The background of the cover is a photograph of a rolling green hill. On the left side of the hill, there is a single, large, leafless tree. The sun is low on the horizon to the right, creating a bright, golden glow that illuminates the grass and the sky. The sky is a mix of light and dark tones, suggesting a cloudy day.

The Miracles of Jesus

Finding God in
Desperate Moments

A Bible Study by

Jessica LaGrone

The Miracles of Jesus



Finding God in
Desperate Moments

Jessica LaGrone

Abingdon Women / Nashville

The Miracles of Jesus
Finding God in Desperate Moments

Copyright © 2017 Abingdon Press

All rights reserved.

No part of this work may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying and recording, or by any information storage or retrieval system, except as may be expressly permitted by the 1976 Copyright Act or in writing from the publisher. Requests for permission can be addressed to Permissions, The United Methodist Publishing House, P.O. Box 280988, 2222 Rosa L. Parks Blvd., Nashville, TN 37228-0988, or e-mailed to permissions@umpublishing.org.

This book is printed on elemental chlorine-free paper.

ISBN 978-1-5018-3545-2

All Scripture quotations, unless otherwise indicated, are taken from The New Revised Standard Version of the Bible, copyright 1989, Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Scripture quotations marked NIV are from the Holy Bible, New International Version®, NIV®. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.™ Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved worldwide. www.zondervan.com. The “NIV” and “New International Version” are trademarks registered in the United States Patent and Trademark Office by Biblica, Inc.™

Scripture quotations marked NLT are taken from the *Holy Bible*, New Living Translation, copyright © 1996, 2004, 2007. Used by permission of Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., Carol Stream, Illinois 60188. All rights reserved.

Scripture quotation marked ISV is from the Holy Bible: International Standard Version®. Copyright © 1996-forever by The ISV Foundation. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED INTERNATIONALLY. Used by permission.

Scripture quotation marked NASB is from the New American Standard Bible® (NASB), Copyright © 1960, 1962, 1963, 1968, 1971, 1972, 1973, 1975, 1977, 1995 by The Lockman Foundation. Used by permission. www.Lockman.org.

17 18 19 20 21 22 23 24 25 26 — 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1
MANUFACTURED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

For the students I work with at Asbury Theological Seminary—
those in the Chapel Office (Derik and Nathan and others)
who helped process and perfect some of this material;
those who graciously received many of these messages firsthand;
those whose eagerness to see the work of God as a reality in our world
inspired me to search for more in the miracles of Jesus:
Never lose your desperation.



CONTENTS

About the Author	6
Introduction	7
Week 1: The Gift of Desperation	11
What Happens When We Run Out	
Week 2: The Miracle of Abundance	45
From Our Little, Jesus Makes Much	
Week 3: Miracles on the Water	77
Even the Wind and Waves Obey Him	
Week 4: Jesus Our Healer	109
Our Broken Places in His Healing Hands	
Week 5: A Two-for-One Miracle Story	141
The Power of True Love	
Week 6: The Grand Miracle	173
Jesus Himself	
Video Viewer Guide Answers	203
Notes	204



About the Author

Jessica LaGrone is Dean of the Chapel at Asbury Theological Seminary in Wilmore, Kentucky, and an acclaimed pastor, teacher, and speaker whose engaging communication style endears her to groups and audiences throughout the United States. A native of Texas, Jessica previously served as Pastor of Creative Ministries at The Woodlands United Methodist Church near Houston, Texas. She is the author of numerous studies including *The Rewritten Life: When God Changes Your Story*, *Set Apart: Holy Habits of Prophets and Kings*, *Broken and Blessed: How God Changed the World Through One Imperfect Family*, and *Namesake: When God Rewrites Your Story*. She also is the author of one book, also titled *Broken and Blessed*, a contributor to the all-church Advent study *Under Wraps*, and a video host for *Disciple Fast Track*. Jessica and her husband, Jim, have two young children, Drew and Kate.

Follow Jessica:

 Twitter: @JessicaLaGrone

 Instagram: @jixsalagrone

 Facebook: @jessicalagrone

Blog: JessicaLaGrone.com
(check here for event dates and booking information)



Introduction

Jesus demonstrated the presence and power of God by performing miracles. He turned water into wine, healed the sick, calmed the storm, opened blind eyes, and raised the dead. While these beloved stories draw our attention to divine power, they also have something else in common: human desperation. Every time we see Jesus performing a miracle, we also get a glimpse into the gift of desperation, a gift that opens us to the dramatic power of God through our desperate need for Him.

In this six-week study, we will explore many of the miracles of Jesus, helping us see that our weakness is an invitation for God to work powerfully in our lives and reminding us that we need God on our best days just as much as we do on our worst.

Themes and miracle stories include

- the gift of desperation (turning water into wine and other signs of God)
- the miracle of abundance (feeding the five thousand and other abundance stories)
- miracles on the water (calming the storm, walking on water, the abundant catch)
- Jesus our healer who restores (five stories of healing)
- the power of God's compassion and love (Jairus's daughter and the bleeding woman)
- the miracle we all receive (the Incarnation)

Getting Started

For each week of our study, there are five readings. Each of these readings includes the following segments:

Read God's Word	All or part of the miracle story (and/or other key Scriptures)
Reflect and Respond	A guided reflection and study of the biblical story with space for recording your responses (blue-gray type indicates write-in-the-book questions or activities)
Talk with God	A sample prayer to guide you into a personal time of prayer

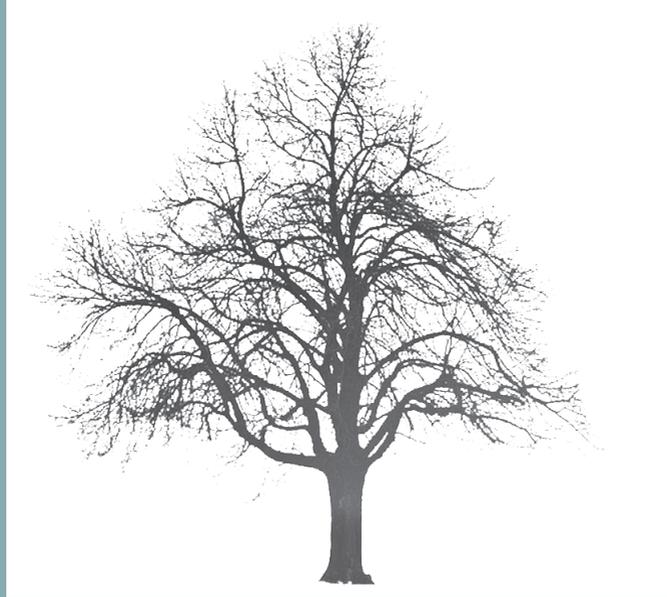
You will be able to complete each reading in about twenty to thirty minutes. Completing these readings each week will help prepare you for the discussion and activities of the group session.

Once a week you will gather with your group to watch a video in which I share additional insights into the miracle stories and their application in our lives. I encourage you to discuss what you're learning and to share how God is working in your own life to demonstrate His miraculous power and love. Sharing with one another will enable you to recognize God's power and activity in your lives more clearly and help you encourage and pray for one another.

Before you begin this journey, give God permission to work in your heart and life. Offer yourself to Him and express your desperate desire to know Him more intimately and see His power at work in your life—on your best days as well as your worst days. He is a God who still works miracles!

Jessica





Week 1

THE GIFT OF DESPERATION

What Happens When We Run Out

DAY 1: THE QUESTION OF MIRACLES

Read God's Word

¹In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.

²He was in the beginning with God. ³All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being ⁴in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. ⁵The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

⁶There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. ⁷He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. ⁸He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. ⁹The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.

¹⁰He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. ¹¹He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. ¹²But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, ¹³who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God.

¹⁴And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.

(John 1:1-14)

Reflect and Respond

Miracles started out for me as a problem to be solved.

I'm a scientist by training. I spent much of my undergraduate years in a science lab: experimenting, observing, and writing up hypotheses about the evidence found. About halfway through college I experienced a radical change of direction that took me from medicine to ministry. God got my attention in some pretty significant ways—some of which I would even call miraculous—communicating that I'd be serving Him in ministry, not medicine. But even though my calling changed, the way my brain works did not.

Here's what I mean: I'm still pretty analytical by nature, and sometimes I find myself applying the scientific method to the work of ministry. I've even caught myself approaching pastoral counseling as if experimenting in a lab! (There's nothing more comforting than pouring your heart out to your pastor about your problems and hearing this response, "Well, let's lay out the possible variables in this system and hypothesize the quantitative change they might enact on the observed outcomes.")



OK, so I don't actually say it out loud, but I do sometimes have a hard time remembering that human nature is not a scientific or measurable quantity. I've discovered that God made me just the way I am—analytical and science-minded—and God has plans to use every bit of who I am to serve Him. I had an idea of who I was and what I would do with my life; who I am didn't change, but God had in mind something very different for me to do. Even when God changes the direction of our lives, He still uses the way we're wired to serve Him.

When I read the miracle stories in the Bible, I sometimes find myself putting my scientist's hat on. Scientists ask questions and look for answers, and I have a lot of questions.

I wish I were standing next to Moses as the Red Sea parted, holding a tensiometer to measure the surface tension of the water as it pulled away from gravity. I want to be with Jesus at Cana with my test tube to find out just how H₂O (water) could possibly become CH₃CH₂OH (ethyl alcohol). I want to put monitors on Lazarus to see his vital signs as the "beep beep" of a heartbeat appears where once there was none.

I'm in good company. We see many people in the Bible asking questions about God's miraculous acts and promises to do amazing, seemingly impossible things.

Read the following Scriptures, and note the person and the question that he or she asks:

	Person(s)	Question(s)
Exodus 3:11, 13		
Luke 1:13-18		
Luke 1:34		

Moses, Zechariah, and Mary had questions too. When it comes to the miraculous, we tend to ask two common questions.

Two Common Questions

1. *How?* My own desire to measure miracles is really birthed out of a desire to answer the many questions they raise. Most of my questions about the miracles are "how" questions. How are these things possible? How do miracles occur? How did God do that?

When you think about miracles in the Bible, what are some of the *how* questions that come to your mind?

2. *Why*? The deeply emotional side of me (it's in there battling it out with the analytical side) also has questions about miracles. Mostly they begin with the word *why*? God, why was this person miraculously healed while a child died? Why did you bring some people back from the dead while others such as your earthly father, Joseph, or your cousin John the Baptist died during your lifetime? Why do you answer some prayers for miracles and not others? If you are like me, at one time or another you have found yourself staring out into the sky as you cry out to God, "Why?"

What are some of your own *why* questions regarding miracles?

We all have *how* and *why* questions. They are part of our human experience and curiosity, and in truth, they are sometimes what drives us to God for answers. But when I read the Bible, it seems that the *how* and *why* questions aren't the first ones to be answered. Most often, we see miracles answering the question of *who*.

A Third Question: *Who*

I believe it's the *who* question that puts the *how* into perspective and gives us a relationship with the One who walks with us through our *why* moments in life.

What are the *who* questions that we're talking about?

Read the following Scriptures, and summarize the *who* question(s) you find in each:

Mark 4:41

Matthew 16:15

Job 38:25-28; 37-38

Psalms 113:5-6

The disciples' question "Who is this . . .?" is the beginning point of the *who* question. Who is this that can still the wind and the waves, turn water into wine, heal a blind man, raise the dead? But as we read story after story of God's great acts on earth, we begin to ask the psalmist's question "Who is like the LORD our God?" And the answer is clear: *No one*. No one is like this. No one that I've ever met before. I've never seen anyone walk on water. I've never encountered anyone who could make a river turn to blood. I've never met anyone who speaks through whirlwinds, burnings bushes, and descending doves. I've never seen anyone heal blindness with a touch.

The miracle stories describe a God who is like no one else. They often leave us in awe and wonder.

How have the miracle stories in the Bible evoked your sense of awe and wonder in God? What have they revealed to you about God?

The miracle stories describe a God who is like no one else. They often leave us in awe and wonder.

The miracle stories reveal many things about God, but first and foremost they remind us that God is *transcendent*. God transcends (surpasses, goes beyond, rises above) all that we see and understand. There is nothing in our finite, earthly experience that prepares us to understand what kind of being God is and what He is capable of. When God speaks in miracles, it tells us that He is beyond everything we understand about our world and our capabilities in it.

A transcendent God, by definition, is hard to see, to touch, to understand, and most significantly, to know. But what if you were a transcendent, all-powerful God who *wanted* people to know you? What if you were a Creator trying to have a deep and personal relationship with those in your creation? How would you go about it? Would you boom with a thundering voice so that they heard your power loud and clear? Would you shake the foundations of the ground they stood on so that they sensed your presence?

Most things that you might try would probably be so frightening that no one would stick around long enough to find out what you were trying to say! It's no accident that so many encounters with God and His messengers in Scripture begin with the phrase, "Do not be afraid." To encounter God's power is a frightening experience!

I remember a story a youth minister told me when I was a teenager that helped me make sense of how God answers the *who* question for us. If you were standing above an anthill, watching the ants scurry to and fro about their work,



and you were overcome with a deep love for those ants and wanted to tell them that you loved them, how would you go about telling them? I initially got stuck on this part of the story because, growing up in Texas, I had been stung by my fair share of fire ants and couldn't imagine why anyone would love ants!

You could stand over them and shout "I love you!" at the top of your lungs, but they wouldn't understand you. You could write a tiny letter and deliver it with tweezers to the center of the colony, but they couldn't read it. But if you happened to have supernatural powers, the one way you could communicate your love for the ant colony would be to become an ant yourself—to take on an ant body, learn to speak ant language, and walk into the colony looking and speaking exactly as they did in order to connect with them and tell them of your love.

The ability to translate yourself into the physical world in such a tangible, relatable, understandable way is called *immanence*, and it is the opposite of transcendence. This is the way of Jesus: to take the incomprehensible, invisible nature of God and package it in a way we can touch, feel, hear, and see.

Read John 1:14 in the margin. How do we see both transcendence and immanence in this verse?

By taking on human flesh, Jesus gives us a God we can comprehend (immanence). But within that flesh "we have seen his glory" (transcendence). The transcendent power of God is acting through this first-century Jewish man.

Transcendence without immanence produces fear: God is terrifying, unrelatable, unknowable. And immanence without transcendence produces casual over-familiarity and contempt: Jesus is my buddy, just like me, and nothing in particular about my life has to change because He is part of it. But in Jesus we have the perfect balance. Fully God. Fully man. This is the Incarnation: the fullness of God putting on the fullness of human nature; the supernatural and the natural meeting in one incredible person.

If this seems a little mind-boggling for you, you're not alone! The Incarnation causes just as many problems and questions for us as it has answers.

People look at the stories of Jesus, and He looks so normal, so human. How could someone so seemingly natural do these supernatural things? This means that more people are skeptical of Jesus' miracles than many other parts of the Bible. They're often searching for the hidden trick in the miracle, the secret hoax or conspiracy embedded in these stories. This happens to me, too, when the *how* questions get a little out of control and begin to take priority.

*The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.
(John 1:14 NIV)*

Extra Insight

Immanent –
being within the limits
of possible experience
or knowledge¹

Transcendent –
exceeding usual limits;
being beyond the
limits of all possible
experience and
knowledge²

Although God knows that the pain of the *why* is often deeply personal and important, His deepest longing is for us to ask the *who* question that will lead us . . . into the only relationship that can make sense of the *whys* we face.

Have you ever struggled with skepticism or doubt regarding Jesus' miracles? Why or why not?

Instead, the question to ask first when you meet a miracle is the question of *who*. After all, God didn't come to earth in person to give us the *how* secrets behind His power. And although God knows that the pain of the *why* is often deeply personal and important, His deepest longing is for us to ask the *who* question that will lead us like paving stones straight into the only relationship that can make sense of the *whys* we face.

Who is the question that will take us onto the boat with the disciples, gasping at the moment a raging storm stops cold. It's the question that transports us to a tomb, staring into the tear-streaked face of a grieving friend who speaks the commanding words: "Lazarus, come out!" It will lead us to look into the eyes of compassion that see the soul of a hurting person where others see a dirty leper, a woman outcast, a blind beggar.

Asking the question "Who is this?" about the God behind the miracles will not only lead to answers; it will lead you to a person. Every single miracle will teach us something about the transcendent God and lead us closer to Him. After all, the One who walked on water, healed the lame, made the blind see, and raised people from the dead is alive and present with you as you read these stories, and He longs to be in relationship with you.

What does He want to tell you about Himself? That's the question of miracles. And that is the question we will be exploring in the days and weeks to come.

Talk with God

Gracious God, You are all at once too transcendent to understand and too immanent to ignore. Open my ears to hear the message in Your miracles. Let my questions lead me straight into Your arms. Help me to learn from Your Word and from those who are making this journey with me. May I come to know You more deeply and become more like You in all I do. Amen.

DAY 2: THE FIRST SIGN

Read God's Word

¹On the third day there was a wedding in Cana of Galilee, and the mother of Jesus was there. ²Jesus and his disciples had also been invited to the wedding. ³When the wine gave out, the mother of Jesus said to him, "They have no wine." ⁴And Jesus said

to her, "Woman, what concern is that to you and to me? My hour has not yet come."⁵ His mother said to the servants, "Do whatever he tells you."⁶ Now standing there were six stone water jars for the Jewish rites of purification, each holding twenty or thirty gallons.⁷ Jesus said to them, "Fill the jars with water." And they filled them up to the brim.⁸ He said to them, "Now draw some out, and take it to the chief steward." So they took it.⁹ When the steward tasted the water that had become wine, and did not know where it came from (though the servants who had drawn the water knew), the steward called the bridegroom¹⁰ and said to him, "Everyone serves the good wine first, and then the inferior wine after the guests have become drunk. But you have kept the good wine until now."¹¹ Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee, and revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him.

¹²After this he went down to Capernaum with his mother, his brothers, and his disciples; and they remained there a few days.

(John 2:1-12)

Reflect and Respond

Last year my little girl got to go to her first wedding. In the past we'd found babysitters to watch her during family weddings, but Kate had turned four ("and a half," she would want me to remind you) and was getting really good at sitting quietly through church services, so we decided she was ready. I spent some time beforehand talking to her about everything that she would see, telling her about the beautiful dresses and flowers, explaining some of the wedding rituals such as rings and vows, and making sure she knew the wedding itself was a worship service meant to point us to the God who created us and wants to be united with us. She sat spellbound during the wedding, and finally, at the reception, we came to the moment she had been waiting for all day: the cake! It was a wonderful introduction to what is sure to be something she will enjoy for a lifetime.

The following week I was walking by our living room when I noticed Kate wrapping her white blanket around the horn of her favorite stuffed unicorn. When I stopped to ask what she was playing, she explained today was the big day: the unicorn was getting married too! I sat as a guest and watched her reenact many of the moments from the wedding of the previous week. It was amazing to see all she had absorbed as she began her experience of weddings and the joy found there.

Weddings are full of signs. Small, visible elements that point to a bigger reality that something incredibly important is going on. Two people walk down an aisle to meet each other, flanked by their closest friends and family. Rings, signifying an unbroken circle of love, are exchanged. Sometimes family members light two smaller candles that the couple uses to light a single candle together.



Meaningful songs are sung, prayers are prayed, and vows are exchanged as promises of what is to come.

Most of all, these signs point to a new beginning. Two people walk into a room separately, but they leave together as one. This is the first day of a new life, a new start. After today, everything will be different.

Jesus began His ministry of miracles at a wedding. The Gospel of John tells us that the changing of water into wine at a wedding near his hometown of Nazareth was the first of the signs Jesus performed. This was a new beginning for Jesus, and after this first sign nothing would be the same.

Reread John 2:11 and write it below:

Notice that John uses the word *sign* and not *miracle*. John is the only Gospel that never uses the word *miracle*. He always refers to Jesus' miraculous works as *signs*.

What are some of the physical signs in your daily life that guide you from place to place? What does each point you to?

Sign

What It Points To

Jesus uses signs during this wedding miracle to drop hints about what His own ministry will be about.

You might have listed things such as the sign that signifies the street you're supposed to turn on to get home, or the sign that points you toward the restrooms in a crowded shopping mall. If you are excited to see these signs, it's not because of the sign itself but because of what it points to.

Signs exist to call our attention to something more important, to act as the guide to what we are looking for. John tells miracle stories to point us to Jesus. Jesus uses signs during this wedding miracle to drop hints about what His own ministry will be about. Since this is the first miracle, He packs it full of signs that point to His purpose and character.

Let's explore three of the signs that show up at the wedding at Cana.

1. Water

Water is a sign of new creation. In the very beginning of Genesis, "the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters" (1:2 NIV). Creation begins with water, and

John is the Gospel that takes us back to the beginning. John's Gospel doesn't start with Jesus' birth but goes all the way back to echo the Creation story: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God" (John 1:1). In the ministry of Jesus, God is starting all over again to restore the world to the newness of Eden.

Water is a sign of cleansing and purification. Water is what we call the universal solvent because it's able to dissolve more substances than any other liquid. When we go to wash our hands, our dishes, or our cars, we use water because it has the ability to surround and break down almost any impurity.

When Jesus asked the servants at the wedding to bring Him some water, He did so in an incredibly specific way.

Reread John 2:6-7. What did Jesus ask the servants to bring Him?

How big were these jars?

What was their purpose?

In Jewish practices, coming near to God meant getting clean first. There were laws about impurity and how to get cleansed. Ritual washing was a way of seeking closeness to their Creator, and these jars were the containers meant for that purpose. Those at the party couldn't look at these jars without thinking about a ritual of physical washing that equaled spiritual purity.

Through Jesus' ministry, God turned the tables by being the One to bring spiritual cleansing to His people instead of waiting for them to clean themselves up before they could come close to Him.

2. Wine

Wine is a sign of joy. The Jews had a saying: "Without wine, there is no joy."³ Wine was a symbol of joy, and Jesus was bringing joy in overflowing abundance. A wedding party really needed over a hundred gallons of wine, especially one that had already run through their preplanned portion. So this sign of overflowing joy reminds us of Jesus' desire to give us more than just "enough" for our lives.

³⁷“Do not judge, and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven; ³⁸give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap; for the measure you give will be the measure you get back.”

(Luke 6:37-38)

Compared with the ministry of Moses, who turned water into blood as a sign of God’s judgment (Exodus 7:14-24), Jesus will change this ordinary substance of water into wine as a sign of joy.

This may be a good time to mention that the association of wine and joy was not about drunkenness. Intoxication was considered a disgrace, and any mention of drunkenness in Scripture is associated with sin. In Jesus’ day wine was the primary beverage for adults—safe to drink and somewhat more diluted than what we are used to today. So, the mention of wine in abundance would not have meant drunkenness but joy. Joy is a response to abundance.

Read Luke 6:37-38 in the margin. How does Jesus encourage us to use abundance in practicing forgiveness and kindness to others?

Write down any words used in these verses associated with wine and the abundance of God’s love. (You might want to look at more than one version.)

How do these verses suggest an ongoing cycle of abundance?

Wine is a sensory sign. Psalm 34:8 encourages us to “taste and see that the LORD is good.” Scripture uses sensory language about God’s goodness to help us remember that God is as real and tangible as the things we can taste, touch, and see with our senses. “May God be as real to you as the things right in front of your face,” it is saying. In other words, may God’s goodness explode before your eyes with the joy of the face of your loved one, or in your mouth as the hot chocolate that hits your tongue. May you not only know about the love of God but also experience it deeply.

Wine is also a sign of the Messiah. An abundance of wine is often used in the Old Testament to symbolize the blessings in the promised kingdom of God and the arrival of the Messiah.

Read Joel 3:17-18. What are some of the blessings in the promised Kingdom named in these verses?



Thirst and dryness indicate that God's people are longing for the Messiah to come, while overflowing, dripping new wine is a signpost that the Messiah has come. In Isaiah 24, we find a dry and painful description of God's people and their situation. And then in chapter 25, we read of a banquet, held on a mountain, in celebration of the arrival of the Messiah. The wine and rich foods of the celebration are a sign that points to other joys the Messiah will bring.

Read Isaiah 25:6-9. What are some of these joys the Messiah will bring?

We not only have these joys of the coming Kingdom to look forward to but we also have the joys of Christ in this life. What are some of the joys that He has brought into your life?

3. Weddings

The last sign is that of the wedding itself. Then, as now, weddings were occasions of great joy. Along with the Passover celebration, a wedding was the greatest day of celebration a community could experience.

Instead of being about only two people, a wedding is a gathering of an entire community to focus on love, hope, and unity. Weddings are not meant to be an exclusionary love of two people witnessed by bystanders. They are meant to point everyone present to the love of God.

Jesus chose the occasion of a wedding to show the power of God working through Him for the first time. Throughout the Scriptures we see a connection between weddings and God's kingdom.

Read the following Scriptures, and note how each uses a wedding as a symbol or sign of the Kingdom:

Isaiah 62:1-5

Matthew 22:1-14

Throughout the Scriptures we see a connection between weddings and God's kingdom.

The angel said to me, "Write this: Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb." And he said to me, "These are true words of God."

(Revelation 19:9)

There are signs of God's love all around us every day, pointing us to Jesus.

Now read Revelation 19:9 in the margin. How does God use the picture of a wedding feast here? What does it indicate?

Talk about abundant joy! One day we will finally and joyfully be fully united with God forever!

Remember what I said about weddings? All the signs in a wedding point to a new beginning. Two people walk into a room separately, but they leave together. This is the first day of a new life, a new start. After today, everything will be different.

Jesus is starting off His ministry with a wedding to say, "This is the beginning of something you have never seen before, and nothing will ever be the same again. I want to bring joy, purity, new creation, and an incredible oneness with you."

God wants us to look for signs, not in a demanding way ("God, give me a sign!") but in a way of exploring the ever-signing God ("God has given me signs; what are they?"). He wants us to look around and ask, "How is this sign, this event, this moment in time pointing me to You, Jesus?" The truth is, there are signs of God's love all around us every day, pointing us to Jesus.

What signs of God's love have you noticed around you?

Signs of God's love are everywhere. They are tangible and abundant. They are before us. I hope you will once again taste and see that the Lord is good!

Talk with God

Abundantly loving God, thank You for pouring out Your love through Your Son, Jesus Christ. Open my eyes and ears today so I can taste and see Your goodness to me. Also, as I look around me at people who are dry and thirsty, help me to be a sign of Your goodness and love poured outward to them today. Amen.

DAY 3: THE GIFT OF DESPERATION

Read God's Word

³*Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*

⁴*Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.*

⁵*“Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.*

⁶*“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.*

⁷*“Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.*

⁸*“Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.*

⁹*“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.*

¹⁰*“Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*

¹¹*“Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. ¹²Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.”*

(Matthew 5:3-12)

Reflect and Respond

Despite what movies would have you believe, teenage romances are not the stuff dreams are made of. There's a lot of awkwardness, embarrassment, and tongue-tied self-consciousness. I remember playing matchmaker in high school after I learned that one of my friends had a deep and abiding love for one of our male classmates, a passion that stood the test of time (which for us was at least two to three class periods if not an entire school day). She sent me over to talk to the object of her affection with the standard instructions: “Find out if he likes me, but don't let him know that I like him.”

I crossed the lunchroom to his table and casually brought up her name in conversation. At once I noticed his cheeks flush and his speech start to stutter with the endearing awkwardness of a teenage boy in love (or at least deep like). He confessed he had been interested in her for weeks! This was great news. However, he sent me back only after I made a solemn promise that I wouldn't reveal his feelings. “I like her, but I don't want her to know how much I like her. That would ruin it,” he said.

The impasse was due to one thing: neither of them wanted to seem desperate. Desperation meant admitting that you had a desire or need for the other person, and somehow that made you less desirable. But if a relationship was ever going to get beyond the stage of glances across English class, someone was going to have to get desperate enough to admit interest in the other person.

Desperation isn't a popular state of being. No one wants to be the last girl without a date for prom when all her friends have been asked, the person



Desperation isn't a preferred or pleasant condition, but it's the stuff that miracles are made of.

sending a hundredth resume for jobs he or she really needs, the guy on the corner with the sign that says "Anything will help."

Desperation isn't a preferred or pleasant condition, but it's the stuff that miracles are made of.

What do you think is the connection between miracles and desperation?

When I began the quest to "figure out" the miracles of Jesus in the New Testament (and in the process, the misguided attempt to "figure out" the God behind the miracles), I read through the Gospels with a pencil in my hand. Next to every miracle I found, I wrote an "M" in the margin. "M" marked the spot of the treasure I was looking for, the place where God's power broke through into this world in visible and dramatic ways. But when I looked back at all the M's in the margins, I noticed a pattern in those stories. Right before each M I found desperation: a person or group of people who were at the end of their rope and had no hope unless Jesus stepped in to fix their situation.

Think about it. Miracles are for desperate people. If you're not desperate, why would you need a miracle? In each miracle story, someone comes to the end of available choices—running out of ideas, options, strength, and resources—and Jesus steps in to make things right. Desperation always precedes a miracle.

I found that I had been so busy focusing on Jesus in these stories—perhaps the way one watches a magician carefully to figure out how he's doing the trick—that I had missed the other half of the equation completely: the someone that the miracle was for. And that someone was desperate.

Read the following Scriptures. In the column on the left, write a word or phrase from each that sums up the person's powerlessness and desperation. In the column on the right, name the miracle that follows.

Desperation Description	Miracle
Mark 7:25-26	
Mark 9:17-18, 24	
Luke 18:35-38	
John 5:1-9	
John 11:21	

Think about it: someone is blind, or lame, or dead. Someone's child is sick, or dying, or demon possessed. Thousands of people are hungry, and there's not enough to feed them. A boat full of people is about to capsize. Ten people are walking around with leprosy, outcast from their families and community. A woman is bent over. A man's hand is withered beyond recognition. A woman has been bleeding for twelve years. A child is dead.

Jesus is the miracle worker of those in despair, the Savior of desperate people.

Along with the M's in the margin for miracle, I began to add a D for desperation. And as I looked through this pattern, finding desperation answered by miracle again and again, I made an exciting discovery.

First, let's review quickly. Read John 2:11 in the margin and recall the two purposes of miracles that we considered in Day 1. Complete the statements below:

Miracles reveal God's _____.

Miracles cultivate _____ in God.

What I discovered was a new way of looking at God's glory. What if the glory of God is not just about the majestic, powerful acts that draw our attention but also about the specific people and situations God uses that power to help—which also cultivate our belief? So...

God's glory = God's power and might.

AND

God's glory = God's direction of that power and might to serve the desperate, downtrodden, and marginalized.

This phenomenon of God's special attention for those at the bottom rung of society isn't limited to the miracle accounts. Again and again in Scripture God turns the tables on our understanding of what it means to be blessed by God. When we say "I am so blessed," we usually mean a state of prosperity, health, and comfort. But reading the Sermon on the Mount turns this upside down.

In this amazing teaching in Matthew 5, Jesus rattles off a list of the types of people He sees as blessed, which we have come to call the Beatitudes. Instead of the prosperous and comfortable, we find a whole different kind of blessedness.

**Jesus is the
miracle worker of
those in despair,
the Savior of
desperate people.**

Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee, and revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him.

(John 2:11)

Reread Matthew 5:3-11 and note below those who are blessed:

How do these descriptions of “blessed” differ from what the world calls “blessed”?

In God’s economy, the poor in spirit, those in mourning, the meek, the persecuted, and those who are insulted and falsely accused are *blessed*.

In God’s economy, the poor in spirit, those in mourning, the meek, the persecuted, and those who are insulted and falsely accused are *blessed*. Even the celebrated “Blessed are the peacemakers,” which is so often quoted from this list, means that those who are blessed to make peace actually are those who find themselves at the center of conflict, struggle, and war.

Why are these folks, whom we normally would view with pity, blessed? Because they know their need for God. Those of us who are still pretending we can get through life in our own strength don’t often turn to God and ask for help. If God loves to bless the desperate, reach the broken, and heal those who come to Him with their wounds, then the brokenness that causes us to cry out to Him actually can be considered a blessing. The entire Beatitudes can be summed up in the phrase “Blessed are the desperate, for they shall seek God and find Him.”

How is desperation a gift from God?

Desperation is a gift from God because it teaches us we can’t do this on our own. Every time we say to ourselves, “I can make it on my own,” we are fooling ourselves, wearing a mask of self-reliance and believing a lie of self-subsistence. We’re all, every one of us, badly in need of Jesus’ help, but the truth is that it’s only the desperate who go looking for it. And they are the ones who receive.

When have you found yourself in a desperate situation? How did life’s circumstances force you to stop pretending that you could do it all on your own?



How did Jesus help you in your desperation?

Desperation is the gift of not being able to pretend anymore. It's the hard things that send us running into God's open arms.

After going on my treasure hunt through the Gospels for the M for miracles and then for the D for desperate that always preceded it, there were two miracles that confused me—confounded me, even. I couldn't quite locate the desperation in them. We will look at one of them later in our study, but the other was the very first miracle we are exploring this week, when Jesus turned water into wine.

Review the story of the wedding at Cana in John 2:1-12 (see page 17).

How would you describe the scene?

Where was the desperation here? A party was going on. They ran out of wine, and Jesus gave them a divine and abundant refill. Party on!

If we look at this miracle without understanding the back story, it almost seems Jesus is performing a party trick for the disciples: "Hey guys! Look at this!" But we need to remember that this was a wedding in a first-century, not a twenty-first century, context.

First of all, theirs was not a convenience culture—no sending someone running to the store for more to drink. Second, the wedding lasted a week or more, and wine was the main beverage for the guests. Finally, the social context in which this happened meant that it was no little faux pas but a major disaster.

Timothy Keller says that "this was not a mere breach of etiquette but a social and psychological catastrophe, particularly in a traditional honor-and-shame culture."⁴ An honor-and-shame culture was one in which every social act brought either honor or shame to your family, your clan. Every individual represented a family, and so any good or kind act from one individual to another meant that there was a positive exchange; and the other family would owe them something in return (a reciprocal invitation or gift). A negative transaction, on the other hand, could bring shame that would last for generations.

A family essentially entered a social contract with other families when they invited them to a feast, promising to provide for their needs. So if they broke that contract by running out of wine, the groom and his family actually could be sued by the guests!⁵

Desperation is the gift of not being able to pretend anymore. It's the hard things that send us running into God's open arms.

Here we have the most important event of a young couple's life. They are being introduced to life in the community that they will depend on for trade and commerce, support, social and religious community, and even future marriages of their children. If they get off on the wrong foot—and running out of wine is possibly the worst—they could be, at best, the subject of the village's jests for years⁶ or, at worst, social pariahs cut off from the benefits of society in a day when all of your supplies for living came from community, not commerce.

This was a desperate situation. This family was facing certain shame and guilt.

Read John 2:7-9 again (page 17). How did Jesus rescue them?

Instead of a party trick, we see an introduction to what we will come to recognize as Jesus' specialty: using His power for the powerless and helpless to eliminate shame and guilt. Not only did He prevent certain disaster but He also turned a desperate situation into an abundant blessing.

Look again at John 2:9-10 (page 17). In what way did Jesus do even more than was necessary? How do we see abundance here?

Jesus not only turned the water into wine—He turned it into the *best* wine! And there was more than enough for everyone.

The place that they ran out is the place where they ran into Jesus, and it ended up being the best thing that could have happened. We will see this happen again and again as we look at the people in desperate need in the miracle stories of Jesus.

When we find ourselves in situations that could bring shame and guilt, we recognize that Jesus is the rescuer of desperate people. The only way to a deep connection with the powerful Christ of the miracles is first to encounter our deep need for Him. If we think we can enjoy His power without first admitting our own powerlessness, we are mistaken.

If you or someone you love is in a desperate situation today, take heart. When you find yourself in a place where you run out of your own strength, that is precisely the place you may run into Jesus!

Talk with God

Jesus, forgive me for living as if I could do life in my own strength. Thank You for the moments when I've found myself at the end of my rope and needing Your help and strength. Today I pray

When you find yourself in a place where you run out of your own strength, that is precisely the place you may run into Jesus!

for those in desperate situations. May You use everything at Your disposal, including me, to show them mercy and love. Amen.

DAY 4: THE TALK OF THE WEDDING

Read God's Word

³When the wine gave out, the mother of Jesus said to him, "They have no wine."

⁴And Jesus said to her, "Woman, what concern is that to you and to me? My hour has not yet come." ⁵His mother said to the servants, "Do whatever he tells you."

⁶Now standing there were six stone water jars for the Jewish rites of purification, each holding twenty or thirty gallons. ⁷Jesus said to them, "Fill the jars with water." And they filled them up to the brim. ⁸He said to them, "Now draw some out, and take it to the chief steward." So they took it.

(John 2:3-8)

Reflect and Respond

I walked into a night class I had signed up for and sat down in a group of strangers, excited to improve my writing skills and meet and learn from other writers. The teacher began by handing out index cards and asking us to write our names and an answer to the question "Why did you sign up to take a class in writing fiction?" My pen hovered over the card for what seemed like an eternity, and then I finally wrote. "I didn't know I signed up for a fiction class. I write nonfiction. I'm here by mistake."

I came close to leaving at the break and never returning, but I stayed. And I'm so glad that I did. I learned more from the lessons in writing fiction about how to write the truth than I ever imagined I could. One of the hardest lessons of the class was on writing dialogue. I never imagined that writing convincing conversation could be so incredibly difficult. The teacher explained that it is difficult to capture different points of view on paper, to put words in other people's mouths in a way that sounds natural and believable. I'll never forget what he added: "To write good dialogue, you need to understand where each person is coming from; and they may be in a very different place and time than you are. You need to know them inside and out, to know their world and their heart, in order to write their words."

At the heart of the story of Jesus turning water into wine during a wedding at Cana is a conversation between Jesus and his mother, Mary. This dialogue may be one of the most misunderstood in the Bible, since so many people read it without taking time to understand Jesus and Mary inside and out, both their world and their hearts.



It's always tempting to read Scripture from our own cultural perspective. One reason we study the Bible is to discover what life and culture were like at the time the stories in Scripture occurred in order to understand the original intent of the author. Once we know what the stories meant for their original audience, we can better know what they mean for us now.

If we read the conversation between Jesus and his mother through our own cultural lens, we may end up a little shocked. Mary could seem bossy and unrelenting. Jesus could sound resentful and adolescent. One might wonder how the Son of God could speak to his own mother in such a tone—the same tone I might refer to when telling my kids, “Don’t take that *tone* with me!” Let’s read through their conversation in two different ways: hearing it from our own cultural understanding today, and then hearing it from theirs.

“They have no wine.”

Based on your own cultural understanding, how would you interpret these words of Mary in John 2:3?

Today’s cultural understanding might lead us to hear Mary’s statement with the same tone a mother might use to say, “Your socks are in the middle of the floor.” It’s a statement that’s not really a statement but a passive-aggressive request or demand.

But as we’ve learned this week, wine had a much deeper significance in their culture. You’ll remember that it was a sign of joy because it signified the coming of the Messiah. If wine is a sign that God was showing up in power and love to save His people, imagine what the absence of wine would mean.

Read Isaiah 24:7-11 below. This passage depicts a hurting nation longing for God to send the Messiah, the One who will come and save them. Circle any mentions of wine or a lack of wine.

*⁷The wine dries up,
the vine languishes,
all the merry-hearted sigh.*

*⁸The mirth of the timbrels is stilled,
the noise of the jubilant has ceased,
the mirth of the lyre is stilled.*

*⁹No longer do they drink wine with singing;
strong drink is bitter to those who drink it.*

*¹⁰The city of chaos is broken down,
every house is shut up so that no one can enter.
¹¹There is an outcry in the streets for lack of wine;
all joy has reached its eventide;
the gladness of the earth is banished.*

A dry and thirsty people—merrymakers who had run out of wine—would signify that people were longing, thirsty, ready for God to come and save them. So when Mary said, “They have no wine,” she was essentially saying, “Look, Jesus. They are longing for the Messiah!” What a beautiful sign of God’s people being ready to receive Him.

As a mother—and one who had received miraculous messages about her son before he was ever born—Mary had kept a close eye on Jesus his entire life. Lately she had seen Jesus’ ministry emerging: his baptism by his cousin John and his calling of disciples to follow Him. Now she was likely wondering if this sign, the wine running out, meant that it was time for Jesus to step into a more public role.

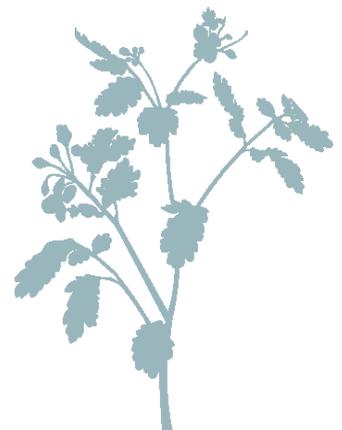
How does this insight into the biblical and cultural context enrich your understanding of this scene?

Consider what we’ve learned about desperation and miracles. It’s a gift to admit failure, want, and lack, because ultimately it brings us to rely on God’s help. Now notice that Mary is the only one willing to point out the desperate situation at this wedding. This is a beautiful situation where a people in need of help are connected with the One who has the power to help, not only with their need for wine but also with their need for God’s intervention in their lives. Mary is a hero in this story, not a nag.

“Woman, what concern is that to you and to me?”

Based on your own cultural understanding, how would you interpret these words of Jesus in John 2:4?

Our cultural understanding today might leave us shocked by the blatant disrespect in Jesus’ words. Just picture yourself addressing your own mother or a woman in a position of authority as “Woman!” “Woman, make me dinner!” “Woman, what are you talking about?” That kind of talk would not go over well



in my family, and probably not in yours either. But in Jesus' culture, addressing someone with the word *woman* was a sign of respect—similar to someone today calling a woman “Ma’am” out of respect.

When you study the Bible and come across a word that is confusing or that stands out in some way, it's always best to start by seeing the other ways that particular book uses the word. So let's look at the other places in John's Gospel where Jesus begins a sentence with the word *woman*.

In John 4, Jesus converses respectfully with a woman who, according to the culture, would be beneath Him in every way because she was female and a Samaritan, and she had been married several times.

*Jesus said to her,
“Woman, believe me, the
hour is coming when you
will worship the Father
neither on this mountain
nor in Jerusalem.”*

(John 4:21)

*¹⁰“Woman, where
are they? Has no one
condemned you?”¹¹ She
said, “No one, sir.” And
Jesus said, “Neither do I
condemn you. Go your
way, and from now on do
not sin again.”*

(John 8:10-11)

*Jesus said to her,
“Woman, why are you
weeping? Whom are you
looking for?” Supposing
him to be the gardener,
she said to him, “Sir, if you
have carried him away,
tell me where you have
laid him, and I will take
him away.”*

(John 20:15)

Read John 4:21 in the margin. What was Jesus talking with this woman about? How does knowing the cultural usage of the word *woman* affect your understanding of Jesus' dialogue with her?

Most men would have avoided talking with this fallen woman altogether, but Jesus engaged her in a theological dialogue as an equal, showing her kindness. “Woman, believe me . . .”

In John 8, Jesus addressed a woman who had been shamed by other men when they caught her in the act of adultery.

Read John 8:10-11 in the margin. How did Jesus treat this woman? What did He tell her?

Instead of condemning the woman caught in adultery, Jesus addressed her with kindness, compassion, and gentle instruction. “Woman, where are they?”

In John 20, we find the risen Jesus speaking with Mary Magdalene.

Read John 20:15 in the margin. What did Jesus ask?

Here Jesus used the word *woman* with tenderness to address a grieving Mary Magdalene crying at his tomb. “Woman, why are you weeping?”

There is only one other place in the Gospel of John where Jesus addresses His *mother* as “woman,” and it is a very tender moment.

Read John 19:26-27 in the margin. As Jesus is dying on the cross, what tone do you imagine Him using to speak to His mother and best friend?

What look do you imagine on His face?

We see from these examples that Jesus' interaction with women was always respectful. He always engaged them as equal conversation partners, showing respect and kindness. The conversation at the wedding is part of a pattern of lovingly addressing women in a culture that did not value their worth.

“My hour has not yet come.”

Based on your own cultural understanding, how would you interpret these words of Jesus in John 2:4?

Today's cultural understanding might cause us to hear Jesus saying that He's not ready. It's not yet the hour to begin His ministry. But if we read these words with the rest of the Gospel of John in mind, we might see that “my hour” is a different kind of reference.

When Mary brings up Jesus' Messiahship by referring to the people's lack of wine, He reminds her that His hour has not yet come. When *will* His hour come? To answer that, let's go to the garden of Gethsemane.

Read John 17:12 in the margin, Jesus' words spoken in agony of prayer. What is the hour that Jesus is referring to that is quickly approaching? (See John 19.)

The final hour when mercy and sacrifice will flow liberally will involve the death and resurrection of Jesus. Jesus knows that the thirst for Messiah, echoed in the thirst for wine, will be answered only in His own death and resurrection. He's not speaking of “the hour” as the start of His ministry but as the final culmination.

²⁶When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing beside her, he said to his mother, “Woman, here is your son.” ²⁷Then he said to the disciple, “Here is your mother.” And from that hour the disciple took her into his own home.

(John 19:26-27)

“While I was with them, I protected them in your name that you have given me. I guarded them, and not one of them was lost except the one destined to be lost, so that the scripture might be fulfilled.”

(John 17:12)

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

(John 2:5)

Listening for instruction and then doing God's will means that we're putting the whole messy situation in God's hands, acknowledging we are simply the servants of His will.

"Do whatever he tells you."

How might someone interpret these words from John 2:5?

An untrained eye of a contemporary reader might see a nagging mother who just won't give up on her ideas of what her son should be doing. But students of the Bible can see deeper. This phrase is one of absolute trust in Jesus' authority. Mary didn't tell the servants or Jesus what to do; she pointed them to obey the One with great authority in the room.

This is good advice for us too. Whatever Jesus says to do, we should do. It might look impossible or foolish. It might be hard and thankless work. But listening for instruction and then doing God's will means that we're putting the whole messy situation in God's hands, acknowledging we are simply the servants of His will.

What is something Jesus has asked you to do recently? Have you responded in obedience, or are you dragging your feet? Explain your response.

Dialogue is tough! I learned that lesson the hard way in what I thought was the wrong writing class. In the end, it taught me to pay close attention to words, as well as the culture and heart behind them.

When we see the heart of God, we find that He wants to dialogue with us—to share His heart of love for us and His instructions for living a life of holiness and wholeness. I hope that you've learned something from Jesus' words today, and that you will take time to enter into your own conversation with Him now.

Talk with God

Lord, teach me to pray. I want to talk to You and hear Your voice. I want to know Your heart and do Your will. Speak to me now, Lord. With Your help, I will do whatever You tell me to do. (Spend a few moments in quiet listening.) Amen.

DAY 5: "DO WHATEVER HE TELLS YOU"

Read God's Word

⁵His mother said to the servants, "Do whatever he tells you."

⁶Nearby stood six stone water jars, the kind used by the Jews for ceremonial washing, each holding from twenty to thirty gallons.

⁷Jesus said to the servants, "Fill the jars with water"; so they filled them to the brim.

⁸Then he told them, "Now draw some out and take it to the master of the banquet."

They did so.

(John 2:5-8 NIV)

¹⁶Then the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain where Jesus had told them to go. ¹⁷When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted. ¹⁸Then Jesus came to them and said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.

¹⁹Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."

(Matthew 28:16-20 NIV)

Reflect and Respond

A good friend who loves mission work has made several trips to visit an orphanage in India. Each time she goes, the woman who is the head of the orphanage—called "Ma" by the kids who live there—asks the new American visitors to go through a cultural orientation when they first arrive. Life is different in India, and we have habits that are second nature to us but that might cause friction or offense there. Visitors generally want to be considerate and respectful during their stay, so they try to observe customs such as covering their shoulders and legs, even in hot weather, or making an effort to use their right hand when eating or greeting others, since the left hand is reserved for unsavory functions in that culture.

But my friend the traveler reports there is one rule that is hard for Americans to keep, and it has to do with their relationship with the children in the orphanage. While the American visitors are talking with or playing with the children, sometimes their "Ma" or another adult in authority will call them away, announcing that it's time to study, go to bed, help with chores, or clean



up from a meal. The American visitors often say something such as, “Let’s just finish this game we’re playing” or “Finish telling me your story and then go.” That doesn’t seem like a cultural faux pas to us, but it is. In India, children are taught that “slow obedience is no obedience” and they must do as they’re told as soon as they are told, or it’s an act of disobedience. So, if they are swayed by a fun-loving visitor inviting them to take another turn at a game, they often get in trouble once they finally respond to the task they’ve been asked to do. Obedience is a necessity in their culture, and obeying immediately and without question is just as important as the obedience itself.

When I contrast this example with the speed of obedience I often witness from my own kids, it’s a bit staggering! They’re pretty great kids, but I am sure some of their earliest counting skills came from the fact that I so often had to tell them more than twice to obey and then threaten with “One, two, three . . . !” Obedience is a value most parents try to instill in their children, but the understanding of how quickly that obedience should happen varies from culture to culture and household to household.

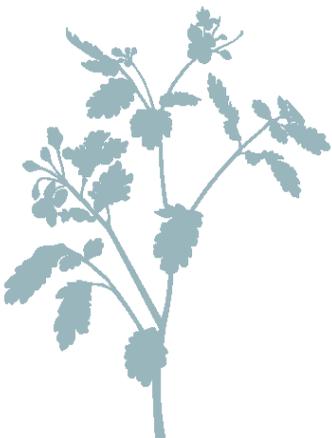
We are often drawn to the miracle stories because of the power of an omnipotent God on display in His mighty acts. But in addition to His power, there is a quieter character on display in the miracles: our obedience.

Reread John 2:5-8. What did Mary ask the servants to do?

What did Jesus ask them to do?

Let’s think about the servants at the wedding banquet for a moment. This celebration was obviously a huge workload for these servants. Feeding and serving all of these additional guests for a multiple-day—possibly multiple-week—party meant that they had been working overtime to provide for the needs of the guests. They were probably the first ones to notice that the wine had run out, and they even may have felt anxious that they would be blamed when the next guest ordered a refill and they had to tell them there was no wine. One thing was certain: wine is not something that could be quickly manufactured or made.

Then one of the party guests pointed to her son and spoke those iconic words: “Do whatever he tells you.” This statement is the blank check of obedience. Who knew what this new teacher would command? When He did speak, it certainly was out of the ordinary.



Just imagine the conversation between servants as they rushed back to the kitchen.

Servant 1: “He wants us to go get the WHAT? Those jars aren’t for weddings; they aren’t even for holding drink; those are for religious purification ceremonies!”

Servant 2: “I know! And He wants us to serve WHAT to the wedding guests? The master will certainly be a laughingstock if we serve up water in jars intended for a religious ritual when the people are expecting more wine. Who is this guy anyway?”

I can only imagine the stressed expressions of the servants as they anticipated the angry look on the face of the master of the banquet when they dipped a cup for tasting into a jar they had just filled with water. Perhaps when things went wrong, it was the servants who took the blame—and sometimes the beating. For whatever reason, they were willing to obey the stranger’s strange instructions.

The servants discovered that obedience isn’t easy work.

Look again at John 2:7. How did the servants carry out Jesus’ instruction? Complete the sentence below:

They filled them to the _____.

They obeyed fully, hauling enough water to fill six large jars. No slacking; no room for doubt that someone had added anything other than water to the jars.

Here’s one thing I noticed when writing my M’s in the margins of my Bible to indicate where a miracle occurred: I wasn’t sure of the exact moment when this particular miracle occurred. I couldn’t tell if the water changed while the jars were being filled, or when a ladle was dipped into the water, or even when the cup was lifted to the lips of the master of the banquet. I hovered over the margin for a moment trying to decide where the M belonged, because the Bible isn’t clear on this point. But if anyone knew when that moment happened, if anyone witnessed the miraculous transformation taking place, it had to be the servants.

Review John 2:8-10. What did Jesus tell the servants to do with the wine?

What do we learn from verse 9?

Extra Insight

Each water jar would have held twenty to thirty gallons each (see John 2:6).

It's amazing how often obedience is an essential ingredient of a miracle.

Because of their obedience, the servants had a front-row seat to God's power on display. The steward or master was confused when he drank the wine, not knowing where it came from, and the others at the party might have drawn their own conclusions about when and how the new and improved wine appeared; but the servants saw the miracle in action. They knew the truth. In a way, Jesus was actually giving the servants something that not even the honored guests or even the master of the party knew: they were receiving firsthand knowledge of Jesus' power. Though this is the first miracle that Jesus performed publicly, it's not very public because only the servants are let in on the secret.

It's amazing how often obedience is an essential ingredient of a miracle. Finding the small acts of human obedience that are a part of God's miracles may not always be as exciting as looking for the mind-blowing results of God's actions, but it shows us how He loves to work in relationship with His people. Let's look at a few examples together.

How did God use something Moses already had in each of these miraculous events?

Exodus 14:21

Exodus 17:5-6

Exodus 17:9-10

God never simply said, "Hey, Moses, watch this." Instead He told him to stretch out his hand to part the Red Sea, strike a rock with his staff to produce water, and raise his staff in the air to be victorious in battle. God often uses some gift or resource we already possess as the catalyst for a miracle when we put what is in our hands in His hands.

When has God used a gift or resource of yours to bring about extraordinary results?

Naaman, who sought healing from God for a terrible and isolating skin disease, is another example. In his desperation, he even traveled to another nation to find a prophet who could tell him what to do. But he balked when the instructions included dipping himself seven times in an "inferior" river.

God often uses some gift or resource we already possess as the catalyst for a miracle when we put what is in our hands in His hands.

Read 2 Kings 5:14 in the margin. What did Naaman eventually do, and what happened as a result?

Only when Naaman was obedient, doing something he considered beneath him, did his healing occur.

God is always on the side of restoration and wholeness, but He calls us to participate in our own healing by obeying Him. Our internal lives often need as much or more healing than our bodies, and obedience to God often brings healing to both. We'll see this again and again in the healing miracles of Jesus (stay tuned for Week 4).

When has your obedience, or the obedience of someone else, played a part in bringing about healing or restoration?

He went down and immersed himself seven times in the Jordan, according to the word of the man of God; his flesh was restored like the flesh of a young boy, and he was clean.

(2 Kings 5:14)

In addition to the healing miracles, we see obedience playing a role in many of Jesus' miracles.

Look up each Scripture and complete the chart below:

Scripture	Act of Obedience	Miracle
John 5:1-8		
John 6:1-13		
John 21:1-6		

In each of these instances, an act of obedience was required for a miraculous outcome. God often calls us to act in faith, trusting that He will meet our needs. And prayer is generally a part of this process. In fact, prayer is obedience. Those who pray in desperation and then see God's answers unfold have a front-row seat to God at work, while others may tend to view amazing outcomes as coincidence. Mary certainly had a front-row seat to God's miraculous power. It's no accident that Mary is the one who instructed the servants to do whatever Jesus told them to do. Her own story is a witness to the miracles that often follow obedience.

Those who pray in desperation and then see God's answers unfold have a front-row seat to God at work, while others may tend to view amazing outcomes as coincidence.

Read Luke 1:26-38. What news did the angel bring Mary?

What question did she ask? (v. 34)

What was her ultimate response? (v. 38)

As an unmarried teenage girl, an angel told Mary that she would become pregnant and give birth to the Son of God. Though she wondered how this would be accomplished, since she was a virgin, her response was one of obedience: “May it be done to me according to your word” (Luke 1:38 NASB).

Contrast Mary’s example to that of her relative’s husband, Zechariah. While she was of low status (female, young, unmarried, and poor) he was of high status—male, older, married, and of the priestly class. Yet when told in a similar manner that his aging and barren wife, Elizabeth, would have a son (John the Baptist), Zechariah responded differently.

Read Luke 1:18-20. What did Zechariah ask, and what does his question reveal?

What did the angel say would happen as a result of Zechariah’s response?

Zechariah was struck dumb until his son was born, but Mary was blessed with affirmation when she went to visit Elizabeth.

Read Luke 1:39-56. What happened when Elizabeth heard Mary’s greeting? (v. 41)

What affirmation did Elizabeth give Mary? (vv. 42-45)



How did Mary respond, and how does this further demonstrate her obedience? (vv. 46-55)

Mary is known as an icon of obedience, for she not only gave birth to Jesus “according to God’s word” but also raised Him and witnessed His death and resurrection. It’s no wonder she identified with the servants at the wedding in Cana and reminded them to “do whatever He tells you.” She lived by those words, being obedient to God.

A life of full obedience is what God desires from each of us. It won’t always be easy, but it is always our best choice.

**What would full obedience to God look like in your life right now?
What do you sense Him calling you to do?**

Here’s the thing about recognizing the relationship between our obedience and God’s miracles: it keeps us dependent on God. Rather than the kind of white-knuckled, teeth-gritted determination that results from believing that we obey God by acting alone and in our strength, we see our actions as part of God’s work, remembering that God’s power is at work in and through us. By obeying God, we are playing a part in His grander plans. It also keeps us from becoming detached spectators of God’s work in the world.

If we approach miracles thinking God will “knock our socks off” by doing all the work Himself, we miss the point. God wants to involve each of us in the plan for His kingdom to come here on earth as it is in heaven. If you would like a front-row seat to see God at work and be part of the amazing transformation of the world we live in, put on a servant’s uniform and “do whatever he tells you.”

Talk with God

Loving God, I am desperate for You and dependent on You. I want nothing more than to be Your servant, following Your will and learning Your ways. Help me to remember that Your power at work in me can do amazing things. Forgive me when I try to go it alone, relying on my own effort. Continue showing me that You are a miracle-working God. Amen.

A life of full obedience is what God desires from each of us. It won’t always be easy, but it is always our best choice.

If you would like a front-row seat to see God at work and be part of the amazing transformation of the world we live in, put on a servant’s uniform and “do whatever he tells you.”

VIDEO VIEWER GUIDE: WEEK 1

In the Gospels, where Jesus is involved, _____ always precedes a miracle.

When we _____ is when we are most likely to run to _____.

John 2:1-5

The first thing we have to do with our desperation is _____ it.

Our desperation points us to our _____, but it really points us to _____.

The place where you are running out is the primary place you're going to see Jesus' _____.

Isaiah 24:7

Isaiah 25:6

It doesn't matter if our dreams or moments of desperation are _____;
God's answer is _____.

