

John 2:1-11

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[0 : 0 0] Back in 2008, the British writer Julian Barnes wrote his memoir, *Nothing To Be Frightened Of*,! And he used a really interesting line in that book. He said, I don't believe in God, but I miss Him.

! I don't believe in God, but I miss Him. And I remember hearing that at the time and thinking, that's an astonishing thing for an agnostic or potentially an atheist to admit, because all the voices about Christianity and about God and Jesus in the public square at the time were very critical.

You might remember Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, Christopher Hitchens, all of those voices were very, very critical indeed. God is not great, the God delusion, aggressive anti-God sentiment. And if you didn't agree with that, you were considered to be a fool, at best a fool. But it's completely different now. Tom Holland, Jordan Peterson, Ayaan Hirsi Ali, Tommy Robinson, even Nick Cave, all kinds of high profile people speaking positively about the Christian faith. And of course, who can forget that event last year where most of the senior members of the US government publicly and clearly proclaimed the gospel of Jesus Christ. There is a growing interest in God, Christianity, the church, Jesus Christ. And while that is a very, very positive thing, it is possible for someone to like those ideas, for you to embrace the culture, the Christian culture, the things that go with Christianity.

You can belong to a church. In a very real sense, you can look the part and still not know God. It is possible to attribute lots of positive things that you see around you in the culture to Christianity and not be a Christian. It is possible for you to say that you think Christianity is the hope of the Western world and for you not to know Jesus Christ, the one at the heart of it all. That's not what we want. That is a failure of the highest order. What a terrible thing to be able to speak positively about Christianity as an artifact, to think that Jesus is really important and to have a measure of reverence for Him in your heart, but not to have a living relationship with Him. It's to miss the point it is a failure. We don't want that. What we want is the reality. We want living faith, real faith, faith that you can see. By that, I mean faith that actually changes the way that you live your life. Over these next few Sunday evenings, as Paul said, I want to take you to the source of that kind of life change. And it can only be found in one place, the Lord Jesus Christ. And I want to look in particular at what happens when individuals come face to face with Him. What happens when He sets about changing your life? And in doing that, I want us to see, I hope for most of us who know Him, I hope that we will be thrilled by that. But for those of us who come, those of you who are here who do not know the Lord Jesus Christ personally, I want you to see what He does when He takes hold of your life. And so,

I want to encourage you to surrender yourself to Him. So, maybe come back over these Sunday evenings. But at the start of his gospel, John records several encounters with Jesus with very different kinds of people. That's one of the things that could potentially be in people's heads this time of year. There's all this sort of stuff, this time of year, in this cultural moment, when everybody, it seems, lots and lots of prominent voices speaking so positively about Christianity, saying good things about God and about Jesus Christ. And you think, well, it's for that kind of person, that's not really for me. I'm not really that kind of person. Well, what we see at the beginning of John's gospel is that Jesus engages with very different kinds of people. This evening, He's engaging with a bridegroom at a wedding. Next week, Lord willing, it'll be a theologian. He's actually interacting with somebody who is the teacher of Israel. He then gets involved with a morally dubious woman and talks to her about what He means to her. And we'll also see that He meets with somebody who is a cultural and religious no-hoper. And in each of those cases, I want to show us what happens. These are portraits of people meeting God. That's what's happening. When they come face to face with Jesus, they are meeting God. You see, that's what we're told at the beginning of John's gospel, chapter 1, verse 1, if you look over there. The first words of John's account, in the beginning was

the Word.

[5 : 10] There's a deliberate echo there of the very first words of the Bible, Genesis 1, verse 1, where God spoke the world into existence. And here in the coming of Jesus, what we realize is that God's Word isn't just spoken, it's embodied, a Word that is flesh and blood. And we're to see that His coming then is the bringing in of a new world. In the beginning, echoes of the beginning of creation. In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning.

This, John is telling us, His account is the beginning of a new world that centers around the One who is the Word, who is Jesus. And we need that new world because our sin has spoiled that old creation. So, God has come. He has taken on flesh, and He has come to us. That's the Christmas story that we've spent so much time thinking about recently. He's come at Christmas to put that right, to recreate, to rewrite the story of history, to restore order from the chaos that our sin has brought to the world.

You can know God. You can know Him personally because He has made Himself known. And in these early chapters, we see that He has done this personally. This evening, I want to see what happens when He meets the bridegroom at this wedding party in Cana in Galilee. And it all starts, chapter 2, verse 3, with something of a crisis. Chapter 2, verse 3, When the wine ran out, the mother of Jesus said to Him, They have no wine. The party has run out of wine. Now, in ancient cultures that weren't so focused on the individual, as we are here in the West, the purpose of marriage wasn't primarily about these two people finding each other and finding love. It was about raising families. It was about building the community. So, wedding feasts were a much bigger deal even than they are today.

A bigger deal, perhaps, not so much in their opulence, but in the sense that sometimes the parties could go on for days and days. And if the reception was to run out of wine in this sort of honor and shame culture, that was a big deal. It was a disaster. In fact, you could take a family to court if they didn't provide adequately at a wedding feast. So, the party running out of wine wasn't just inconvenient.

It wasn't just kind of, well, I guess we better pack up and go home now then. I expected to be here till Thursday. No. It was a crisis. And Jesus steps in. He performs this amazing miracle. He turns the water into wine. Be under no illusion. That is what it is. He performs a supernatural miracle. And when that happens, verses 9 and 10, it's wonderful. When the master of feasts tasted the water, now become wine, did not know where it came from. Though the servants who'd drawn it knew, the master of the feast called the bridegroom and said, Everyone serves the good wine first. And when people have drunk freely, then the poor wine. But you've kept the good wine until now. It's a moment of celebration. It is wonderful news. And in doing this, Jesus, verse 11, we're told, has revealed His glory. He has shown Himself in this miracle to have the power of the God of chapter 1, verse 1.

[8 : 30] So, what does this tell us? What does this exchange at this wedding with this bridegroom tell us about what it means to meet God? Well, the first thing is this. It happens in real life. It happens in real life, verses 1 to 3. How do you connect with God? When He is described in generic terms as He often is in self-help books or the wellness podcasts or some, if not all, or certainly most of the rhetoric that we hear in our culture at the minute about Him, the usual course of action is to find a way to get ourselves into some sort of spiritual state or get out of ourselves in some way. People are all over this thing called ayahuasca at the minute. It's psychedelic drugs that you can take with a shaman. It's illegal in this country, but you can go to South America and you can do it.

And that shaman, with this magical drug, will get you out of yourself and connect you to spiritual depths that you didn't know existed. And more and more people are doing it because they're hungry for this kind of thing. On a more basic level, I've got a friend who talks to me about needing, quote, to get away to nature in order to feel spiritual. Nature is where we need to go in order to be spiritual. Now, nature is lovely. And there is a sense in which when you're closer to the ground and away from all the urban chaos and everything else, you may feel different. But you don't need to go somewhere else in order to connect with God. God meets us in the ordinary. On the third day, 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. He's at a wedding. It's very run of the mill. Someone got their quantities wrong.

It's embarrassing. It's a potentially socially costly mistake, but it doesn't sound very spiritual, does it? And yet that is where Jesus is. You do not need to go anywhere in order to meet with God. He has come to us. He is present here this evening. He is present now with us, not in flesh, but by the Spirit of the same Son who was present at that wedding.

There's a very real sense that, well, he has promised that he is present when the church gathers in a way that he isn't in other contexts. So, you could say that this is the special context in which we have to be present in order to meet with him, but he meets us in the everyday. He meets us in the ordinary, and that means the God of heaven and earth is concerned with your regular, ordinary, everyday life. He meets you in the midst of it all, and he helps you, however ordinary those needs might be. Jesus is interested in your work, your play, your family life, your health, and all of the associated difficulties that come with those things, which means that you can bring those things to him.

[11:42] He's interested in what you care about. He's interested in what you care about in this world, because he is Lord of it all. So, you can talk to him about it. At this run-of-the-mill wedding, Jesus didn't just ignore the problem. He didn't just say, oh, that's a mundane, ordinary, everyday thing.

You know, that's going to be awkward for the family. God had come to earth, and that wasn't beneath him. He stepped in. He engaged with the people. He provided for the family. He met them at a very real point of need. You can meet God in real life. In fact, when you think about it, that's the only option because that's where we are. He meets us in real life. Meeting God happens in real life. Point number two, it involves real transformation. That's verses 9 and 10. It involves real transformation. First of all, look at verse 3, the shift in mood here. It's really obvious. When the wine ran out, the mother of Jesus said to him, they've no wine. They've no wine. It's going to be a massive deal.

Fear, distress. And then, verse 9, look down. When the master of the feast tasted the water now become wine, did not know where it came from. The master of the feast called the bridegroom and said to him, everyone serves the good wine first. People have drunk freely, then the poor wine. You've kept the good wine until now. It's incredible. It's a cause for celebration. All the fear, all the distress, it's gone. Now, it's celebration. I don't know if you've ever been a best man at a wedding or involved in organizing a wedding or something like that, and there's been a problem in the process. The father of the bride has gone AWOL just as the speeches are about to start or something like that. Or you realize the band haven't turned up. You've been trying to call the band, wondering where they are. They're not there. They thought it was next month or something like that. You're trying to keep a lid on it so that the bride and groom don't find out you're outside phoning, whatever. You come back in, hey, everything all right? All that kind of thing. And you realize you can't hide the problem anymore.

[14:02] And so, you're going to try and sheepishly let the groom know, maybe buy a bit more time, avoid a bit of panic, whatever it is. Hey, don't panic, all right? It's actually nothing, but there's a bit of a, there's a bit, there's a bit, that kind of thing, you know? Don't worry, I'll sort it out.

I'll be back in a sec. Just give us a couple of minutes, that kind of thing. You can imagine the bridegroom, he knows that they're out of wine. And he's thinking to himself, how on earth am I going to break this news?

And he's wondering, you know, his bride's saying, you know, everything all right? You seem a bit edgy. And he's saying, no, no, it's all cool. Don't worry, don't worry. Everything's all right. And he's thinking to himself, this is really going to be bad. And then the master of the feast comes to him. You can imagine he's about, he's come to him and he's about to say, you know, completely out of wine. It's a disaster. We're going to have to close things down. And he says, well, tell you what, you know how to do it, don't you? You're some boy. And he says, do you?

I'm like, what? Well, you know me. What exactly have I done, please? Can you tell me? Well, you have only gone and kept the best wine till now. Oh, you are a messer. We thought we're out of wine.

[15:18] And there you go. You've gone and sorted it all out. He's thinking, he just told me a minute ago, it had all run out. This was a disaster. He's thinking to himself, right, we're going to make plans to get on honeymoon, get out of here and never come back. We don't want the shame. He might be confused about how this has all happened.

I don't know how it played out. But what is clear is that the whole situation has been turned on its head. The whole situation has been transformed. And that is a picture of the kind of transformation that Jesus brings to the lives of those who are his. See, the regular order of things is the good wine first. And when people have had a few, you can give them the Australian stuff. And that's really the pattern for life. Start well and then decline. It's true, isn't it? Quality diminishes as time passes. Jesus reverses that natural order. This transformation at the wedding gives us a glimpse of something that he'll make explicit, actually, in a few chapters time. Chapter 5, verse 24.

Here's Jesus. Truly, truly, truly, I say to you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life. He does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life. The natural order of things is life to death. But Jesus turns it upside down. Let me be totally clear. Christian faith is not just a lifestyle choice. It's not, I'm a member of the golf club. I'm a member of the local council. I'm a member of the church. A pastime. Something that I do. It is not a lifestyle choice. It is a transformation of your whole life. And for those of you who haven't put your faith in Jesus, I want to say to you, this is what he offers you. Anxiety, confusion, and fear transformed to celebration.

[17:19] That's what happened at the wedding. And what he says later on is a picture of death to life. That's what Jesus offers. He offers to take your life where you are, however good you might think things are, however bad you might think things are. He takes your life, he takes hold of it, and he transforms it completely. And I think we need to remember that, those of us who do believe, because I think we can forget that Christ, by his Spirit, when he takes hold of your heart, he gets to work on a total renovation. So much so that the Apostle Paul says that we are a new creation. It's not just a renovation, it's a completely new creation. You are made new when you come to Christ.

Now think about that for a moment. Think about what that does to our lives. Think about the hope that that just offers all of us. So first of all, you're no longer controlled by your past. When you put your faith in Christ, you are no longer controlled by the past. Christ has taken every one of your sins on himself at the cross, and those sins have been punished in him, and they won't be punished in you. You are no longer that old person. You've been given a new identity. You are now a child of God and an heir of eternity. That's what's true of you if you're a Christian. You, if you are a Christian, that is true of you. Your past no longer controls you. So you can move on from that story that you've told yourself about being stupid or ugly or weak or a failure. Whoever told that to you, whoever made you believe that, they're not God, and Jesus is God, and he tells you that you're loved. He tells you that I've taken all of your sin on myself, and I've given you new life, and you live in that new life under my love and approval. That is who you are.

[19:39] Let that reality define you. You're not controlled by your past. Similarly, you're not stuck in the same old patterns that have controlled you up to now. Jesus can break your addictions. He can heal your wounds.

He can deal with your depression. He can. The other implication of this is that your best days, your best days are ahead of you.

The natural order of things is health and vitality and decline and death. That has been transformed such that your best days are ahead of you.

In the wellness world, we're promised all kinds of longevity hacks. Top of the list, I mentioned him before, that tech guy, Brian Johnson, on his Living Forever protocol, spends millions of dollars every year, eats this terrible pureed pulp stuff, which has exactly the right amount of nutrients. He's under the light, getting the right amount of red light and blue light and whatever light, and, you know, all that kind of stuff. And he says he's going to live forever. Pills, potions, plans, they can potentially slow your decline, but they can't reverse the natural order of it.

[20:59] But Christ can. And he does. He is the agent of real transformation. And whether you're young and healthy, or whether you're old and broken, if Jesus Christ is part of your life, your best is still to come.

Your best day here in this life is only a shadow of what lies ahead. And ever strong and full of vitality you might feel here this evening, and that's judging by your expressions on your faces, that's none of you.

But those of you that feel super strong and that life is there for the taking, it's going to be even better than that in glory.

And those of you that think, I'm hanging on by my fingernails, I'm broken and busted, one day you're going to be released from it all. Your best days are ahead of you. Meeting God.

It happens in real life. It involves real transformation. And because of that, thirdly, we can see it also brings real joy. It brings real joy. Now, there's obvious happy relief at this wedding.

[22 : 14] The social faux pas, it's been averted, thankfully. But the point actually runs deeper. The point about joy runs deeper. It's not just relief and kind of, oh, that was a close one, thanks very much, and the party can continue.

No, it runs deeper than that. Why? Because we're told here that the story is centering on wine. And wine, biblically speaking, signifies joy.

Now, like any of God's good gifts, it can be abused and it can take away that joy. But wine is almost always in the Bible associated with joy. And that is why Jesus does this miracle as His first miracle. You see, in a real sense, it is His signature statement. He's beginning His ministry. He's showing His power. He's revealing His glory. And the first miracle that He does is this one, turning water into wine.

It's interesting. He could have healed the sick. He could have done something like that in full view of everyone. He could have raised the dead for all to see. He did that later. But He chose that His first miracle was going to be this relatively private, turning water into wine at a wedding.

[23 : 22] And He did that because doing it that way afforded Him the opportunity to teach us about the character of God and the truth about Christianity. See, by providing what was needed at the party, Jesus is actually revealing Himself to be the one who brings true, real, lasting joy.

Right at the beginning of His ministry, you see, He wants to show how the whole thing is going to end. There will be suffering. There will be self-denial as He goes along. He will be rejected, mocked, abused, and ultimately crucified.

He will suffer in the most horrendous ways. But ultimately, His suffering is a means to an end. And the end is a feast, a joy-filled celebration where He is the host.

That was the promise of the prophets. Isaiah 25, verse 6, Of all the things Jesus could have shown us, His first miracle, His page one sign, says this, I have come ultimately to bring joy.

The renewed positivity about Christianity that I talked about at the beginning, it's bubbling up all around us. It is pointing to lots and lots of really important things.

[25 : 00] We need to return to our Christian heritage, we're told, because of the culture, because it has implications for the community, because of what it will do for our families, because of what it will do for marriage, because of what it means for ethics.

All of those are true. All of those are true. And we should seek to recover Western civilization because of its Christian roots. Christianity needs to re-drive the West.

Of course it does. But the reason Jesus starts with isn't those. It's joy. Isn't that striking?

I wonder, does that surprise you? Lots of people think that Christianity and joy are like magnets with the same poles. You know, you try and stick two magnets together, the same poles, they don't go together. And lots of people think that's what Christianity and joy.

They don't go together. Maybe you meet the occasional Christian who's a bit detached, and they've always got a smile on their face, but we don't want that because they're mad. No, if you've got a real Christian who's serious about the Bible, well, they're in much joy.

[26 : 05] It's dry, it's dusty, and so on. Jesus says, no way. No, no way. At root, it's all about joy.

And don't miss the liberality of it either. Look at verse 6. Now, there were six stone water jars there for the Jewish rites of purification, each holding 20 or 30 gallons.

Why does He give us the quantity? Of course, He gives us the quantity because God doesn't give His good things with teaspoons. He doesn't get one of those tiny little syringes you used to give your kids kelp all with.

He doesn't give you one of those and go there, have some blessing, have some joy. He takes shovels and ladles, and blessing comes in floods. He keeps pouring and pouring 20 or 30 gallons. Everything that Jesus gives to gladden our hearts, He does it in abundance. Now, don't mishear me. This joy, or the transformation for that matter, is neither instant nor constant.

[27 : 11] Our world is broken. Living in a fallen world is hard. Our freedom from the penalty and the power of sin, those things are real. We are free. We were hearing that this morning. But we aren't yet fully free from the presence of sin.

It also means that the Christian life requires sacrifices. Our desires aren't entirely pure. And therefore, we've got to put the desires of the old man, our sinful desires, our old flesh, our self-loving selves, we've got to put those to death.

When you put Jesus at the center of your life as He requires you to, it means going against many of those instincts or desires. But as many of you know, knowing Christ personally transforms even the hardships of life.

And can I say again, if you're looking into Christianity and you find this hard to believe, I can introduce you to people, some of them are here this evening, who are going through real struggles, and despite that suffering, their lives are still marked by a profound joy.

And it's because they know this Jesus. And whatever they have or don't have now, they look forward to the fulfillment of this miracle, the great feast with Jesus in glory.

[28 : 35] It's a feast that's described in the Bible as a wedding. Revelation 19, Blessed are those who are invited to the wedding supper of the Lamb, the wedding supper of Jesus. This is a wedding where Jesus and those who have put their faith in Him are united finally and fully to experience the fullness of the joy that this miracle has promised.

So, what I'm saying is it brings real joy. But the joy that we experience in the moment, in the present, isn't the fullness of the joy that is coming at the end that the Bible holds out to us.

The reason we know this, the reason we know that our best days are in the future, that there is a wedding supper for all who have put their faith in Jesus in the future, is because that wedding is on Jesus' mind at this wedding.

We know that because of the way that He addresses His mother. Do you see that? The way He speaks to His mother connects the miracle to the way that we can experience all that the miracle points to. We look again at verse 4.

Woman, what does this have to do with me? My hour has not yet come. Sounds a bit strange, doesn't it? Speak to your mother like that? He calls His mother woman. But because He then speaks of His hour, we know that this is about something bigger than a mother and her son and some wine at a wedding.

[29 : 55] What Jesus is doing here is signaling with this term woman, which He uses again at the cross, which is what His hour is referring to, the hour of His death, is that in His ministry He is acting more in His capacity as the Son of God than He is as the Son of Mary, His mother.

He's creating distance with her, not in an unkind way, not in a rude way, certainly. Some people read this and say He's being a bit short with His mom. That's not the case at all. What He's doing is signaling that He is on a bigger mission than merely this wedding or merely what it means for Him to be the Son of His mother by the flesh.

How do we know this? Do you notice how the water jars are described? Verse 6, Not just told how much they hold, but we're told that they were reserved for the Jewish rites of purification.

These water jars were used for the ceremonial washing that symbolized what was required to come into God's presence in the temple. You see, sinful people need to be cleansed.

We need to be cleansed if we're going to come into the presence of holiness. And these pots symbolized, they spoke of that reality.

[31 : 17] And Jesus then takes those pots that symbolized that, the pots that spoke of cleansing, He takes them to say that the hour of His death will do what these jars only pointed to.

He's saying, My death on the cross will cleanse you on the inside, not just on the outside. And because of that, you can be united to me and we can rejoice for eternity at the heavenly feast.

You and I can't just stroll up to that heavenly feast just as we are, because our sin has stained us. You know that uncomfortable feeling that comes when we do something that we know is wrong?

That is an accurate feeling. We are unclean before a holy God. But because Jesus endured the hour of His death in our place, when we put our faith in Him, we are cleansed by His blood.

We are cleansed. All of the guilt, all of the shame, all of the wrongdoing, all of the things that we've put away in the back of our minds that we're ashamed to even think of now, all of it is washed clean.

[32 : 37] And that means that the door to the heavenly feast is flung wide open. That is why Jesus brings joy. He has done everything required to meet you where you are, real life, to transform your life, because He has paid for your sin and He has brought you into the joy and the delight of God.

I don't believe in God, but I miss Him. Can you see that in unbelief, you miss more than the cultural trappings that Julian Barnes was talking about?

But if you do believe in Him, if you meet Him in the person of Jesus, you get all this? And hope and joy flood your life.

Let's pray.