

**Christ Presbyterian Church
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Yohanna Katanacho
Elemental: Changed by Jesus | John 2:1-11**

Good morning, everyone! I am truly honored to be in your midst and to share the word of the Lord with you. My name is Yohanna Katanacho, and I am here with my wife and family until August 23. We will be with you, interacting with you, and hopefully learning from you as well. I want to share with you today about a message that has to do with my life, as well as with the Bible, and the title of my presentation is "Changed by Jesus".
Changed by Jesus.

I was born in Jerusalem during war, and my life was so difficult growing up in a war zone. I grew up in the midst of hatred, bitterness, and as a teenager, I became very far from the Lord. My father is from a Catholic background. My mother is Armenian. But then I became an atheist. Living on Via Dolorosa, Station number 8, the Way of the Cross, yet Jesus is not in my heart. And when I'm going to the university, my first degree is in chemistry. I studied at Bethlehem University, and there I became an active atheist, advocating atheism. I became one of the leaders advocating atheism at the university.

One day, as I was sleeping in my home in Jerusalem, at about 3:00AM in the morning, I literally woke up hearing the bells of churches ringing, and the moment I opened my eyes, I felt some kind of air going through my body. I didn't know what was going on. I was not able to move my hands, not able to move my legs. I was horrified. I thought, maybe I'm dead, because I was awake—it wasn't a nightmare. For two hours, I tried to free myself, and I wasn't able to do it. Two hours later, I ran out of all my thoughts, ran out of myself, and I said, "God, if this is You, free me, and I promise You to look for You." The moment I said that, I was able to move again. I was horrified. My whole worldview collapsed in one night, and I started looking for God. Then I went to a small church and there I heard the Gospel presented for the first time in my life. "Yohanna, you are a sinner, and you need to give God your heart." I didn't have a problem understanding that I am a sinner. My life was so far from God. And I remember, I closed my eyes and I prayed, "Lord, I give You my heart, but I can't give You my mind, because I can't understand that You are the god of Israel and not the god of the Palestinians. I can't understand that You are a just god."

I left the church, and in the same week, I had three dreams that were a turning point in my life. In the first dream, there were very ugly faces to the right, very ugly faces to the left, and a person. I was holding his garment and walking behind him. In the second dream, there were the same faces that were aggressive, who were trying to attack me, but I was inside a box like glass, and the box prevented them from reaching me. The third and last dream, the same ugly faces to the right and to the left, aggressive faces, the same person walking, but this time I was not behind holding the garment trying to

follow him from there. I was in his arms. And whenever I opened my eyes in the dream, I saw a face that brought peace and tranquility to my heart. When I woke up, as if someone was whispering in my ears, "Yohanna, this is the difference between grace and deeds. If you want to follow Me with your effort, you can't. But if you are in Christ, then you are protected, and I will carry you, and this is My grace to you." For some reason, the barrier in my mind started collapsing, and my spiritual journey started, and I started looking for God with all of my mind and with all of my heart. And God put on my heart to start a Bible study at the same university where I was advocating atheism. That wasn't easy, but God really helped me to do it. And that was the beginning of the Palestinian Christian Student movement, which then spread to many other universities.

I want to share with you about a story and Scripture that talks about the power of Jesus to change. I experienced that first-hand in my life, and I pray that God will encounter you today and that you will taste the power of Jesus as it changes all of us as a community of God. I want to unpack the story of the wedding of Cana, and as I read this story . . . Cana is about fifteen minutes from where I live, and, you know, I visit there, and many times I chuckle as I see, for example, Cana Shopping Center, and then I read the wedding of Cana. I bring the modern reality and the ancient reality together in my experience. But when I read the story of Cana, I see that Jesus changes water into wine in this story. And in order to understand this story, we need to go back to a little bit of the customs of 1st century Judaism and try to understand how people celebrated weddings.

First of all, you know, we need to understand that if you are single, your wedding will be on Tuesday. In the Hebrew calendar, the way they count the weddings, you know, they count first day, second day, third day. So, in the Bible, when it says on the third day, that means it's on a Tuesday. And if you are single, you get married on Tuesday. If you are divorced, you get married on Wednesday, according to rabbis in the ancient Jewish culture. People didn't get married on Saturdays, because on Saturdays they were not allowed to travel for a distance, for a long distance, and they want the whole family and everyone to come. Some people, when they look at the third day, they might argue that in John 1 there are four days that are mentioned, and on the third day from the fourth day, that's the seventh day, and that's Sabbath, maybe. Some people argue that the third day was so common in the hearings of Christians in the 1st century when John wrote, that it connects us to the resurrection of Jesus Christ perhaps. But, from a historical point of view, it's clear this was on a Tuesday, and some manuscripts would say that it was the wedding of the cousin of Jesus.

In all cases, how can we imagine this wedding? First of all, please do not imagine the wedding with a white dress for the bride, because white dresses were actually a late invention. You know, the first white dress was in the 15th century in England, and then the Queen of Scots used it in the 16th century, and then Queen Victoria popularized it, and now it's all over the world. My grandmother did not have a wedding gown. In the 1st century, people had a purple dress or a blue dress, and these were for the weddings. And so, we have to imagine now how this wedding was. We need to understand a little

bit some of the customs because it will help us to unpack this story and understand it, how Jesus really turned water into wine. And this is in John 2:1-11 that I am referring to.

So, now the wedding in the 1st century, it was celebrated for one whole week, and the groom and the bride were like king and queen. In the Greek Orthodox Church, until today, in matrimony, they will put actual crowns on the heads of the groom and the bride in the matrimony itself. They were celebrated as king and queen, the groom and the bride, and the wedding lasted for a week. And many, many people will come. Hundreds of people, sometimes even thousands of people will come to a wedding. Our wedding, Dina and I, until even today in the Middle East, we have hundreds of people coming to the wedding. All the people we know, all the people my father knows, all the people my uncles know, and all the people my ex-distant cousin knows. You know, like, all of them will come to the wedding. This was the way weddings were. Big celebration for one week. And the groom usually would go to pick up the bride, and sometimes the groom might be a little bit late, you know, like in some of the parables of Jesus. You know, the versions with the oil and the versions without the oil. The groom got late. And so, the groom will go and pick up the bride, and then they will be carried on big chairs like king and queen, and people will be dancing in the streets, and they go to the place where the wedding is going to be happening. This is the scene, and Jesus comes to this scene of the wedding.

Now, the first thing we see, that Jesus comes to this wedding, and my first point is that Jesus turns water into wine, turns the inorganic into organic. It's amazing. As a chemist, I tried to calculate the energy that it takes to transform one drop of water into one drop of wine, from inorganic to organic, and I was amazed. The energy that is needed can give us electricity for the whole planet for billions of years, and yet Jesus is transforming all this water into wine. He is the true vine, according to John 15. But I want to understand, How can we understand this story? It's not about the power of Jesus. It's about something much more significant, in fact. Not about ability to change things that are in a miracle, but there's something even beyond that. In order to understand that, we need to look at the motif of water in John. Put your seatbelts on, because I'm going to go fast now to talk about the Gospel of John, and how we are going to address water in John.

John 1: We have a water scene. Baptism. John 2: Water is being transformed into wine. John 3: We have Jesus talking to Nicodemus about being born of the water and the spirit. John 4: We see this Samaritan woman, and Jesus is telling her that rivers of water will come out of her belly. John 5: We have a pool and a water scene where people are being healed. John 6: We have Jesus walking on the water. John 7: We have Jesus telling whoever is thirsty, let him come to Me, and the water that I will give is actually the Holy Spirit. John 9: We see another water scene, and there is another blind person who is healed in a pool, washing his eyes in a pool. Then we see in John 11 people being cleansed before the Passover. John 13: We see Jesus comes to Peter after He washes the feet of the disciples and He says to Peter, "Unless I wash your feet, you have no inheritance with Me in the kingdom." John 19: They stab Jesus and blood and water came from His side.

Do you agree with me that John is interested in water? I hope you do. There's a big water motif in the Gospel of John, and here we see water being transformed into wine at a wedding. And in the Old Testament, God began working with a wedding: Adam and Eve. And in the New Testament in the Gospel of John, God starts working in a wedding. God is very interested in families, and weddings used to be like the groom represents God, the bride represents Israel, and the contract between them represents the Torah. But here we come to a wedding. Jesus changes things. He changes water into wine. How do we understand the story even further? My second point, it's not just that Jesus changes water into wine; Jesus also changes a problem into a blessing. In order for us to understand that, we need to delve a little bit deeper into the story.

Now, we need to understand the customs of the 1st century Jewish traditions. Everyone who comes to the wedding should bring a gift, but it depends . . . if you are poor, or if you are relatives and friends, or if you are rich and a dignitary in the community. So, there are three kinds of people who would come to the wedding. The poor were not expected to bring any gifts. They will eat and drink without bringing anything. The relatives and friends, they will give gifts, and if basically you give a gift to John's wedding, \$200. When John's son or brother comes to your wedding, they give \$200 or more. If they give less, it's a shame. This is the culture even today. So, 2,000 years were not able to get rid of that. But the thing is, this is in the culture, how we act, and that's how people expected people to behave in the 1st century.

So, the question is: were Jesus and His disciples from the poor, or were they relatives and friends, or is Jesus a dignitary who will give a big gift without expecting anything back? We notice that, in fact, Jesus comes and He gives a big gift. There was a problem. They didn't have wine. And this is a serious problem if you don't have wine, because according to some of the rabbis of the 1st century, some people abused the system. You go to a wedding and you don't find food or drink, and some people thought this could be good profit. I could get married ten times, have many weddings, and people give me gifts without my giving anything back. And some people abused the system. So, some of the rabbis issued a regulation: If you go to a wedding and there is no food or wine, you can actually sue the groom and take them to jail. So, this was a serious problem when there is no more wine at the wedding. The whole family could suffer.

And so, the mother of Jesus comes to Jesus and tells him they have no more wine. And Jesus says, "Fill the jars to the brim," and they filled them, and He says, "Take," and He gives all this wine. More than 500 bottles of wine, of good, excellent wine. I wish I was there. You know, I went to Google to try to look what is the best wine in the world today, and I looked and I can't even read it. It's a French wine. But one bottle can cost from \$13,000 up to \$40,000. Now, I imagine the wine Jesus gave is much better even than that. Jesus gave a big gift, because Jesus is able to transform problems into blessings. Every time in the Gospel we see a person who is blind, Jesus gives them sight; a person who is crippled, Jesus blesses them; and even those who were not healed in history, Jesus still uses everything we give into His hands and turns it into a blessing.

Let me share with you a personal story how Jesus transforms a problem I have into a blessing. When I became a follower of Jesus, one of the things I started looking at is the Sermon on the Mount, and when I read the Sermon on the Mount, I read, "Love your enemies." Now, as a Palestinian, the way I read that, I didn't need to go to a dictionary to define the word "enemies". It was very clear for me that God is asking me to love my Jewish neighbor. I struggled. I closed the Bible and I said, "I can't do that." I struggled with God. I argued with God. And then I went to Jaffa Gate, one of the gates of Jerusalem, and there I saw flyers and brochures, and on the brochures the title that was written, "Re-love," in Hebrew and in English. Christian brochures. And it was a quotation from Isaiah 53. "Like a lamb being lead to the slaughter." I decided to take as many of these brochures with me, and I put one brochure inside my ID card, and then when an Israeli soldier would stop me, I would give them my ID card. They would open it and they will see inside, and they will see this brochure. And they will ask me, "What is this?" And I will tell them, "This is how my God wants me to relate to you." I didn't want to lie and tell them I love you, because I didn't at that time. But I wanted to obey God. I was making a compromise with God. And then they will ask me, you know, further questions, and we'll talk about Jesus, and then they will let me go. Day after day, God started changing my heart, and I would walk in the same streets seeing the same people, but this time I will be asking, "Lord, please, let them stop me so that I can share Jesus with them."

One day, I was doing church bulletins in Arabic for the church, and most Israeli soldiers don't know Arabic. And during that season, there was a lot of political tension, as usual, and many people were distributing political flyers in Arabic, and many people were writing political graffiti's on walls in Arabic. The photocopier didn't work well with me that night, and it was very late, almost midnight, and I was going back to where I live, to East Jerusalem, and as I was going back from one of the gates of Jerusalem called Damascus Gate, I saw three soldiers sitting at the gate. I knew that I was going to be in trouble, so I lifted up a quick prayer and I said, "God, I was doing your work, and this is what You do to me? I'm tired. I want to go home now." So, as I was going down the stairs, one of the soldiers crooked his finger, asking me to approach. As I approached the three soldiers, I wasn't thinking clearly. I unzipped the zipper of my jacket very quickly. The three soldiers thought I was going to attack them. They put their hands on their machine guns and they pointed their machine guns towards my head. I put my hand on my heart and I said, "I love you." They were in shock, and I was in shock. For a few moments, we didn't know what to do. It felt forever for me, but anyway . . . they lowered their guns and I started sharing about Jesus. They told me, "We wish that all Palestinians are like you." I said, "No, I wish that you are like me." God told me that love is not only a feeling. Love is a decision that we make in order to honor Jesus. And our love muscles grow stronger in the context of hatred. God sometimes brings people that are difficult to love so that we can grow in understanding of love and of who God is.

Jesus changes water into wine, changes a problem into a blessing, but as I look at this story, I see something even deeper than that. I see Jesus changes a request into a revelation. And I want to point out something I don't see in any commentaries, but I

think it's very central for this story. Jesus comes and says, "Fill the jars with water." So, they fill the jars with water. And then he says, "Taste," and they take it and it's wine. Now, Jesus solved a problem but created another problem. What is the other problem? The other problem is they no longer have water in the wedding. And water was cleansing, and it's very important, especially for the Pharisees who need to cleanse the utensils, even between the meals, and they will go and wash their hands between meals, because they understood that they are defiled and that they need to be cleansed by God. Water can cleanse from outside, but Jesus is going to transform us from inside.

And so, we see in this story, which is, interestingly, in the Gospel of John, juxtaposed to the cleansing of the temple, because John is bringing a new world view of which this wedding in Cana is only a sign of; it's not a miracle, it's a sign. And a sign is different than a miracle, because it leads us to something else. Like a sign you see in the street as you are driving that tells you something is 50 kilometers away; it leads you to something else. So, this is a sign that should lead us to something else. What should it lead us to? The key for understanding that is in the dialogue between Jesus and his mother. In the story, it tells us that the mother of Jesus comes to Jesus and tells him they have no wine. He says to her, "What is that to Me and to you, oh woman?" That confused me for many years. Is Jesus saying yes? And if so, why is He saying it that way? If He is saying no, why did He transform the water into wine? Then one day, I understood that Jesus is saying yes *and* no. He wants to solve the problem. He wants to reveal His glory, which Mary had understood since He was a child, since He was conceived. He is special. He's unique. He is the Messiah. She understood that, and it's time for Him to reveal His glory. But He doesn't want to reveal His glory through powers and miracles. He wants to reveal His glory through the cross. But how is His answer connected to the cross? The key is in the word that Jesus used: "My hour has not yet come." As you follow this expression, "hour", in the Gospel of John, you will see it mentioned so many different times in John 7:30, 12:23, 12 . . . et cetera. So many times. And if I have the time, I can unpack this, but very quickly, Jesus said the hour had not yet come in John 7. Then in 12, "The hour has come for the Son of man to be glorified." Then in 12 again, "My soul is troubled and what shall I say? Father, save Me from this hour. No, it was for this reason that I came to this hour." Then, in 13, Jesus said, "He knew that the hour had come for Him to leave this world and to go to the father." And in 17 again, "The hour has come. Glorify your Son, that your Son may glorify You." The hour is the crucifixion. The hour is the resurrection. The hour is the ascension. The hour is the glorification of Jesus Christ.

I don't know about you, but many times, God brings new insights as we dialogue with Him. And many times, as I pray, I discover the answers to my problems. I discover the will of God for me. So, I want to share with you a prayer that I have written in the midst of a season of trouble in my region. But I believe that God revealed His will for me through this prayer, and I pray that it will bless you as well. I dream. This is my prayer.

I dream of a Middle East—and you can put America, if you like, instead of the Middle East, or the whole world—I dream of a Middle East in which I have my breakfast in Jerusalem, my lunch in Beirut, and my dinner in Syria. I ride my car a

Middle East in which people choose their own religion without fear. I dream of a Middle East in which there is no bigotry, radicalism, or hatred. I dream of a Middle East, of America, of the world, in which all human beings are equal, the ones who wear a hijab and the ones who put keffiyeh are equal. I dream of a Middle East in which Jews love Arabs and seek to uphold their rights, a Middle East in which Arabs love Jews. I dream of a Middle East without poverty, without hatred, without wars, and the massacring of human beings. I dream of peace. Peace with God and with all of our neighbors. Peace with self and with the angels. I dream of a Middle East without weapons, without traffic jams, without pollution, without discrimination, because of gender, religion, age, or weight. My dream is not an illusion, but a step forward as I follow Jesus Christ, the Prince of Peace. My dream is not something that can be fulfilled in a moment, but it is a celestial kingdom that comes through many generations, many sacrifices, many prayers, and many more tears. Before the dawn, there is darkness. Before joy, there is the victory of sadness. Before laughing, weeping dominates. Before the dominance of the kingdom of God, the kingdom of the devil dominates. Oh Lord, may Your kingdom come and Your will be done on Earth, as it is in heaven. May Your kingdom come through my words, thoughts, decisions, and relationships. Turn me into a peacemaker. Turn us, oh Lord, into peacemakers. Amen.

The nature of oral presentations makes them less precise than written materials; any lack of attribution is unintentional, and we wish to credit all those who have contributed to this sermon. Soli Deo Gloria.