

RUNNING ON EMPTY

John 2:1-11

**Dr. Howard Batson
First Baptist Church
Amarillo, Texas
September 29, 2024**

Today, we come to our third sermon in our Johannine series for a sermon entitled “Running on Empty. Pondering this passage about water turning into wine reminds me of a story that Dr. Winfred Moore, our longtime pastor, once told me. A particular “dry” county in Tennessee was going to the ballot box to turn “wet.” Many of the folks were hoping that where there had been no libations, there would now be free-flowing spirits. During the campaign, one of the citizens wishing for a wet county approached old, Bible-thumping, teetotaler, Miss Hattie. Making his case, he reminded Miss Hattie that, after all, Jesus’ first miracle was turning water into wine. “What do you think about that, Miss Hattie?” Miss Hattie was surprisingly struck silent for about 30 seconds, until she replied, “Well, I would have thought more of Him if He hadn’t.”

If you’ve ever been in charge of planning a wedding, you know that at least one thing will go wrong every single time. Never have nuptials been shared in a flawless fashion.

The pastor told me this story himself, while we were telling wedding mishap stories at the Baptist General Convention of Texas. The young pastor said it was his very first wedding. And the expectations from this bride and her godzilla mother were high. I can pretty well predict where pastors are most likely to make their mistakes on the first wedding they officiate. The most frequent faux pas is that the nervous minister starts the service without ever seating the guests – the bride comes down, her mother stands up, the congregation joins, and the pastor just starts the service without ever motioning to the congregation to be seated so the ceremony can begin. I have seen ceremonies in which the pastor left the congregation standing for five minutes before he finally realized the crowd was still awkwardly, impatiently standing on their feet. At one wedding, where I was just attending, I could tell the pastor had committed the common mistake of leaving the crowd standing. I got up, went to the back of the sanctuary and started doing this [wave arms], trying to help my brother out. He caught on quickly and seated the crowd. Whew! And yes, I still make mistakes, too.

The second most common mistake is forgetting to tell the couple to kiss. The pastor sharing the story about his first wedding ceremony said that he got the crowd seated all right, but he omitted the sealing of the vows with a kiss. Having memorized the ceremony better than the preacher himself, the bride kept saying, without moving her mouth (ventriloquist style), “Kiss me. Kiss me,” trying to coax her new husband to seal the deal with a kiss. Either the husband couldn’t hear or he was absolutely oblivious, but the pastor kept hearing her say, “Kiss me. Kiss me. Kiss me,” so the pastor said, “I did.” He got so confused that he kissed the bride upon her command. Of course, no one will ever let that poor preacher live down the day he himself kissed the bride!

Yes, in every marriage ceremony there is always at least one mistake. The young couple, very much in love, was getting married. Rachel, the wife to be, was very nervous about the big occasion, and so the pastor chose one verse that he felt would be a great encouragement to her. The verse was 1 John 4:18 which says, “There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear.” Rather unwisely, the pastor asked the best man to read the Bible passage and to say that the pastor had felt that this was a meaningful verse for Rachel. Now the pastor made the mistake of assuming that the best man was biblically literate, but he wasn’t a regular church goer and didn’t know the difference between the Gospel of John and the first letter of John. As instructed, he introduced his reading by saying that the pastor felt this was a very apt verse for the couple. But instead of reading 1 John 4:18 about perfect love casting out fear, he read John 4:18, which says, “You have had five husbands and the one that you now have it not your husband.” From such faux pas there is no recovery!

Our story today is about a wedding, and the expectations are pretty high in the first century, too. And, yes, something does go wrong, really wrong – the wine runs out. Let’s take a look at the text.

2:1-2

On the third day there was a wedding in Cana of Galilee, and the mother of Jesus was there; and both Jesus and His disciples were invited to the wedding.

Remember our character from our previous sermon, Nathanael, was from Cana. We move from Nathanael, our neighbor from Cana, to a wedding in Cana.

The story begins with the words “on the third day.” Many see a reference to the resurrection of Jesus – “on the third day” – in the opening of this story. The symbolism is clear: on the third day, the day of Jesus’ resurrection, the new age of the Messiah begins, a new age represented here by new, better wine. While there seems to be a subtle hint from the evangelist about Easter in these opening words, they are, more likely, simply a part of his consecutive accounting for a week of ministry in the life of Jesus. Counting seven days in the life of our Lord, we find: Day 1 (1:19-28); Day 2 (1:29-34, “on the next day”); Day 3 (1:35-42, “on the next day”); Day 4 (1:43-51, “on the next day”); Day 7 (2:1-11, our day here, “on the third day,” i.e., three days later than the fourth day being the seventh day). Chapter 1 through chapter 2:11, collectively, represent the first full week recorded in the ministry of Jesus, a week culminating with the Messiah turning water into wine.

After the keeping of Jesus’ calendar, we are told that the event at hand is a wedding in Cana of Galilee. Though the wedding couple remains nameless, we are quickly introduced to “the mother of Jesus.” The fact that both Jesus and His mother (and possibly brothers, 2:12) were invited to the same wedding suggests that the occasion was the wedding of a family friend. Mary herself seems to bear some responsibility for organizing the catering of the affair. No surprise, therefore, that she quickly steps up to deal with the waning supply of wine. Most likely a widow by now (no mention of Joseph), Mary would have leaned heavily on her first-born son. No surprise, therefore, that she would look to Jesus to supply what is missing.

While folks get frustrated if a Baptist wedding lasts more than 30 minutes, followed by an in-and-out reception, in antiquity, the center of the Jewish wedding event was a celebratory feast which normally lasted for seven days! Look at verse 3: “And when the wine ran out, the mother of Jesus said to Him, ‘They have no wine.’”

The first thing I want you to see this morning from this story is that

I. We have to admit there is a problem (v.3).

There is no wine. The situation is dire; the guests have drunk all the wine. In a culture of shame, the duties of hospitality were not to be taken lightly. Perhaps the bridegroom was poor, and, being unable to make full provision for his guests, he was simply hoping for the best. Even beyond embarrassment, moreover, running out of wine might render the bridegroom’s family liable, leading to a lawsuit. They had failed to provide for their guests.

Failing to be the “hostess with the mostness” is not only an ancient dilemma, it is, very much, a modern mishap. One writer posts on forums.theknot.com; “I just got home from my honeymoon and my mom just called to tell me that her book club informed her that their table never got food at my wedding! In fact, two tables never got food, and when the caterers ran out they ‘sent for more food.’ Pasta salad and cans of black beans! I am horrified that my guests were not fed! When we complained to the restaurant, they refunded us \$600 dollars! And, to add insult to injury, they included a voucher for brunch at their restaurant! I am so upset! How can this be remedied, or do I just have to let it go!”

No one wants the shame, the embarrassment of failing to provide for their family and friends.

Every year, we host a big event, and it horrifies me to think we might run out of candy. During our Fall Festival, we begin the evening with a mountain of candy on the center table in the Family Life Center check out area. And then you bring more candy. At the very beginning, we have an ample supply of Kits-Kats, Twix bars, Hershey bars, and bubble gum. But when we begin, it seems as if all of Amarillo has decided to come to First Baptist Church for Fall Festival. Why not? It’s a gift from First Baptist to our community. It’s all free, it’s all fun – the bounce houses, the games, the candy, the frito pie, and the coffee truck.

Usually about half way through, I notice that the enormous mountain of candy is down to a little molehill. What to do? I remember on one occasion telling Brent Womble that I was about to head to CVS. “What for?” he asked. “The candy is getting low; I’ve got to go.” “Well, Dr. Moore never had to do that,” he replied. “What did he do?” I asked, taking the bait. “Well, he just multiplied it, of course.”

That may have been true with your previous pastor, but your present pastor has to run to CVS. You ought to see my buggy – two buggies full of to the brim with every piece of candy CVS has left on the shelves. I call a crew to come meet me at 15th Street to come and grab all the candy out of the car to make sure that, before anyone notices, the good times keep flowing. Thousands are fed by First Baptist.

One mother of the bride writes, “This just happened at my daughter’s wedding. It was a buffet. They ordered food for more than the number of invited guests, but ran out after only 2/3 of the guests had eaten. They ordered additional food once the problem was evident, but it took a while to arrive, and it came in batches. And we still feel as though it wasn’t enough. We feel terrible and apologized, of course, but it feels as though there is no way to make amends. We worked so hard to make a nice reception. We expected that not everything would go perfectly, but this was a REALLY big thing, probably the biggest thing that could go wrong. Right now it has tarnished our memories of an otherwise beautiful day. I am wondering if we will always feel this way? (posted by Kate, www.weddingwire.com, 9/23/2019)

Both then and now, the embarrassment of running out of refreshments at a wedding is a really big deal. And imagine if the wedding reception is not just a one-meal-deal, but a seven day feast.

Yes, what happened at this ancient wedding in Cana was such a big deal that we are still talking about it 2,000 years later. Mary, who was probably partially responsible for providing refreshments, goes to her oldest son and admits, “The wine is running out. What is everyone and anyone going to say about us when the wine runs out?”

The second thing I want you to see in this story is

II. We need to bring our problems to Jesus.

The fact that Mary came to Jesus indicates she believed He could resolve the problem. But at this point, Jesus has not performed a single miracle in John’s narrative. Despite the fact that we have yet to experience Jesus giving sight to the blind or multiplying the loaves and the fish, his mother is fully confident of His resourcefulness. We must remember that Mary knew the angels had prophetically proclaimed Jesus’ birth. She knew, moreover, that she conceived Him while still a virgin. And however she struggled to interpret it, she knew that He was the Messiah, the anointed one of God.

Jesus replies to her, “Woman, what do I have to do with you? My hour is not come.”

I think way too much has been made of Jesus’ response. “Woman” is not nearly as cold in the Greek as it comes across in English translations. Nonetheless, the fact that Jesus refers to her as “Woman,” and not “Mother,” is an indication that a new stage in their relationship has begun – the stage of His public ministry. Jesus is no longer primarily the son of Mary, or even Joseph, but “the Son of Man” (1:51).

The Greek literally reads, “What to me and to you?” Greek is full of idioms that were well known to first century hearers. This idiom is used frequently in the Old Testament Septuagint (Joshua 22:24; 2 Samuel 16:10; 1 Kings 17:18; 2 Kings 3:13), as well as in the New Testament (Matthew 8:29; Mark 1:24; 5:7; Luke 4:34; 8:28).

With this expression, Jesus is making clear, at the very beginning of His ministry, that He must be utterly free from any kind of human manipulation or agenda. His only calling is to do the will of the Father (5:30; 8:29).

We must not forget that Mary had birthed Him, nursed him, and watched him fall as he learned to walk. She, also, had grown to rely upon Him as a family provider – don't forget He was a carpenter! All that must now be subordinated to His divine mission of ushering in the kingdom of God.

Jesus explains, "My hour has not yet come." The word for hour (*hōra*) is a reference often found in John to refer to the passion of Jesus – His death on the cross, His resurrection, and His ascension to glory (7:30; 8:20; 12:23, 27; 13:1; 17:1). Jesus and Mary are operating on two different planes. Mary is primarily worried about the wedding ending with embarrassment; Jesus knows that the true messianic age, His hour, is just around the corner when the new wine will flow liberally (Jeremiah 31:12; Hosea 14:7; Amos 9:13-14). Often, Jesus uses the imagery of a wedding as a symbol for the arrival of the messianic age (Matthew 22:1-14; 25:1-13).

This story, therefore, becomes an acted parable, as Jesus declares the hour of the new wine, the hour of His glorification, has not yet come. Ultimately, Jesus is the bridegroom, and He will supply the new wine of the new age at the ultimate messianic banquet – the celebration of His kingdom having fully come.

There is a third thing I want you to see in the story. Not only admit there is a problem (v. 3) and bring the problem to Jesus (v. 3), but

III. Do whatever He asks you to do (v. 5).

But Mary says, "Do whatever He tells you to do." At that moment, Jesus ceased to be a guest and became the one who was in control of the whole wedding celebration. At that moment, a miracle began to happen. People are perfectly willing to have Jesus as a guest in their lives, but they are not willing to turn over control and "do whatever He tells them," so they never have their lives changed by a miracle.

Jesus' mother, Mary, is not overly sensitive to Jesus distancing Himself from her urgent agenda. In fact, having placed her request in proper context, she is quite confident that her son will solve the problem. She instructs the help to do "whatever He asks you to do."

The best advice ever offered to anyone at any time is: Do whatever Jesus asks you to do.

Verses 6-10

Now there were six stone waterpots set there for the Jewish custom of purification, containing twenty or thirty gallons each. Jesus said to them, "Fill the waterpots with water." So they filled them up to the brim. And he said to them, "Draw some out now and take it to the headwaiter." So they took it to him. When the headwaiter tasted the water which had become wine, and did not know where it came from (but the servants who had drawn the water knew), the headwaiter called the bridegroom and said to him, "Every man serves the good wine first, and when the people have drunk freely, then he serves the poorer wine; but you have kept the good wine until now."

And that's when Jesus stepped out of His humanity and into His divinity, changing mediocre water into vintage wine.

The water pots were used for Jewish ceremonial purification. The "tradition of the elders" held that the Jews could not eat until they gave their hands a ceremonial washing (Mark 7:3-4). Jesus' gift to the bridegroom, if you can do the math, is 150-plus gallons of good wine. The overflowing wine represents the lavish quantity of God's grace, available to those who are children of the new kingdom, attenders of the new messianic banquet.

Logically, hosts most often served the best wine first, as the drinkers' palates are still sensitive. As the guests become dulled by the drink, the bridegroom slips in a cheaper imitation. Breaking with the custom of his day, this bridegroom has actually saved the best for last.

The last thing I want you to see in this story is

IV. We must, in the end, commit ourselves to Jesus, the problem solver.

Look at verse 11.

This is the beginning of His signs Jesus did in Cana of Galilee, and manifested His glory, and His disciples believed in Him.

In John's gospel, Jesus' miracles are called "signs" (*sēmeia*). A "sign," by definition, points beyond itself to something more important. The turning of the water into wine points to (signifies) the real identity of Jesus and the arrival of the kingdom of God.

Throughout this gospel, there are six miracles that are designated as "signs," all of which point to Jesus as the Messiah (2:1-11; 4:43-54; 5:1-18; 6:1-15; 9:1-41; 11:1-57). The other gospel writers call Jesus' miracles "mighty works." Their designation, "mighty deeds" or "mighty works," focuses on the power of Jesus' acts. John uses "sign" to indicate that the miracles point beyond themselves to the arrival of the Messiah.

This very first sign begins the manifestation of Jesus' glory, resulting in belief within the disciples. In fact, this whole Gospel is written (23:30-31) with the intention that we might come to believe, that we, too, believe Jesus is the Messiah.

Now, sometimes Jesus turns alcohol into other things. As one wife put it, after her alcoholic husband encountered the transforming power of the resurrected Christ, "Jesus changed beer into furniture" – that is, the money that had been being spent on her husband's habit of beer was now being spent on caring for the family.

Yes, Jesus can change water into wine and beer into furniture. He can turn bitterness into peace and sour into sweet. He can turn hatred into love and anger into joy. He can take a broken creation and turn it into His kingdom.

Two miracles happened on this day. The first was the changing of water into wine, so that a great celebration could continue for the rest of the feast. The second was much more significant. In the

second miracle, the hearts of Jesus' disciples were changed from condemned sinners to forgiven children of God so the celebration could continue for the rest of eternity. You tell me which was the greatest miracle.

When you're running on empty, turn to Jesus and "do whatever He asks you to do."

Idea sources:

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