

You Are Cordially Invited To The Wedding

Recently I've been reading Sam Walton's autobiography. You probably know that he was the richest man in America. He was the founder of Wal-Mart which has become the largest retail outlet store in the United States. He mentions all the downsides of his being named America's richest man. He tells about reporters coming to his house, even taking pictures of him with a telephoto lens while he was having his hair cut at a local barber shop. But the stupidest thing to him was the invitation he received to Elizabeth Taylor's wedding. He couldn't imagine why Elizabeth Taylor would invite a stranger from Bentonville, Arkansas, who drives a pickup truck with two bird-dogs in the back, to her wedding in California.

You and I know why she invited him. Not because he's Sam Walton but because he's labeled the richest man in America. Wedding invitations often say a lot. They say a lot both about who's invited and about who does the inviting. That's the way it was for probably the most famous wedding that has ever taken place in all of history. It is not famous for the bride or groom (we don't even know their names), but it's famous for one of the invited guests. A man who was then and is now the richest man in the universe although they didn't know that when they invited him to their wedding. The story is told in John 2:1-11.

On the third day a wedding took place in Cana in Galilee. Jesus' mother was there, and Jesus and his disciples had also been invited to the wedding. When the wine was gone, Jesus' mother said to him, "They have no more wine."

"Dear woman, why do you involve me?" Jesus replied. "My time has not yet come."

His mother said to the servants, "Do whatever he tells you."

Nearby stood six stone water jars, the kind used by the Jews for ceremonial washing, each holding from

twenty to thirty gallons.

Jesus said to the servants, "Fill the jars with water"; so they filled them to the brim.

Then he told them, "Now draw some out and take it to the master of the banquet."

They did so, and the master of the banquet tasted the water that had been turned into wine. He did not realize where it had come from, though the servants who had drawn the water knew. Then he called the bridegroom aside and said, "Everyone brings out the choice wine first and then the cheaper wine after the guests have had too much to drink; but you have saved the best till now."

This, the first of his miraculous signs, Jesus performed at Cana in Galilee. He thus revealed his glory, and his disciples put their faith in him.

The wedding to which Jesus was invited was on a Wednesday in a tiny little village called Cana in the province of Galilee in what we would call Palestine or Israel today. It wasn't far from Jesus' home town of Nazareth. The family was probably poor. That seems a safe guess because most families were poor then, but also it's my guess because they ran out of wine and that hints more of a tight budget.

Weddings in those days were different from what we are used to. Betrothal (what we call engagement) began with solemn vows and lasted at least a year before the wedding. It was very serious stuff. It required a legal divorce to break the engagement.

The wedding itself was long — at least a day depending upon how you measured it. Actually,

it could be a lot longer than that as well. It was on a Wednesday if the bride was a virgin, Thursday if she was a widow. The day of the wedding communicated whether the bride

was a virgin much as a white wedding gown is meant to communicate virginity in modern times.

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There was a grand feast which required an invitation, followed by the wedding itself which was after dark. After the wedding was over there was a processional and they all would go house to house through the village even out into the countryside. The attendants carried a canopy over the bride and groom and they'd stop at every house to receive their congratulations. It was part of the social custom of establishing their marriage within the broader community.

The procession ended at the couple's new home where they began a week long "honeymoon" to which everyone that came to the wedding was invited. It's somewhat different than the way we do it today! During those seven days the bride and the groom were to be treated as if they were royalty, actually addressed as king and queen. Their friends were supposed to cater to their every whim.

What made this wedding most memorable took place back when the bride and groom and their families prepared their invitation list. Among all the other names of relatives and friends, someone said, "Let's invite Jesus of Nazareth." Perhaps someone else said, "But he's not even from Cana." Another said, "Let's invite him anyway." So they put his name on the list, and he made all the difference. The invitation and the inclusion of Jesus is what made this the most memorable and supernatural wedding of all of history.

The same is true for us. Our weddings and special events, if you count them in the course of all human activities, really are quite inconsequential. But what if we invite and include Jesus? Put the name of Jesus on the invitation list, add one more to the count for the caterer, set a place for him at the head table. Yes, invite Jesus and expect him to come! It makes all the difference.

At the wedding in Cana they discovered that simply having Jesus there did not mean the absence of problems. The wedding celebration was going well, but then a problem arose. The wine ran out (that's why I think they were probably poor people who had a tight budget.) They had

hoped it would stretch. Maybe they guessed that some of the invited would not come. But they ran out and it was embarrassing. It would be like having a wedding today where you invite two hundred guests for a reception with a sit down dinner, but your budget is short so you hope only 125 will come and that is the number of places set. If all 200 show up, the last 75, although they've brought gifts and are friends and family,

they're turned away — there's no space for them. It would be embarrassing.

Hospitality was especially important in the Middle-Eastern culture.

In fact, it could have been considered a breach of contract and result in a lawsuit. It sounds very strange to us but in those days if the host and hostess at a wedding feast invited you and you accepted the invitation and there were not adequate provisions, you could sue that person for breach of contract in one of the courts of law. This was a serious problem!

It was Mary, the mother of Jesus, who was among the first to discover that they had run out of wine. She immediately went to Jesus. Up to this point in the New Testament there is no record whatsoever of Jesus ever performing a miracle. So it wasn't that she expected a miracle. Maybe she thought that he would just say something that would relieve the tension or placate the people or solve the problem.

The point is that she knew Jesus well after thirty years. She knew the kind of man that he was. She knew that he cared about people and was concerned about their problems. He didn't want people to be embarrassed and have this kind of difficulty and she knew that he could make a difference. She knew that when any problem arose that she could not handle and could not solve that the smartest thing to do was to go straight to Jesus.

I doubt that she understood when he said, "My time has not yet come." I don't think that she had a sense of the schedule that he was following that would take him from conception to crucifixion to resurrection and back to heaven again. She

(Mary) knew that when any problem arose that she could not handle and could not solve that the smartest thing to do was to go straight to Jesus

didn't know that God had laid out a calendar and that it was all figured out from eternity ago. She didn't understand all that. And so when Jesus said what he said, she simply turned to the servants and said, "Well, just do whatever he says."

Mary was right. She got it. Her response teaches us a lot. Whenever problems arise, even if we've never seen Jesus do a miracle before, even when we don't understand Jesus' words and can't figure out how he will handle it — just take your problems to him and do whatever he says.

Nearby stood six stone water jugs, each with a capacity of twenty or thirty gallons. Jewish law dictated that everyone had to wash their hands before they ate and so they had set aside lots of water. The very religious strict conservatives would actually wash their hands between every course of the meal. And so if it was much of a gathering, a lot of water would be used up. By this time the water pots were pretty much empty and Jesus ordered the servants to refill them. As soon as they had filled them to the brim, Jesus told them to take some of it back out again and to serve it to the master of ceremonies.

The master of ceremonies had no idea what was going on. He had not heard any of these conversations and was not aware that they had run out of wine. He took what was dipped or poured out of the water jug, touched it to his lips and even though he didn't know much of what was going on, he knew his wine. He knew it well enough to recognize that it was perhaps the best quality of wine he had ever tasted in his life. He immediately went to the groom, took him aside and said, "I've been to lots of weddings and I know how it works. At the beginning of the feast the best wine is served. Then after people's palates have been desensitized, the cheap stuff comes out. But you have saved the best until last!"

Some fascinating facts come out of this wedding story. Fact number one, Jesus has supernatural power. He did a miracle here. He literally changed water to wine. Fact number two is that when Jesus does something he does it very well. It wasn't just wine, it was the best of wine! Fact

number three, when Jesus does something special, he does it big. One hundred and eighty gallons. That would have provided for a very large and a very long party!

I like these facts because they say that we, too, can come to Jesus with our problems. We can take our embarrassing problems to the supernatural Jesus who does what he does with excellence; he does what he does very big.

There is for some people a troublesome aspect to this story. They fear that it presents Jesus as some sort of supernatural bartender who has come up with an astonishing amount of alcohol and they wonder why the Bible would record such a thing. Knowing the enormous problems related to alcohol in our society they have trouble understanding it. There are those who have tried to say that it wasn't really wine — just grape juice. But the words used here are used elsewhere within the New Testament linked to drunkenness so I've concluded that those of us that take the Bible seriously have got to take it at face value when it says that the wine was in fact real wine.

Others have correctly pointed out that Jews in those days were very careful to avoid drunkenness. Moderation was a virtue. In fact, they would dilute their wine, two parts wine to three parts water, to make sure that the wine was not particularly strong.

Personally, I'm convinced that the wine was real and I'm convinced that the Bible

does not forbid the drinking of wine. But at the same time those who are serious about the Bible know that it frequently condemns the abuse of alcohol. It frequently warns against the problems that are associated with alcohol. You know as I do that many of the tragedies on the front page or on the evening news are alcohol related. When I put it all together I have chosen to abstain from the consumption of alcohol because I think that that is the most consistent position and practice that I as a Christian can take in protest to the excesses of our society and is consistent with the warnings that are given to me within the Bible. Not only is that my own choice but I strongly

"...just take your problems to him (Jesus) and do whatever he says."

encourage other Christians to abstain. I believe it is an appropriate, wise choice for Christians in America today.

But the story really isn't about wine. The story is about the wonder of what Jesus did. Look again at the epilogue. "This, the first of his miraculous signs, Jesus performed at Cana in Galilee. He thus revealed his glory, and his disciples put their faith in him."

A couple of weeks ago Charleen and one of our children and I did something I've been wanting to do for a long time and just never had the time or the opportunity. We went to northern Minnesota to Itasca State Park to visit the headwaters of the Mississippi River. We drove north through Bemidji and then on to Itasca State Park and there it was — the beginning of the great Mississippi River. It isn't very big at that point — maybe twenty feet wide. I took the brave approach first of all and walked across it on a very large log (I figured most people haven't walked across the Mississippi on a log so that put me several steps ahead of them) and then I stepped back across from stone to stone and finally stepped into the 12 inches of water and waded the rest of the way across the bed of the Mississippi. Then I read some of the statistics: the flow of the Mississippi is only a few cubic feet of water per second at the headwaters, but twenty-five hundred miles later the Mississippi River flows into the Gulf of Mexico at the rate of almost a half million cubic feet of water per second and is two miles wide at the mouth. It is an enormous change. Something that starts so small and ends up so huge.

As we were driving up to see it, about twenty miles from the headwaters of the Mississippi we started to see signs every few miles pointing the way. You know, I didn't see anyone taking a picture of the signs. But when we actually got to Lake Itasca I was amazed at the number of people

lined up to walk across, carrying their cameras and camcorders. There were thousands of pictures being taken of the headwaters of the Mississippi. Of course they weren't taking pictures of the signs. Who cares about the signs when you can go see the real thing? The purpose of signs is to point people to the real thing.

Changing water to wine was a wonder, but only a sign pointing people to the real thing — the glory of God in Jesus Christ. The sign was there to point the way to faith. The sign revealed his glory and turned the disciples into persons of great faith.

Does Jesus do miracles today? Indeed he does. Some of them are large wonders like this and some of them are small. Some are commonplace things woven into the fabric of our lives that we hardly even notice. But the primary purpose is not just to heal our diseases, solve our problems or get us a job. Miracles then and now are signs — pointing to Jesus, showing us the way to faith.

Don't get all caught up with the signs. Be like the disciples and follow them to Jesus. Don't desire the signs for themselves, just use them to point your way to faith — to the real thing — to Jesus Christ.

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