

When the Wine Runs Out



Gary Wilkerson January 12, 2015

“There was a wedding at Cana in Galilee, and the mother of Jesus was there. Jesus also was invited to the wedding with his disciples. When the wine ran out, the mother of Jesus said to him, ‘They have no wine.’ And Jesus said to her, ‘Woman, what does this have to do with me? My hour has not yet come.’ His mother said to the servants, ‘Do whatever he tells you’” (John 2:1-5).

Most Christians know that the wedding at Cana was where Jesus performed his first miracle: “The first of his signs, Jesus did at Cana in Galilee, and manifested his glory” (2:11). Christ had just begun his ministry and already had a small following of disciples. Now, by working this wonder, he revealed his glory to the world in spectacular fashion.

Yet the miracle Jesus performed here also contains deep significance for the church beyond that time and place. Verse 3 contains a powerfully symbolic phrase: “When the wine ran out...” Throughout the New Testament, wine is associated with the manifest presence of God through the Holy Spirit. Paul evokes this when he writes, “Do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery, but be filled with the Spirit” (Ephesians 5:18).

What does it mean for the people of God to “run out of wine”? In this scene, wine was at the center of the wedding celebration, poured out freely to be served to the invited guests. The scene is a picture of a joyful people to whom God’s Spirit flows freely. But now a need arose because the wine had run out and the people needed it replenished to sustain their joy.

As Christians, we all have the Holy Spirit present in us. Yet it’s also true that we have to be filled with the Spirit continually. Every one of us experiences an ebb and flow in our walk with Christ. The low times do not mean his Spirit has left us, but it does mean we’re called back again and again to quench the deep thirst that the Spirit himself puts in us. As children of God, we need spiritual food only he can give—food that empowers us to love others as he loves, to lead a holy life that pleases him and to speak his Word with boldness to others.

Some theologians disagree with this thinking, saying all believers have an equal measure of the Spirit at all times. But the Bible makes a strong case for continual filling. For example, the gospel writers tell us that the disciples received the Holy Spirit when Jesus breathed onto them. But in Acts 2 and 4, after Christ’s resurrection, the disciples were filled again with the Spirit in a different way, with manifest power from on high. Once that happened, they preached the gospel with boldness and performed incredible miracles in Christ’s name.

The scholar and writer Warren Wiersbe says Paul’s phrase “be filled with the Spirit” actually means “be ye being filled,” signifying a continual filling. It doesn’t matter to me what your theology is about the Holy Spirit. It’s fairly clear that to serve Jesus we all need to be filled with the Spirit—to remain in constant communion with him so he can manifest his presence in us to an unbelieving world. And if you’ve followed Christ for any significant length of time, you know by experience how easily your soul can become dry, needing the Spirit to fill you again.

We see this not only in the individual lives of biblical figures but also through church history. When I moved my family to New Jersey over a decade ago, my wife, Kelly, and I were eager to visit the historical churches there, some of which had rich histories dating back to the early Great Awakenings in our nation. We dropped in on one congregation where signers of the Declaration of Independence had once been members. Yet as we sat through the service, the environment was so spiritually dry we felt life being sucked out of us. As we left we asked each

other, "Do you feel like you need to be saved all over again?"

I pray that the church's wine today doesn't run out—that the living, trusting, sacrificing church of Jesus Christ doesn't lose its fire and within a generation's time become a hollow shell of itself. Sadly, this happened to the church time after time throughout history.

We may run to the altar seeking the wine of God's Spirit, but for many the answer lies in simple obedience.

When Christ's mother, Mary, saw that the wine had run out, she directed the servants to her son and said, "Do whatever he tells you" (John 2:5). The King James Version renders her instruction more powerfully: "Whatsoever he saith unto you, do it."

For many of us, the filling of God's Spirit may take place in our prayer closet or within our circle of fellowship. But many Christians will be filled only as they begin to obey God's clear commands in earnest. I'm convinced the hang-up constraining many believers is a casual attitude toward God's voice in their hearts and in his Word. By neglecting his direction for their lives, especially regarding his holy purposes, they are easily robbed of freedom and confidence.

I was speaking with a young single Christian man a few months ago when he told me he had decided to move in with an unmarried couple that was living together. I challenged him, saying, "That doesn't sound like a very healthy environment for you." He answered, in effect, "I feel like it's a safe situation. I don't think God will be upset with me for doing it." He said this not in faith, as though he believed it, but as if he were a teenager sneaking out of the house.

Eventually, the unmarried couple broke up. Soon the Christian young man was romantically involved with the woman and eventually became sexually entangled. I tell this story not with judgment but as a simple illustration: The best way to be filled with God's Spirit is simply to heed his voice and obey his commands. Doing so provides us with peace, safety and joy and allows us to speak for God with authority. As Mary told the servants at the wedding, "Whatever he tells you to do, do it."

The wedding wine in this passage represents more than the Holy Spirit.

Scripture tells us there were "six stone water jars there for the Jewish rites of purification, each holding twenty or thirty gallons" (John 2:6). Obeying Jesus, the servants filled up the large pots with water, which miraculously turned into a rich, tasty red wine.

That wine represents Christ's redeeming blood. In the Old Testament, God used Moses to turn a river of water into blood as a sign of his judgment. Now, in contrast, Jesus turned water into wine to introduce God's New Covenant. Through this miraculous act he was signaling, "Your purifying rituals will only cleanse your outer self, not the deepest core of your heart. My cleansing blood is needed to accomplish that in you."

In short, the old way was passing into history as Jesus ushered in the new. The host at the wedding literally tasted the new thing in the wine wrought by Jesus' miracle. He marveled, "Everyone serves the good wine first, and when people have drunk freely, then the poor wine. But you have kept the good wine until now" (2:10).

Yet it wasn't just the host who was blessed. Everyone present benefited from this amazing work, including the disciples who accompanied Jesus: "This, the first of his signs, Jesus did at Cana in Galilee, and manifested his glory. And his disciples believed in him" (2:11). If Jesus' disciples needed final proof that he was the Messiah, this miraculous act provided it. It persuaded them to follow him with their all.

What a beautiful picture of our service to the world in Christ's name. The world is desperately in need of his redeeming blood, poured out for us and flowing freely in our lives through his sacrifice. And the gift is meant to be poured out to others in turn, blessing the world as we have been blessed.

Many Christians today are content only to receive God's blessings, limiting their devotion to Sunday services. Others are so eager to experience his blessings that they travel from one revival to another, crying, "Pour it out on me, Lord!" All their energies, focus and resources are spent on receiving God's blessings, not pouring them out to others. That isn't the point of the blessings. Don't misunderstand—it's right and good to be continually filled with the Holy Spirit. But as Christ's living body we are called to do more than taste; we are commanded to serve his

rich blessing to others.

There is another message in this scene that is meant for last-days believers.

“You have kept the good wine until now” (John 2:10). The wedding host didn’t know just how prophetic his words were. God manifested his glory in the latter days by pouring out his Spirit on his church. That includes this present generation as we live in an increasingly turbulent world. ISIS (the terrorist Islamic State) and Ebola are only the most recent threats to humankind. Wall Street was so shaken over the Ebola crisis and its impact on air travel that the Dow experienced a 400 point drop in a single day.

We are also living in a time of growing persecution. Recently, the mayor of Houston demanded that pastors citywide submit their sermons to her office by Wednesday before they preached it on Sunday. That way city officials could monitor whether pastors were speaking against the mayor’s “bathroom bill,” which allows for transgendered people to use opposite sex restrooms. Anyone resisting her edict risked contempt of court and possibly faced jail time.

That’s a minor uproar, however, compared to the flood of filth being poured out on the world through twisted messages about sex. Statistics show that “sexting” on cell phones is widespread even among pre-adolescents and is pervasive throughout middle schools.

In the midst of this descending darkness—panic over Ebola, terror over ISIS and helplessness to stop the floodwaters of sexual lust—we are meant to be a blessing. As followers of Jesus, we are to be filled with his peace, unshaken by evil, our lives shining as lights in the midst of darkness. We are to have a ready response when those around us ask, “How can you have such peace in the midst of all this? Where does it come from?”

God is going to have a testimony of his goodness in the midst of panic, a testimony of holiness in evil times. Friend, does that include your testimony? Pray with me: “Lord, pour out the wine of your Spirit on us—your wine of healing, anointing, deliverance and restoration. Pour it out on brothers and sisters mired in dead religion and free them to serve you powerfully again. We want to see you move through your people to bring new life. Amen!”

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