buried, be raised again from among the dead, and then ascend into heaven, to await the moment when He would come again, subdue His enemies and take up the reins of government. This is the subject of much of the prophecy outlined in scripture. But more of that later.

Notwithstanding this apparent rebuff, Mary instructed the servants to make all the necessary preparations. In effect, she said, "Don't worry. Everything is under control. Just do what He says. He will make sure that there is sufficient wine for the celebration. Rest assured! No one will go short."

What follows is a very good example of the way in which the truth is presented in the Gospel of John. There is a need. The need is recognised and acknowledged. The matter is brought to the attention of the Lord Jesus, the Son of God. He takes control. He issues a clear, unambiguous command. This command is obeyed, verbatim, word for word. The blessing flows, and is enjoyed. This is a simple but important sequence of events, which occurs several times in the Gospel narrative in John. On each occasion, it is simple but complete obedience to the words of the Son of God which make it possible for the blessing to flow. As is stated plainly in this case, these events are called 'signs' in John's Gospel. They signify the personal glory of the One Who is doing them, confirming that He is indeed the Son of God.

Let us check the detail here. Does it match the declared pattern? Of course it does! To the very letter! The Lord said, "Fill the water pots with water." What did they do? They filled the water pots with water. They did exactly what He had told them to do. So far, so good! Next, the Lord said, "Draw out now, and take the contents to the governor of the feast", whom we would possibly call the Master of Ceremonies. What did they do? They drew samples, and took it to the governor of the feast. Notice, the servants again did exactly as they had been told. The result? The governor of the feast was amazed at the superb quality of the wine. What did He expect, I wonder? Nothing but the very best, surely, when it comes from the hands of the Son of God!

In verse 11 of this chapter, the final comment given about this episode is that "This beginning of signs did Jesus in Cana of Galilee, and manifested forth His glory, and His disciples believed on Him." This is the purpose for which the signs were given. First of all, to manifest His glory, display it openly, let it be seen and appreciated. Then, as a consequence, faith in Him is confirmed and strengthened in His disciples!

The next event is, just as clearly, an illustration of the fact that, if the blessing that the Son of God offers and provides is refused, the only alternative is judgment. Let us ask again. Do the details confirm this suggestion? This is what happened. The Lord Jesus went up to Jerusalem because it was approaching the time of the Feast of Passover. Clearly, it was not practicable for everyone to transport their own animals for the celebration of the Feast of Passover. It was practicable for local tradesmen to make suitable beasts available commercially. That was not the issue. What was at stake was that these tradesmen, and other ancillary trades, like moneylenders, were using the very precincts of the Temple for merely commercial purposes. This horrified the Lord Jesus. "What?" He said. "Make My Father's house a house of merchandise? Never!" He made a symbolic scourge of small cords and drove them all out of the Temple. This is a very interesting and significant remark. "Jesus made a scourge of small cords." Now one of the statements made at the very beginning of the Gospel is, "All things were made by Him, and without Him was not anything made that was made." If He made all things, obviously that includes everything that was ever made. So why single out one particular thing that He made, as if by way of exception. The overall witness of scripture is perfectly plain. God desires to bless. That is abundantly clear. But, if the blessing is refused, the only alternative is judgment. So the scourge of small cords, clearly an instrument of judgment, is brought in as something exceptional that had to be made to carry out the judgment that had become necessary. To quote a well-known phrase, "Judgment is God's strange work", as Isaiah 28:21 indicates. Here, then, we have yet another picture of something much more far-reaching than the immediate circumstance. When the time is ripe, the Lord Jesus will assume total command of the administration of the affairs for the whole of the universe. He will bring in untold blessing. Where necessary, He will also assert righteous judgment, according to His own absolute standards. Scripture always presents the truth in perfect balance. This incident is no exception.

At this stage, as we move on, we must give the Jews the credit for understanding that what was going on was no ordinary event. They seemed to discern that there was a very striking symbolism attached to what was being enacted before their very eyes. They said to the Lord Jesus, "What sign shewest Thou unto us, seeing that Thou doest these things?" In other words, "What's going on? Who do you think you are? What right have you got to act like this? Turning everything upside down, without as much as asking us what our views are! Don't you know we are in charge here?"

Let us consider how the truth is expressed here, and look at the misapprehension of the Jews, who could not understand at all what the Lord Jesus was telling them. Notice their use of the word 'sign' here. They were right. What was happening was indeed a 'sign' of something essential that they needed to learn. The Lord Jesus Himself,

personally, and the value to God of His work upon the Cross of Calvary, is absolutely crucial. Our eternal destiny depends on these vital truths, and our acceptance of them in the faith of our souls.

The Lord answered their question by saying to them, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it again." The Jews immediately jumped to the wrong conclusion. "What?" they said. "Herod has been rebuilding this Temple for forty six years and it still isn't finished. What do you mean, you will build it up in three days?" John the Apostle, guided by the Holy Spirit, adds the correct interpretation. The Lord Jesus was saying, "If you, the Jews, take Me and put Me to death, I will rise again from among the dead in three days, as I have said on many occasions." Indeed, in chapter 10, John records the Lord's own statement, "I have power to lay down My life, and I have power to take it again." In John's words, 'He was speaking of the temple of His body'.

There can be no real misunderstanding of the force and meaning of the Lord's words. He gives the plainest possible answer. The actual, physical death and personal, bodily resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ; these demonstrate the only righteous basis for all blessing and all justice. We need the whole of the New Testament to fill out the detail of what is involved, but this is the core. All blessing, and, ultimately, all justice, rest upon the righteous foundation of the death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ. After all, at the most basic level, this is the kernel of the Christian gospel. 'Christ died for our sins, according to the scriptures; and ... He was buried, and He rose again the third day, according to the scriptures' (1 Corinthians 15:3-4).

The last statement in this section, added by John, is also crucial. 'When therefore, He was risen from the dead, His disciples remembered that He had said this unto them; and they believed the scripture, and the word which Jesus had said.' In statements recorded in chapters 14, 15 and 16 of this Gospel, the Lord Jesus made it plain that they could never understand fully the significance of what He had said unto them while He was with them on earth. Not until He had died, risen again from the dead, gone back to heaven, and sent the Holy Spirit into their hearts, would they be able to perceive the full significance of His teaching. When the Holy Spirit had come, He would "bring to their remembrance whatsoever (Jesus) had said unto them" (14:26). He would "guide them into all truth" (16:13). John, evidently with the personal advantage of hindsight, and empowered by the Holy Spirit, is led to insert his comment, many years after the event, to put things in proper perspective.

At the end of the chapter, we are told that many believed on His Name when they saw the miracles that He did. However, the Lord discerned that their apparent acceptance of Him was not based on real, personal, spiritual faith. Rather, they were astounded and tremendously impressed by what they saw Him do. But that wasn't by any means sufficient. It was necessary for the Lord to teach them that something much more fundamental was essential if they were to be brought into the wealth of blessing that was resident in Him. Again and again in this Gospel, which sets the Lord Jesus forth as the Son of God, and emphasises His deity, we are told that 'He knew'. Omniscience, full, total, absolute knowledge of all things is an attribute of deity. This comes out here in the face of the apparent response and acclaim of many who saw the signs He gave. Because of this, we are told 'Jesus did not commit Himself unto them, because he knew all men, and needed not that any should testify of man, for He knew what was in man'. That is, while, superficially, there seemed to be a measure of response to Him, deep down there was an underlying, prevailing condition in men that prevented them from being brought into a real, spiritual relationship with the Lord Jesus until the root cause of their moral and spiritual condition was dealt with. But that leads us into chapter 3, which we must leave for another talk, on another day.

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