

Jessica LaGrone

Inside
the
Miracles
of
Jesus

Discovering *the*
Power *of* Desperation

Praise for *Inside the Miracles of Jesus*

“If you want to be challenged, comforted, informed, and transformed by a fresh encounter with Jesus and his miracles, then this is an excellent place to start.”

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“Jessica LaGrone combines the careful observation of a scientist with the rhetorical artistry of a poet to craft this study of Jesus’ miracles. I learned for the first time how his miracles are often in response to our desperation. Excellent for group study and for individual reflection.”

—**Talbot Davis**, Pastor of Good Shepherd UMC in Charlotte and author of *Head Scratchers* and *Crash Test Dummies*.

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INSIDE THE MIRACLES OF JESUS
DISCOVERING THE POWER OF DESPERATION

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INTRODUCTION

When was the last time you felt desperate? Sometimes we stand right in the middle of a desperate situation, and sometimes we carry around with us a low-grade desperation. But we all know that feeling of being at the end of ourselves, at the end of our own strength, and reliant on the power, compassion, and love of God to save us.

I remember a day when desperation became my overpowering companion. My friend Laura and I had signed up to go on our first ever overseas trip to Israel. While the rest of the group we were traveling with had booked a connecting flight from our home in central Kentucky to a major international airport north of us, we thought we'd be frugal by simply driving the few hours to that airport and parking at a friend's house nearby. We were excited and packed and felt fully prepared and ready to go—until we checked the weather report. A major winter weather system had moved across our path, leaving the roads ahead icy and treacherous. I'll never forget how tightly I gripped the steering wheel on that long, long drive. Laura and I were both from the South and had never driven on ice-covered roads. The journey was slippery and slow, littered with cars that had skidded off the road. My heart rate stayed so high I think it must have counted as cardio exercise even though

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I was sitting down! I don't think I've ever prayed so hard or spent such a long car trip in silence as we did that day, but we made it to our destination. Our friends were ready to greet us, having relaxed on their trouble-free regional flight while we were inching along the road below. Laura and I had a unique perspective as we journeyed to the Holy Land. We entered the rest of that trip, knowing God was with us because we had already been clinging to him just to get started.

Desperation often means that we have come to the end of ourselves. We are out of resources and places to turn. The power of desperation moves us to action and can even give us the boldness to do what needs to be done, to go that last mile, or to sacrifice that last bit of energy to get the thing we need most. Sometimes it means running completely out of inner resources and turning to the help only God can supply.

In the following chapters, we'll witness Jesus demonstrate the presence and power of God by performing miracles in some very desperate moments. He turned water into wine at a wedding party on the verge of ruin, healed sick people who had no more options but his healing power, calmed a storm with his words, opened blind eyes, and even 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.

Sometimes I wish I had been there with Peter and James and John and the others to see Jesus's miracles in person. I wish I had gotten to witness the moment in Mark 4:39 when Jesus called out, "Peace! Be still!" and the wind and the waves of the storm stopped immediately in response to his words or the time there was so little food to go around, but in Jesus's hands, next to nothing became everything that was needed to feed more than five thousand people. I wish I had been there to see the joy in the eyes of the people who were healed, the surprise of Peter as he stepped out onto the water, or the amazement of Lazarus as he came out of his tomb alive again.

But as much as those particular miracles impress and amaze me, they all point to a greater miracle—the Miracle of miracles, Jesus himself.

As impressive as Jesus's signs and miracles are, Jesus himself is our destination. He is the home we've been longing for, the end of the road we have been following the signs of these miracles toward. It may be our desperation that leads us to him, but it's our love that keeps us with him.

I'm not sure if you've been aware or not, but even *you* are part of a miracle. You are part of the grand miracle story of Jesus's rescue. Within the big story are smaller, particular stories of restoration, healing, wholeness, and wonder. But the overarching story is the miracle of God's rescue plan for his beloved children.

The miracles of Jesus help us see that our weakness is an invitation for God to work powerfully in our lives, reminding us that we need God on our best days just as much as we do on our worst.

Would you 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 to 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 LaGrone



CHAPTER 1

THE GIFT OF DESPERATION

WHAT HAPPENS WHEN WE RUN OUT

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.")

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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, though, 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 sometimes wish I could have stood 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, or beside Jesus at Cana with my test tube to find out just how H₂O (water) could possibly become CH₃CH₂OH (ethyl alcohol). I would like to have put monitors on Lazarus to see his vital signs as the “beep beep” of a heartbeat appeared 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 his promises to do amazing, seemingly impossible things. In Exodus 3 and Luke 1 we see that Moses, Zechariah, and Mary had questions too. When it comes to the miraculous, we tend to ask 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?

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?”

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*. 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?

The disciples' question, “Who is this . . . ?” is the beginning point of the *who* question. Who is this man who can still the wind and the waves, turn water into wine, heal a blind man, and 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?” (Psalm 113:5). The answer is clear: *no one*. No one is like him. No one whom 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, burning 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. They 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. Nothing in our finite, earthly experience 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

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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 your power was heard loud and clear? Would you shake the foundations of the ground so that those you had created sensed your presence?

Most demonstrations of power 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, "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.

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

By taking on human flesh, Jesus gave us a God we can comprehend (immanence). But within that flesh, as John 1:14 says, "We have seen his glory" (transcendence). The transcendent power of God acted through this first-century Jewish man.

Transcendence without immanence produces fear: God is terrifying, unrelatable, unknowable. Immanence without transcendence produces casual overfamiliarity and contempt: Jesus becomes my buddy; he is just like me, and nothing in particular about my life has to change because he is part of it. However, Jesus is 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 questions for us as it provides answers.

People read the stories of Jesus, and he appears so normal, so human. How could someone so seemingly natural do these supernatural things? This means that people are more skeptical of Jesus's 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 the stories. This happens to me, too, when the *how* questions get a little out of control and begin to take priority.

Sometimes as I pray and offer God my own needs and the needs of the people I love deeply, I begin to ask how questions. Lord, *how* are you going to meet this financial need? *How* are you going to turn my loved one's life around? *How* are you going to right all the wrongs that I see around me? And

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if I'm not careful I also begin to answer my own questions, trying to help God out by telling him just how to handle all the problems I've put before him! The *how* questions sometimes end up with me putting myself in God's place and dictating instructions to the King and Creator of all things. *How* often leads me down a road that's less than helpful for me—and I'm sure from God's perspective as well. I sometimes find myself in a whirlwind of *whys* and *hows* and forget the God at the center of the whole story.

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!" (John 11:43). It will lead us to look into the eyes of compassion that see the soul of a hurting person, while others see a dirty leper, an outcast woman, a blind beggar.

Asking the question "Who is this?" about the God behind the miracles will lead not only to answers but also to a person. Every single miracle teaches 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. Every miracle story in this book is an invitation into relationship with the God who bends low to meet us right where we are—in the middle of our most desperate moments. As we'll see over and over again as we explore Jesus's miracle stories, the very real presence of desperation leads to an encounter with the very real power of Jesus, resulting in a deeper understanding of who Jesus is and what relationship with him means.

Desperation: What Miracles Are Made Of

Desperation isn't a popular state of being. No one wants to be the girl without a date for prom when all her friends have been asked, or the person sending a hundredth resume for jobs he or she really needs, or 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.

When I look closely at the miracle stories, I see a pattern. Right before each miracle, there is desperation: a person or group of people who are at the end of their ropes with no hope unless Jesus steps in to fix their situation.

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 is for. And that someone is desperate.

Think about it: someone is blind or lame or dead. Someone's child is sick or dead or possessed by demons. 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. Jesus is the miracle worker of those in despair, the Savior of desperate people.

Through the miracle stories, I discovered 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

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situations God uses his power to help, which also cultivate our belief? 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.

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" in verse 9, which is so often quoted from this list, means that those who are blessed to make peace are actually 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 Beatitudes in their entirety can be summed up in the phrase *Blessed are the desperate, for they shall seek God and find him*.

Desperation is a gift from God because it teaches us we can't do life 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's help, but the truth is that it's only the desperate who go looking for it. And they are the ones who receive.

Desperation is the gift of not being able to pretend anymore. The hard things send us running into God's open arms. We see this gift of desperation in Jesus's first miracle when a bride's family runs out of wine. Before we unpack the desperation of the situation, let's consider how this miracle set the stage for Jesus's ministry and all of the miracles that would follow.

The Wedding at Cana

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

Think about the signs we read all day every day: the sign that marks the street where you're supposed to turn 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 where it points. Signs exist to call our attention to something more important, to act as the guide to what we are looking for.

Weddings are full of signs, the 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 used signs during this wedding miracle to drop hints about what

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his own ministry would be. Since this was his first miracle, he packed it full of signs that point to his purpose and character. I read three signs in this miracle story.

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 began with water, and John’s Gospel takes us back to the beginning. John doesn’t begin his Gospel with Jesus’s 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” (1:1). In the ministry of Jesus, God started 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 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. In Jewish practice, 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 the Creator, and these jars were the containers meant for that purpose. Those at the party couldn’t look at the jars without thinking about a ritual of physical washing that equaled spiritual purity.

Through Jesus’s 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.”¹ Wine was a symbol of joy, and Jesus was bringing joy in overflowing abundance. A wedding party really needed more than a hundred gallons of

wine, especially a wedding that had already run through their preplanned portion. So this sign of overflowing joy reminds us of Jesus's desire to give us more than just *enough* for our lives.

Compared with Moses, who turned water into blood as a sign of God's judgment (Exodus 7:14-24), Jesus changed ordinary 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's 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.

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. To paraphrase the verse, “May God be as real to you as the things right in front of your face.” In other words, may God's goodness explode before your eyes with the joy of the face of your loved one or 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 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. 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 point to other joys the Messiah will bring.

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

Jesus's first miracle shows us that signs of God's love are everywhere. They are tangible and abundant. They are before us. Every single day we can taste and see that the Lord is good—including our most desperate moments.

Desperation at the Wedding

I remember well a moment of desperation at my wedding. The unity candle wouldn't light. You know, that symbol of two lives coming together as one. This tall candle stood on a high stand. We lifted our smaller candles

up and tilted them down, and unwittingly just buried that little wick as we dripped hot wax on top of it. All the while we were hoping it would magically light, while all of our family and friends sat there and watched, thinking, “You know, it seems like a really bad omen if your unity candle won’t light.” I would have loved for that desperate moment to have preceded the miracle of light!

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!

But where was the desperation at the wedding in Cana? 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 backstory, it almost seems Jesus was 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 context, 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, “This was not a mere breach of etiquette but a social and psychological catastrophe, particularly in a traditional honor-and-shame culture.”² 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, so any good or kind act from one individual to another meant 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.

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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!³

Here we have the most important event of a young couple's life. They were being introduced to life in the community that they would depend on for trade and commerce, support, social and religious community, and even future marriages of their children. If they were to get off on the wrong foot—and running out of wine is possibly the worst—they could be, at best, “the subject of this village's jests for years”⁴ or, at worst, social pariahs cut off from the benefits of society in a day when all of a person's supplies for living came from community, not commerce.

The family was in a desperate situation, facing certain shame and guilt. Instead of a party trick, we see an introduction to what we will come to recognize as Jesus's 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.

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 where the hosts ran out of wine 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 in the miracle stories of Jesus as we look at the people in desperate need.

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. When we find ourselves in a place where we run out of our own strength, that is precisely the place we may run into Jesus!

Mary Recognizes the Desperate Need

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.

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!”

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 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 was a sign that God was showing up in power and love to save his people, imagine what the absence of wine would mean.

Isaiah 24:7-11 depicts a hurting nation longing for God to send the Messiah, the One who will come and save them. A dry and thirsty people—merrymakers who had run out of wine—would signify that people were longing, thirsty, and ready for God to come and save them. So at the wedding in Cana, when Mary said, “They have no wine,” she was essentially saying, “Look, Jesus. They are longing for the Messiah!” (John 2:3). 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 his ministry emerging: his baptism by his cousin John and his calling of disciples to follow him. Now she was likely

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wondering if this sign, the wine running out, meant that it was time for Jesus to step into a more public role.

It's a gift to admit failure, want, and lack, because ultimately it brings us to rely on God's help. Mary was the only one willing to point out the desperate situation at this wedding. This story is a beautiful picture of a people in need of help being connected with the One who has the power to help them, 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.

Our cultural understanding today might leave us shocked by what we perceive as the blatant disrespect in Jesus's words. 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's culture, addressing someone with the word *woman* was a sign of respect—similar to someone today calling a woman "ma'am."

When Mary brought up Jesus's messiahship by referring to the lack of wine, he reminded her that his hour had not yet come. When *would* his hour come? To answer that, we must go to the garden of Gethsemane, the final hour when mercy and sacrifice flow liberally would involve the death and resurrection of Jesus. Jesus knew that the thirst for Messiah, echoed in the thirst for wine, would be answered only in his own death and resurrection. He wasn't speaking of "the hour" as the start of his ministry but as the final culmination. In that final hour, Jesus would set in motion the beginning of the greatest miracle of all time—his resurrection. That hour would hold within it fear, forgiveness, trust, surrender, and obedience. And as we see from this first miracle to the last, obedience was an essential ingredient.

The Essential Ingredient of Obedience

We are 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.

Think about the servants at the wedding banquet. This celebration was obviously a huge workload for them. 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 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 manufactured or made quickly.

Then one of the party guests pointed to her son and spoke those iconic words: “Do whatever he tells you” (John 2:5). 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.

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 odd instructions.

The servants discovered that obedience isn’t easy work. 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.

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’s 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.

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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.

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.

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. Only when Naaman was obedient, doing something he considered beneath him, did his healing occur (2 Kings 5:1-14).

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 many times brings healing to both.

In the miracle stories, an act of obedience is often required for a miraculous outcome. God 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 was 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.

While Mary was still an unmarried teenage girl, an angel told her 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 Mary was of low status—female, young, unmarried, and poor—Zechariah 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. Zechariah was struck mute until his son was born, but Mary was blessed with affirmation when she went to visit Elizabeth (Luke 1).

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.

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 his power is at work in and through us. By obeying God, we are playing a part in his grander plan. 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.”

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Your desperation is a gift if you'll allow it to be. Don't try to hide the places of your weakness, dryness, or running out. Instead of running from these things, lean into them. This is where you're going to meet Jesus. Your best will always run out. His best will always be better. Your desperation will lead you to ask for a tiny refill, but he will bypass the bottles you have emptied and say instead, "Bring me the jars and fill them to the top with 150 gallons of grace." Grace upon grace upon grace.