

Our Bible Journey Begins with John
The Gospel of John Sermon Series
Kenwood Baptist Church
Pastor David Palmer
September 13, 2020

TEXT: John 2:1-11



This morning we continue in our new fall series that began last Sunday. It's a series in conversation with *Bible Journey*. *Bible Journey* is an innovative digital online curriculum, "Aim for Discipleship." It was developed by my good friend Tim Laniak, who teaches at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary. I want to invite you to join us this fall as we go through *Bible Journey* together. We are starting a Wednesday evening class where we will interact together over *Bible Journey* in what we are learning and how we are growing together. *Bible Journey* was produced with the effort of many people for ten years. Their goal is to reach a million people to engage them in Scripture study. When we open the Word of God and we meet Jesus Christ, our lives change. That's the message that we will see in our passage this morning. *Bible Journey* is being translated into several different global languages. They are partnering with Pocket Testament League, *Christianity Today* and the *YouVersion* of the Bible to get God's Word out in this digital format. We are very excited to be partnering with them in this series this year.

Bible Journey for us begins in the middle of the story. In September and the first week of October we are jumping into the middle of the narrative of Scripture, just like the great epics of world history. Homer's *Iliad* and *The Odyssey* are stories that start in the middle of the story. Virgil's *Aeneid* starts in the middle of the story. It's a convention of great writing, but that's not why we're doing it. We are beginning with the Gospel John, and then we will jump back to the beginning of the great story of God in Genesis. As we go through the text with *Bible Journey*, we will see insights in the text. We want to be looking closely into the Word of God. But as we read God's Word and encounter it, we will find things that we don't understand, places that are

unfamiliar, places we might want to visit, and the significance of words or practices that will point us to a greater cultural reality that's behind the text. We will go behind the text along the way. We won't stay there, but we will follow where the text of Scripture goes as it touches real people's lives in our world today, both in our country and around the world.

Let's dig in this morning and continue our journey. All the Gospels show various reactions to the public ministry of Jesus, but John's Gospel is structured around the theme of signs. John presents Jesus' public ministry to us around an escalating progression of signs. Why? Because signs point us to something. Signs signal another reality. You may have noticed this sign, just up the street from our church. The sign says quite clearly that Happiness Way is closed. You might



have seen that sign and thought to yourself, "This is a construction project assessment of the year 2020." Happiness Way is closed. It captures this unusual and painful and challenging year. Others, though, with a little more cultural insight, may recognize that this, in fact, is not a social commentary, but it is a road sign. It's a road sign pointing you and alerting you to a change in traffic patterns. But underneath that change, this sign

that Happiness Way is closed is a signal of a massive construction project. In fact, it is the largest construction project in the Kenwood area, and it is bringing new apartments to our community for the first time in sixty years, just up the street or down the street, depending on your geography. It will be The Gallery of Kenwood. They are building 248 apartments, 115,000 square feet of Class A office space (for all those people working from home), a six-story 130-room hotel, two first-floor restaurants, and even an 801-space parking garage. You can see this going up under construction now. So the sign actually points to something more. When I see that Happiness Way is closed, the thing I think about the most is that we're gaining about a thousand new neighbors within a quarter-mile of our church. How will those people be introduced to Jesus Christ?

It's an exciting sign that Happiness Way is closed, but signs point to something greater. And so it is in the Scripture. When we look into Scripture, signs are used throughout the Bible. The first time we see this is in Genesis 1:14:

"And God said, 'Let there be lights in the expanse of the heavens to separate the day from the night. And let them be for signs and for seasons, and for days and years.'"

When we look up at the night sky, and we see those heavenly bodies there, it signals to us what time it is. It tells us where we are in the world. Signs can tell us the meaning of where we are and what time of year it is. They are also a signal to us that this world is created. The signs point

to the reality that there is intelligence behind the universe, and it proceeds from God's sovereign, creative mind to put the lights in the sky. Signs in Scripture are not only evidence of God as Creator, they are evidence of God as Covenant Keeper. In Genesis 9:12-13, we read:

“And God said, ‘This is the sign of the covenant that I make between Me and you and every living creature that is with you, for all future generations. I have set my bow in the cloud, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between Me and the earth.’”

God says that this is the sign of the covenant between Me and you. After the devastation of the flood, when Noah and his family emerge from the ark, God says, “I will never destroy the world again, and I'm putting a sign in the skies so you can see that the war is over.” God lays the bow down and says, “When you see the rainbow, that symbol of war or conflict in armed weaponry, and it is laid down, it is not just pretty (the colors of the rainbow). It is a signal of peace. It's a sign between Me and you of the covenant that I've made between us, that the world will continue.” Every time you see a rainbow you should look up and think, “Praise God, the world has continued another day, and God has not only created this world, but He has kept this world and kept me in covenant relationship with Him.”

God is Creator and Covenant Keeper, and signs in Scripture also point to God as Redeemer. The most frequent use of signs in the Bible, especially in the Old Testament, is in the context of the Exodus. We see signs and wonders that show God's power and authenticate God's messenger. Signs signal that God's messenger can be trusted, and they call forth the response of trust. Signs in the Gospel of John are not something that he is making up or just a creative way to present Jesus' ministry. Signs are rooted in Scripture to point us to who God is and to authenticate the One whom God has sent. Anthony Selvaggio in his book, *The Seven Signs: Seeing the Glory of Christ in the Gospel of John*, says all Old Testament signs authenticate God's divine messenger so that people would believe in the message they brought. And so it is with John's Gospel. Jesus' signs reveal who He is and call forth the response of faith from us. There is a progressive revelation in the signs: a new Creation, a new Exodus, a new Covenant, as we will see.

Let's look more closely at what John presents to us as the first of Jesus' signs. In John 2:1, we read that on the third day there was a wedding in Cana in Galilee. Cana is a day's walk from Nazareth, where Jesus grew up. Jesus' mother Mary was there, and we read in John 2:2 that Jesus and the disciples were also invited to this wedding. Jesus and the disciples came to the wedding. Weddings are occasions of tremendous joy, and their joy is not just in the ceremony itself. This wedding has a great celebration that's happening after the ceremony. The community is invited, and in the midst of the celebration there is a social crisis. Jesus' mother leans over to Him and says they have run out of wine. It's something of great embarrassment for the host family that they've run out. Jesus' mother alerts Him to this crisis. And Jesus turns

and, I imagine, whispers back to her, “Dear woman, what does this have to do with me?” The address of the vocative “woman” is not derogatory in any way. It's the same way that Jesus addresses her from the cross with tenderness and affection. It's a way of saying, “Dear woman, is this of My concern?” And then Jesus says something enigmatic. In John 2:4, He says:

“My hour has not yet come.”

What an unusual thing to say. It's unusual unless we're in the text. If we're in the text of John, then we start to pick up on this motif of the “hour,” that's unique to John. It's like a special clock that runs only in the Gospel of John. In John 4:21, 23, Jesus says to the woman at the well:

“Woman, believe Me, the hour is coming when neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father. But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father is seeking such people to worship Him.”

In John 5:25, He says:

“Truly, truly, I say to you, an hour is coming, and is now here, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live.”

In John 7:30, as the crowd seeks to make Jesus King and then later to arrest Him, John tells us:

“But no one laid a hand on Him, because His hour had not yet come.”

As Jesus was teaching in the temple, we read in John 8:20:

“But no one arrested Him, because His hour had not yet come.”

We're waiting and waiting throughout the Gospel of John for this hour to arrive. Finally, in John 12, Jesus says:

“The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified.”

John's Gospel is structured in two parts. Chapters 1 through 12 tell of Jesus' public ministry, and then chapters 13 to 21 cover His Passion. When we turn the corner, the hour of Jesus is the central moment, the defining moment, when God's saving purposes for the world ring. In John 17:1, just before Jesus is arrested, He says:

“Father, the hour has come; glorify Your Son that the Son may glorify You.”

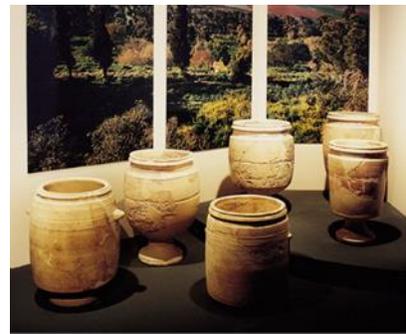
But in John 2, the hour of Jesus' greatest miracle, His death and resurrection, has not yet come. Mary, in the same suspense as we are now, waits, but her parting words in John 2:5 are so instructive, aren't they? Miriam, her Hebrew name (we know her as Mary), the mother of Jesus, simply says to the servants:

“Do whatever He tells you.”

That is a great verse for all of us, isn't it? Let's make discipleship really simple: Do whatever He tells you. Jesus says in John 14, "If you love Me, keep My commands; do whatever I tell you." Mary tells the servants, "Do whatever He tells you," profound and instructive words. Notice that she directs the attention of others to obey Jesus, not herself.

John tells us that there were six stone water jars there at the wedding. This is the kind of detail that an eyewitness would include. Something that differentiates Christianity from all other faiths is that we believe that the Word of God really took place. We believe that the Word of God, Jesus Christ, came down and took on real human flesh, that the events of Scripture are not just childhood stories or myths, but that they really happened. And we are living in an age when it feels more important than ever to know where we can go to get reliable information. We long for eyewitness accounts we can know for sure, and this is just one of those small details that signals for us that the person who's reporting this incident was there, because he just noticed that there were six stone water jars. I love also that John is aware that not all of us would know what those are for. Sometimes when we're talking about Jesus and what He said and taught and did, we need to remember that the people that we're talking with don't understand all the words we're using. We need wisdom to know what things need to be defined. John knows that there will be many of us reading his account that would have no idea why you would have a stone water jar. A stone jar is heavy. Clay vessels are the typical common ware in the first century. They are like the paper plates of the ancient world. They are easy to make and cheap to produce. They also break, and when you're done or they get broken, you just throw them out.

Some vessels in Israel are made of stone – stone dishes, stone cups, stone water jars. When you go to someone's house and their dishes are made of stone, it's not some look-back to deep antiquity, like an echo of Neanderthal man. Stone dinnerware in Israel is of a devout family. It's a devout family because stone vessels cannot contract ritual impurity. Stone vessels are also expensive to produce, and most stone vessels are in more upper-class homes. In Jerusalem, there is a wealthy home where several of these large stone vessels have been found, and this is what they look like. John tells us they hold 20 to 30 gallons, according to the translators, but John says they actually hold two or three measures. Each measure is about nine gallons. There are six of them, so there are about 120 to 180 gallons of water there for ritual purity, for rinsing off persons or objects, and it's a signal that this is a devout house. It's also a house of means. Mary said to the servants, "Do whatever He tells you." So Jesus speaks to the servants in John 2:7:



"Fill the jars with water.' And they filled them up to the brim."

In John 2:8, He says:

“Now draw some out and take it to the master of the feast.’ So they took it.”

I wish that my whole life could be recorded like these two verses, and I wish that for yours. Mine is not, and I suspect yours is not, but I wish that it were. I wish that “Do whatever He tells you” were just the daily rhythm. John makes this point subtly: “Fill the jars,” and they fill them, “Take it to the master of the feast,” and they took it. I'd love for the biography of David Palmer to read like that. Jesus told him to stand up, and he stood up. Jesus told him to preach, and he preached. Jesus told him to love, and he loved. Jesus told him to deny himself, and he denied himself. Wouldn't you like your biography to read like that?

They took it, and they brought it to the master of the feast. This is the man in charge; he's like the wedding coordinator. This is the person who's really exercising hospitality. They brought some of the water, and it had become wine. He had no idea where it came from. He knew that they were on the edge of social shame with the wine running out. He tastes this wine and then calls out to the bridegroom in front of everyone, saying, “Everybody else serves the good wine first, and when people have drunk freely, then they bring out the cheap stuff. You kept the best for last.” And that's the first interpretation of the sign. The best has come last – the good wine. The end is better than the beginning. Do you believe that? We tend to tell ourselves that things will get easier and faster, but this is different. This is a signal to us that God's tomorrow is better than today. This is a signal for you that there is a good future, that God has plans that unfold and move you forward. “You've kept the best until now.” And then John tells us that this was the first of His signs. This was the first signal pointing to who Jesus is, and John tells us that Jesus manifested His glory in this. This is the glory of Jesus that we talked about last week. John says we saw His glory as of the one and only Son. Together with the Father, He let it out – He showed His glory in this wedding. It was the first time He did it. Notice the reaction of the disciples. Their reaction to the sign of Jesus' turning water into wine is that they entrusted themselves to Him. They believed in Him. It is the first of His signs, manifesting His glory.

What does this sign mean? Jesus turning water into wine contains the whole of this ministry in miniature. It's a wedding; it's a time of celebration. Jesus' kingdom announcement is a moment of great joy. We see the power of Christ's command. We see the glory of His person and that the best of what God has for us has now arrived. We see that Jesus is a Creator, because He makes wine where there was none. We also see that Jesus is a Redeemer, as His miracles are public attestation of this reality. We also see that the arrival of Jesus not only brings the best last, but His arrival comes with a signal of tremendous abundance. One hundred twenty gallons of wine, this image of fruitfulness and abundance occurs in key places in the Scriptures. In Genesis 49:10, one of my favorite texts about the coming King of the world is described:

"The scepter shall not depart from Judah, nor the ruler's staff from between His feet, until tribute comes to Him; and to Him shall be the obedience of the peoples."

Jacob sees that one of the descendants of Judah will come and will rule over all the world and that the peoples of the earth will come streaming to Him. He will bind His foal to the vine. He will wash His garments in wine and His vesture in the blood of grapes. We see this image of fruitfulness and abundance. Amos 9:13-14 says that this image of abundant fruitfulness will signal the era of restoration:

"Behold, the days are coming,' declares the LORD, 'when the plowman shall overtake the reaper and the treader of grapes him who sows the seed; the mountains shall drip sweet wine, and all the hills shall flow with it. I will restore the fortunes of My people Israel, and they shall rebuild the ruined cities and inhabit them; they shall plant vineyards and drink their wine, and they shall make gardens and eat their fruit.'"

Maybe the clearest of all is Jeremiah 31:10-12, a great new covenant passage. The Lord says that before the promised new covenant:

"Hear the Word of the LORD, O nations, and declare it in the coastlands far away; say, 'He who scattered Israel will gather him, and will keep him as a shepherd keeps his flock.' For the LORD has ransomed Jacob and has redeemed him from hands too strong for him. They shall come and sing aloud on the height of Zion, and they shall be radiant over the goodness of the LORD, over the grain, the wine, and the oil, and over the young of the flock and the herd; their life shall be like a watered garden, and they shall languish no more."

The King of the world is coming. Sorrow is turned into joy. The best has come last. And Jesus signals all of this by turning water into wine. He manifested His glory, and the disciples believed in Him.

This is just the first sign. There is a progression through the rest of the signs. The second is a healing, again at Cana of Galilee. The third is a healing at the pool of Bethesda. These signal the arrival of Jesus as Creator. Then we see the fourth sign, the multiplication of loaves in the wilderness, which is an Exodus sign. The people who saw that said, "Surely this is the prophet like Moses, who was to come into the world." After this Exodus sign, then Jesus walks on water. It is the fifth sign, which is another Exodus motif. We see the progressive revelation: new Creation, new Exodus, and new Covenant. In the sixth sign, Jesus heals a man who is born blind, just as Isaiah had predicted that the eyes of the blind will see.

The climactic seventh sign in the book of signs (the first half of John's Gospel) is the raising of Lazarus from the dead. It is one of my favorite on-site videos so far in *Bible Journey*. As Tim

Laniak walks us through the perspective of this incident, through the eyes of Lazarus, he goes inside the tomb of Lazarus and walks out into the light of day. Imagine what it would have been like for Lazarus to hear Jesus say, "Come forth, take off the grave clothes, and set him free." The climactic sign of the book of signs is Jesus, not only Creator-Redeemer, but the One who raises the dead to life. It propels us into the second half of John's Gospel. The signs point to something greater. They reveal the glory of Jesus. The goal of John in recording these signs is to lead the readers to faith in Jesus, just as John said had happened to the disciples. They saw that, and they believed in Him. John's Gospel is organized this way and has this purpose.

In John 20:30-31, John says that Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not included in his Gospel. The limits of a 32-foot scroll, standard book length in antiquity, makes you be selective. The point of the signs is not to see just Jesus' power or authority, but to reveal the glory of His person and for us to be drawn to Him. If He can turn water into wine, He can change my life. If He can turn water into wine, He can take my shame and turn it into honor. If He can turn water into wine, He can take my sadness and turn it into joy. If He can turn water into wine at a wedding and save the best for last, that means, no matter what I've gone through in my life or where I am now, God's future for me in Jesus Christ is good. And we can trust Him. If all you have is John 2, you can trust Jesus and, by trusting Him, receive everlasting life. If all you have is John 2, you know enough of the glory of Jesus to believe in Him for salvation.

God's Word meets us in Jesus Christ, and in the Gospel of John we see His glory and His person. When the Scriptures are given to people, lives change. Our lives will change as we get into the text of God's Word. I am really enjoying the "in front of the text" portion of *Bible Journey*. It's the pastor in me that loves to see where the Bible is going. I do love to know where it's coming from, but I love to know where it's going. It's going to people like you and like me. It's coming to us, sometimes through gifts and sometimes through electronic communication. Sometimes the Bible comes to us in a hotel room, placed lovingly.

I've enjoyed getting to meet David Collum, who is the CEO of Pocket Testament League. They are like the Gideons, who have a mission to place Bibles, full Bibles, in hotel rooms. The Pocket Testament League has a mission of distributing pocket-sized copies of the Gospel of John all over the world. So far, they have distributed 130 million copies of the Gospel of John. Many of those copies then have a secondary or tertiary distribution, because the person who receives it, reads it and then gives it someone else. When the Word of God comes to you in Jesus Christ, it changes your life. David shares the story of a seventy-year-old woman names Olga, an elderly Russian woman, a faithful member of the Pocket Testament League. She regularly had the habit, like others, to distribute copies of the Gospel of John.

Olga was on her way to a doctor's appointment but had forgotten to bring her copies of the Gospel of John with her. She was so upset. "I left them at home," she cried. Then she decided to go to the local train station, knowing there would be other members of the Pocket Testament League there giving away copies of the Gospel of John, and she would be able to pick up a few. She arrived at the train station, and she saw someone handing out Gospels of John. So, this elderly woman rushed up, fell down, and began kissing the feet of the person, who was embarrassed. "What are you doing to me?" he asked. She said, "I'm so glad to see you! Blessed are the feet of those who bring Good News! I left my copies of the Gospel of John at home. I knew that if I came here, there would be people giving them out and I could get a few copies." This friend gave her a few copies and she continued on to her doctor's appointment. On her way, she prayed a very simple prayer often prayed by members of the Pocket Testament League: "Lord, open my eyes. Lead me to the person You would like me to share Your Word with."

She entered the doctor's office and sat down in the waiting room. Across the room, she saw a young adult woman, sitting down with her head in her hands, closed off from others. Olga began to pray and ask: "Lord, is this the person that You would have me share Your Word with?" So she got up, taking a Gospel of John with her and handed it to the woman in the doctor's waiting room. As the young woman took the Gospel of John in her hands, she screamed out loud, right in the office. She screamed and became agitated. Olga began to wonder if she had made a huge mistake. "Lord maybe this is not the person You had for me."

As Olga started to calm the young woman down, she said: "I need to tell you why I'm here. I'm pregnant and my boyfriend wants to marry me, but I'm not ready for that. He begged me to bring the child into the world and promised that he, together with his parents, would raise the child. I told him: 'No. This is my body. I can do with it what I want.' So I've come here to the clinic. Just before you came in, the technicians left. I have paid my money, and all of the pre-tests are complete, and they told me: 'We'll be back in ten minutes to get you for the procedure.' So I put my head down and said, 'Okay, God, if You are real, You have ten minutes.'" In that short window of time, in comes little Olga and offers her the Gospel of John.

That happened in 2017. The remarkable thing is that those Gospels were printed in 2016. They were paid for by an American donor in 2015. Fourth months later, David Collum finally met the man who had given the funds for the printing. He told the man he was so glad to meet him and then told the donor this story. The man asked, "Do you know why I gave a donation for Bibles in Russia?" David said, "No, I don't." The man went on to say, "The day that the Pocket Testament League asked me for a donation, my very close friend and his wife had just had their seventh

miscarriage. Their hearts were broken. My heart was broken, and out of nowhere, the Pocket Testament League asked if I would help fund gospels in Russia. My friend is Russian, and I said, "Sure." And then he said, with tears in his eyes, "Are you telling me that there is a child alive in Russia today because of that motivation?" David said, "I think that's what I'm telling you."

John, the Gospel writer, said in John 21:30-31:

"Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in His name."

He also said in John 21:25:

"Now there are also many other things that Jesus did. Were every one of them to be written, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written."

The Jesus that you read about in the Gospel of John is still doing signs today and is meeting people in the pages of His Word and saving them and saving others.

Next week we will look at the I AM statements of Jesus, but this morning, as we conclude, most importantly, I want you to believe in Jesus. I want you to believe that He can change your mourning into joy, your shame into honor, your lack into abundance, and that whatever you're facing right now, His tomorrow for you is good. Let's pray.

Lord Jesus, we magnify You. We exalt You this morning. You are the promised King, the saving Son. We praise You for the signs that stirred in us belief and trust. We thank You, Lord, for revealing Your glory to us so that our belief is not blind but in a Person we can't take our eyes off of. Lord Jesus, You capture our attention; You fill our hearts with faith. Turn our shame into honor, our mourning into joy, our lack into abundance through Your grace, our Creator and our Redeemer. Live in us, Lord Jesus. Make us one with You so we can continue to walk by faith in this world, through Christ, the hope of glory.

In Jesus' Name, Amen.