



Good things can crowd out the best.

Lesson 3

When Change Is for the Better

Lesson Setting

Scripture: John 2:1-22.

This section of the Gospel begins shortly after the time when the Baptist identifies Jesus and helps Him begin to collect disciples. After the wedding at Cana, Jesus goes home to Capernaum for several months and then goes down to Jerusalem at the time of the Passover.

Another day, another shekel. Business has been going well for a while, Micah the caterer thought to himself. Lots of young people growing up, lots of marriages to celebrate, lots of food and drink to prepare. People needed caterers for such occasions. It was a decent living, and a lot of satisfaction came with it: helping families get together, seeing happy people enjoying a good feast.

This particular wedding was a bit strange, however. Micah had been approached by Mary to cater a wedding for one of her relatives (see *The Desire of Ages*, 146). It was rumored that Mary considered her son Yeshuah to be born of the Holy Spirit (a novel claim for a young, engaged woman who had been caught pregnant!). Another rumor was that perhaps He was the long-hoped-for Messiah. Some people were concerned, therefore, that Yeshuah's arrival with

His disciples would create a sideshow that could detract from the wedding itself.

But something even worse had happened. The banquet supplies had run out before the party was over. This could result in an irreparable blow to Micah's reputation in a small town like Cana. So he began to panic as he noticed a decline in the quality of the grape juice being served. You see, the right way to cater drinks was to put out the best stuff first, and then when people were a bit tired of feasting and could no longer tell the difference, to bring out the inferior drink. That strategy saved lots of money, much of which went into Micah's pockets. But when the quality declined, the quantity was starting to run low.

That's when the strangest thing of all happened. Just as supplies were running out, a servant brought Micah a cup of juice to check out. It was the sweetest, freshest juice he had ever tasted! And there was

What was the best (or the worst) experience you ever had at someone else's wedding?

plenty to go around! Now he *knew* these people were strange. Saving the best for the end of the feast just didn't make sense! Everybody knew that wasn't the way things were supposed to go! Micah hoped that this wasn't going to set any precedents for the future.

One last strange thing. Micah didn't remember ordering this particular brand of juice. . . .

Bible Search (John 2:1-11)

John 2 opens with a simple story about a wedding where the beverage runs out before the end of the feast. Jesus shows up and rescues a young couple and their caterer from embarrassment. But is that all there is to this story, or is something deeper going on?

In the first lesson, we became aware of the absence of parables in the Gospel of John. Since parables were a major method in Jesus' teaching, their absence in this Gospel is remarkable. But we will discover in this unit that their role in the Gospel is replaced by the stories about Jesus and His miracles. Beneath the surface of each historical account is a deeper meaning that teaches us something special about Jesus. As the first miracle in the Gospel, the wedding-at-Cana story is the first of these living parables.

Answer the following questions on the basis of the biblical text:

1. When did the wedding take place?
John 2:1.
2. Who seems to have had a special concern about the arrangements related to the wedding? John 2:2, 3.
3. In John's Gospel, what did Jesus mean when He said that His "time has not yet come"? John 2:4; 7:25, 30; 8:20.
4. What were the stone water pots normally used for? John 2:6.
5. What was the master of the banquet's (the caterer) assessment of the quality of the wine Jesus had produced? John 2:10.
6. How many miracles had Jesus done before this occasion? John 2:11.
7. How did Jesus reveal His glory in the Gospel of John? John 2:11; 12:23-25, 32, 33.

Important concepts lie just below the surface of this brief Bible study. Changing water into wine symbolized something bigger than a mere physical miracle. The water was not

just any water; it was water set aside by the Jews for ceremonial washings. The wine was not just any wine; it was "the best."

John uses this story as a gentle criticism of legalism and formalism. God had originally given the Jews many instructions regarding washings and cleansings, intended to represent their need for cleansing from sin. But the religious people of Jesus' day were obsessed with washing rituals, among other things (see also Matthew 15:1, 2). Washing is good. It is sanitary. As a religious expression, it can remind us of God's cleansing us from sin. But Jesus replaces the water of ceremonial washings with something better, the tasty juice of the grape, a symbol of His blood.

That brings us to the other point highlighted here. John's portrayal of the story presents a series of indirect references to the Cross. The wedding took place "on the third day," a reference to Jesus' resurrection (see Matthew 16:21; Luke 24:7, 21, 46; Acts 10:40; 1 Corinthians 15:4). Jesus turns water into wine, a symbol of His blood (Luke 22:20; 1 Corinthians 11:25, 26). References to both Jesus' "time" ("hour" in the Greek) and His "glory" are pointers to the Cross. And in the only two times in this Gospel that Jesus is described as speaking to His mother, He calls her "woman": in the wedding story here and at the cross itself (John 19:25-27).

In a special way, therefore, this charming wedding story becomes a parable of the Cross and of the glory of God's character that would be manifested there. These two themes are continued in the following story about Jesus' cleansing of the temple.

Bible Search (John 2:13-22)

Read John 2:13-22 and answer the following questions:

8. What occasion brought Jesus to Jerusalem?
9. What was going on in the temple courts?
10. How did Jesus respond?
11. When challenged about the authority under which He acted this way, what did Jesus say?
12. What did Jesus mean by "temple"?
13. Does this concept of "temple" apply only to Jesus' body? 1 Corinthians 6:19, 20.

The animals being sold in the temple courts were available for sacrifices, making the "marketplace" a genuine and needed service to long-distance travelers. The money exchanging was necessary because the temple did business only in a unique temple currency.

While other sources suggest that there was a lot of deception and corruption involved in the temple-court sales, that doesn't seem to be the issue here in John. The problem here is that the activity, while meeting a legitimate need, was located in a place that should have been devoted exclusively to teaching, worship, and prayer.

Journaling (Experience)

Are there areas of your life where good things are "cluttering up" your life or distracting you from the better things? Ask God to help you identify those "good"



Jesus' route from the Jordan River to Cana

things that get in the way of a fuller relationship with Jesus. What areas of your "temple" would God like to cleanse at this time? How would He like to go about it?

Good, Better, and Best

In John 2:1-22, we see good things getting in the way of the best. It is no different today. Everyone seeks meaning and a sense of value out of life, but few seek it in Jesus. Instead, people try to find "life" by accumulating things, by performing in ways that bring praise, and by developing relationships with admired people.

Chester thought you could find life in possessions. He grew up in the drug-infested streets of Fort Apache, the South Bronx. In his neighborhood, young people often admired pimps and prostitutes because they drove expensive cars and wore fancy clothes. When I asked Chester what he thought happiness was, he said, "Happiness is a big, black Cadillac!" Similarly, bumper stickers proclaim things like "He who dies with the most toys, wins!" and "The only difference between the men and the boys is the price of their toys."

Unlike Chester, I am more susceptible to the performance trap. If I perform well and others praise me for it, I feel more valuable as a person. This came home to me the day I made four errors at third base in a slow-pitch softball game. I was depressed for three days afterward! How stupid! Yet how real! Many people would give almost anything to be a sports hero or a movie star, to be considered the best in the world at what they do.

People also seek life in terms of "who you

know." If you have a good relationship with the richest, the brightest, the smartest, the most famous, and/or the most powerful people in your world, you feel more valuable as a human being. Adultery often happens, not because someone is prettier or nicer than a person's spouse, but out of the need to be affirmed and held valuable by someone else.

If true life were found in possessions, performance, and people, professional athletes would be the happiest people on earth.

Possessions, performance, and people are good things. They are part of the spice of life, but they are not life itself. If true life were found in possessions, performance, and people, professional athletes would be the happiest people on earth. After all, many of them make millions of dollars a year, they are admired by people all over the world, and they have all the romantic options anyone could possibly want. Why, then, is drug abuse a major issue in their lives? Why are some players angry and dysfunctional? Because life, real life, cannot be found in money, performance, and people alone.

No matter how many possessions you may have, they are never enough. And those you have rust, rot, break, crash, or get hopelessly scratched up. Athletes get old and frail, beauty queens get old and wrinkled,

and teachers get old and forgetful. Loved ones sometimes leave you, disrespect you, divorce you, and/or die when you are least prepared for it. Life is frightfully insecure if based on such good things as possessions, performance, and relationships with other people.

But life is not without hope. If we could find a friend who knows all about us, yet loves us just the way we are (so we know he will not change his opinion of us), who is genuinely valuable (a superstar), and who lives forever (so we won't be bereaved by death), we could have a strong sense of self-worth and meaning in our lives. And that sense of self-worth wouldn't be hostage to the ups and downs of the stock market, the highs and lows of our daily performance, or the moods and whims of our friends and relatives.

I have good news for you. Such a friend lives. His name is Jesus. He is worth the whole universe, yet He knows all about us and loves us as we are. And He will never die, so we can know that we have security in Him throughout eternity. To have Jesus is to have life, even in poverty, sickness, and bereavement. To know Jesus the way John knew Jesus is to understand why the martyrs chose to die rather than reject Him. They discovered that life without Jesus just wasn't worth living.

Journaling (Experience)

What do I do when I'm feeling down about my life? Do I turn naturally to Jesus, or do I seek comfort in eating, shopping, talking on the phone, getting a task done,

and/or competing harder at games?

Journaling (Prayer)

Write a prayer committing your possessions, your performance challenges, and all of your relationships to Jesus. Be as specific as possible (CDs, clothing, test preparation, best friend, etc.). Invite Him to provide the sense of meaning and self-worth that you have previously sought from other sources.

Foretastes of the Cross

At the conclusion of the first part of the Bible study, we noticed a number of concepts embedded in the basic wedding story that acted as "foretastes" of the Cross (third day, woman, time, wine, glory). This theme continues in the cleansing-of-the-temple episode. When challenged by what authority He had cleansed the temple, Jesus alluded to His divinity by referring to His body as a temple. Thus when Jesus said, "Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days," He was clearly referring to His death on the cross and the resurrection that would follow.

It is the Cross that establishes the value of a person. When the Creator of the universe (more valuable than everything in the universe, including all the toys we often worship, and everyone in it, including all the great athletes and movie stars whom people often worship) decides to die for you and me, it places an infinite value on our lives. The depth of Jesus' sacrifice is a statement about the value of every person. If I

am that valuable to the greatest person in the universe, then it doesn't matter whether I'm rich or poor, great or small, famous or ordinary; and it doesn't matter what anyone else thinks of me. I am truly valuable in Christ. And the Cross is the place where that value is demonstrated without question.

No wonder Paul said, "May I never boast

except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world" (Galatians 6:14). Paul could turn his back on the allurements of the world, its possessions, performance, and people, because he had found meaning and value in something far more stable and satisfying, the Cross of Jesus Christ. That

same Cross is a central theme of the Gospel of John.

Journaling (Insight)

How has the Cross become clearer to you personally because of your study of this Gospel thus far? In your own words, express

the relationship between the Cross and the things we strive for every day.

Anchor Text

"To those who sold doves he said, 'Get these things out of here! How dare you turn my Father's house into a market!' " (John 2:16).

Reaction

Discussion Questions

1. Why would Jesus take time to attend a wedding when His mission was to save the whole world? What role did His attendance at the wedding play in His overall mission?
2. At what point in the wedding story does it become clear that this is not simply a charming story about a wedding? Why?
3. If you were allowed to choose one miracle to jump-start a new ministry for God, what miracle do you think would have a significant impact on people in today's world? Why?
4. When is it appropriate to be angry about things that are going on in the church? In the lives of family and friends? Is there spiritual danger in exercising "righteous indignation?"
5. Does Jesus' example in this story permit us to use violence against wrongdoing at times? How do you think Jesus would respond if He came upon a bank robbery in progress? A woman being raped? A racially motivated riot? A rock concert or a bingo game in church?
6. How is it that useful practices, such as providing sacrifices for travelers, deteriorate into rackets? Why is it that religious practices tend to outlive their usefulness?

Expanded Horizons

1. Compare the temple-cleansing scene in John with those of Matthew, Mark, and Luke. What are the major similarities and differences? What is the main concern of Jesus in each of the accounts of Matthew 21:12-17; Mark 11:15-19; and Luke 19:45-48? Write your answer as a short essay.
2. In a paragraph describe Jesus' relationship with His mother based on John 2:3-5 and 19:25-27. Then read Matthew 13:53-58 and Mark 3:20, 21, 31-35. How do these passages affect your assessment of the

relationship? Write a paragraph developing your further understanding.

3. Use the marginal references in

your Bible to find the psalm quoted in John 2:17. List all the items of similarity between the two passages.

CREATIVE PROJECTS

1. Use the worksheet provided by your teacher to compare the seven major miracles in the Gospel of John with the plagues poured out on Egypt.
2. On the worksheet provided by your teacher, compare the seven major miracles in the Gospel of John with the miracles in the story of Elisha (2 Kings 2 through 9 and 13).
3. Read the *Seventh-day Adventist Bible Dictionary* article on Herod's Temple, describing its construction and its architectural layout. Note especially the illustrations. Then, using materials of your own choosing, create a model of what the temple and its courtyard may have looked like.