

**Study 23: The Gospel of John – Part 2: Signs**

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**The Book of Signs.** John is unique among the four evangelists in that he speaks of Christ's miracles as "signs." By doing so he wants to ensure we realize that these miraculous acts were not mere marvels or feats of magic performed to entertain or amaze the crowds. Rather, we should see them for what they really are, revelatory events whose full significance can be recognized only by people of faith. They are signs that point to the reality of the Person and work of Jesus Christ.

Most of those who made up the crowds that witnessed these events did not recognize these signs and so failed to comprehend their full meaning. The curious and the thrill-seekers might have considered Jesus to be an extraordinary man, perhaps even a prophet, but they certainly didn't accept His divinity. Furthermore, these signs of Jesus actually led some to react more strongly against Jesus. Those who "*preferred darkness to light, because their works were evil*" became angered and hardened their hearts even more against the Light of the World [Jn 3:19].

In this study guide we will examine chapters one through twelve of the *Gospel of John* in which John presents us with seven great signs or miracles of Jesus. With each of these signs he includes a discourse of the Lord in which we learn the meaning of the particular act.

### The Seven Signs

1. Miracle at Cana: Jn 2:1-12
2. Cure of the Royal Official's Son: Jn 4:46-54
3. Cure of the Paralytic at the Pool of Bethesda: Jn 5:1-16
4. Feeding of the Five Thousand: Jn 6:1-14
5. Walking on the Water: Jn 6:15-21
6. Cure of the Man Born Blind: Jn 9:1-7
7. Raising of Lazarus: Jn 11:1-44

**Drama of Light and Darkness.** This second part of the *Gospel of John* – the *Book of Signs* – begins with the gradual revelation of the Light of the World in the person of Jesus Christ. In rapid succession we encounter Jesus as the Word of God revealing Himself as the Light coming into the world.

Consider these events described by John in the first four chapters:

- Jesus appearance at the Jordan: Jn 1:29-34
- Calling of the first disciples: Jn 1:35-51
- Wedding at Cana in Galilee: Jn 2:1-11
- Cleansing of the Temple at Jerusalem: Jn 2:13-22
- Secret Visit of Nicodemus: Jn 3:1-21

- John the Baptist's Testimony: Jn: 3:22-36
- Conversation with the Samaritan Woman: Jn 4:5-42

Each of these events builds on the previous, revealing the truth about Jesus as the Son of God and His mission of Redemption.

John also describes the various reactions of those who witness these examples of Jesus' self-revelation; and many of these reactions are unfavorable. Already, for example, as a result of Jesus' cleansing of the Temple, we begin to see signs of opposition and even hostility. This negative theme builds to a crescendo culminating in the episode of the raising of Lazarus which leads to the condemnation of Jesus by the Sanhedrin:

*“So from that day on they planned to kill him... For the chief priests and the Pharisees had given orders that if anyone knew where he was, he should inform them, so that they might arrest him” [Jn 11:53,57]*

**Now open your Bible** and read the *Gospel of John* through chapter 12; that is, John 1:1-19 to John 12:57. As you read you make the following notations in the margin alongside these portions of the *Gospel of John*:

- ✠ Introduction – Witness to the Light – Jn 1:19-51
- ✠ 1<sup>st</sup> Episode – The New Creation – Jn 2:1-4:42
- ✠ 2<sup>nd</sup> Episode – The Word that Gives Life – Jn 4:46-5:47
- ✠ 3<sup>rd</sup> Episode – The Bread that Gives Life – Jn 6
- ✠ 4<sup>th</sup> Episode – The Light that is Life, Revealed and Rejected – Jn 7-8
- ✠ 5<sup>th</sup> Episode – The Light that Reveals the Works of Men – Jn 9:1-10:39
- ✠ 6<sup>th</sup> Episode – The Victory of Life over Death – Jn 11:1-53
- ✠ 7<sup>th</sup> Episode – Life through Death, the Meaning of the Cross – Jn 12:1-36
- ✠ Epilogue – Final Appeal – Jn 12:37-50

**Behind the Words.** From the beginning we come to realize that John intends to give expression to the reality of Christ living and acting throughout time in and through His Church. This realization, in itself, makes the *Gospel of John* a magnificent commentary on the sacramental life of the Christian. It is also one of John's great insights, one that makes his Gospel applicable to the life of the Church in every age.

It is particularly important that we recognize the great emphasis John places on the two great sacraments of Christian life: Baptism and Holy Eucharist. It is entirely possible that one of his purposes for writing his Gospel was to prepare neophytes for the reception of Baptism at the great Easter Vigil. Indeed, the dialogue between Jesus and Nicodemus [Jn 3:1-21] is analogous to the questioning of the candidate, something that is still preserved in an abbreviated form in the current Rite of Baptism. Baptism as a kind of spiritual enlightenment also seems to lie behind the narration of the man born blind: “...I washed, and now I can see” [Jn 9:15]. Baptism as the resurrection from the death of sin and unbelief is hinted at in the account of the miracle at Bethesda: “For just as the Father raises the dead and gives life, so also does the Son give life to

*whomever he wishes*” [Jn 5:21]. And, of course, the Church has always recognized the entirety of chapter six as Eucharistic in theme.

We will now examine each of the episodes mentioned above and see how they fit together with the overall theme of John’s Gospel.

Since it was John’s intention to present us with a deeper understanding of the meaning of Jesus’ words and deeds, we shouldn’t be surprised by John’s omission of much of the material found in the three Synoptic Gospels. To achieve his purpose John focused on those particular events of Christ’s life which he believed would best highlight the true significance of the Redeemer’s mission. Accordingly, as we read the *Gospel of John* we should be asking ourselves: *What is the religiously significant aspect of the event which serves to illustrate the major doctrinal message of the whole Gospel?*

**The Wedding Feast at Cana** [Jn 2:1-11]. In the narrative of the wedding feast, which is preserved only by John, we have an excellent example of John’s realization that Jesus’ actions have a timeless reality which finds expression in the life of the Christian in the Church. In this event, which occurs on the threshold of Jesus’ public life, we find a symbol expressing the entirety of the work Jesus was sent by the Father to accomplish. Consider the following aspects of John’s account as they relate to its overall intention:

1. **Timing.** This first manifestation of Christ’s glory took place *three days* after His Baptism in the Jordan. The definitive manifestation of this glory will occur at His Resurrection which takes place three days after His second Baptism – eternal life through death – on Calvary.
2. **Occasion.** This manifestation of His glory occurred at a wedding feast, an image our Lord used frequently in parables as a figure of the Kingdom where the heavenly Bridegroom celebrates His triumph with His friends.
3. **Marian Intercession.** The miracle (sign) is performed ahead of time – “My hour has not yet come” [Jn 2:4] – at the request of His Mother. John sees eternal life as already anticipated here on earth in the life of the Church. And here we also see the power of Mary’s intercession.

*“At Cana the mother of Jesus asks her son for the needs of a wedding feast; this is the sign of another feast—that of the wedding of the Lamb where he gives his body and blood at the request of the Church, his Bride. It is at the hour of the New Covenant, at the foot of the cross, that Mary is heard as the Woman, the new Eve, the true ‘Mother of all the living’” [CCC 2618].*

4. **Water.** The water, used by the Jews for the ritual purification, symbolizes the whole of the ancient dispensation of the Hebrews, as well as the sacrament of Baptism which gives us new life as children of God.
5. **Wine.** The wine represents the new order established by Christ, as well as the “new wine” which is drunk in the Kingdom of Heaven, that of the Last Supper, and finally of the Eucharist.

The water and wine, therefore, symbolize the two foundational sacraments of the Christian life: Baptism and Eucharist. John sees in these sacraments the two *sources* of the new life of God’s

children. As we saw in the *Prologue*, this *new life* is the goal of the Incarnation itself. This wine is extraordinary and unknown because we are concerned with a “life” which comes directly from God, a communication or gift of the Holy Spirit.

Although this chapter offers us a description of a historical event, it is best read as a meditation on the significance of Christ’s work. Through it we also come to experience the humanity of Jesus Christ who began His divine ministry in the midst of the everyday life of the people of Galilee.

The image of the wedding feast is a popular one in Scripture, and particularly in the Gospels, for expressing the joy of life in the Kingdom of God. John uses this inaugural event in Jesus’ public life as a way of showing us that we are already participating in the heavenly realities here and now through the sacramental life of the Church. The Mass, then, is the realization in time of the timeless, of the eternal life the Father has destined for those who love Him, for the community of the Church, Christ’s Body. Recognizing this truth, perhaps we should all consider how well we actually express that community in our lives and in our worship.

**New Life in Christ** [Jn 3]. John often provides us with more detailed descriptions of conversations and controversies involving Jesus than we encounter in the synoptic Gospels. By doing so he is able to emphasize certain aspects of Christ’s work not explicitly addressed in the other Gospels. In chapter two, for example, John gives us two “signs”, the miracle at Cana and the cleansing of the Temple.

Now, in chapter three, John relates the first *discourse* of his Gospel, presented to us in the form of a dialogue between Jesus and Nicodemus, quite likely a member of the Sanhedrin. In the course of this dialogue John highlights the meaning of the redemptive mission of Jesus and emphasizes the role of the sacrament of Baptism in inaugurating this new life won for us by Christ. Although John never explicitly mentions Baptism, the expressions used – e.g., to be born again – were already consecrated baptismal expressions by the time John wrote his Gospel. The indirectness of John’s writing and his frequent reliance on symbolism should not surprise us for this was the way that Jesus Himself often taught.

It’s also important to understand that, during this time in the life of the Church, as it was expanding rapidly throughout a Roman Empire already hostile to its teaching, there was a certain reluctance to speak or write openly about the inner life of the Christian community. A document such as John’s Gospel might easily fall into the hands of a Roman official, be misunderstood, and subsequently serve as a weapon in the propaganda war which accompanied the persecution of the Church.

**The Universal Gospel** [Jn 4:1-42]. Once again John offers us a discourse in the form of a conversation, this time between Jesus and the Samaritan woman at the well. By conversing with a Samaritan – whom the Jews considered, at best, half-pagan – and a woman, Jesus is not only challenging some of the Jewish cultural mores, but more importantly He is highlighting another major feature of His redemptive work: its universality. In other words, the message and the work of Jesus Christ apply to all, as does the work of the Holy Spirit in the universal Church down through the ages.

In this passage Jesus gives expression to the idea that His redemptive work brings to fulfillment God’s plan for man’s happiness. It is a plan first presented “in partial and various ways” [Heb 1:1] through the life, institutions, and people of the Old Testament which are now passing away.

The stagnant water of Jacob's Well is replaced by the living water of Jesus Christ. The cult of the Temple at Jerusalem and the Samaritan worship on Mt. Gerizim are replaced by the worship of God "in spirit and in truth."

St. Paul in his Second Letter to the Corinthians beautifully summarizes this message of Jesus when he writes, "So whoever is in Christ is a new creation: the old things have passed away; behold, new things have come" [2 Cor 5:17]

Once again we are provided with a wonderful source for meditation on the universal nature of the Gospel message and how we, as Christians, should respond to this as we carry out the Church's primary mission of evangelization.

**The Lord of the Sabbath** [Jn 5:1-18]. In the first episode of the Gospel (addressed above) we are told that Jesus brings to men a "new life" and inaugurates a "new creation." Now, in the second episode, John answers the question, "How does Jesus give this new life?"

For an interesting illustration of the difference in approach between John and the synoptic writers, compare this passage with Mk 2. Both evangelists use these two similar events from the life of our Lord to provide insights into the meaning of the Christian life, particularly in reference to Baptism. Humanity lies paralyzed and helpless until the healing and strengthening power of Christ cleanses us from the sickness of sin and restores us to full health in the divine life. Mark, in his Gospel, emphasizes the faith of those who bring the man to Jesus. In John, however, the important thing is the gracious, unconditional invitation of Christ and the personal response of the healed man. John's reference to the pool also hints that the old dispensation is inadequate to heal humanity, and also serves as a contrast to the true healing waters of the sacrament of Baptism.

**The Feeding of the Multitude** [Jn 6:1-21]. John's recording of this event differs little from that found in the other three Gospels. But he uses this event as an introduction to (or preparation for) Jesus' profound discourse on the Eucharist which follows [Jn 6:26-69]. The feeding of the multitude is, in itself, a messianic sign fulfilling the Old Testament prophecies. It is also a sign pointing forward to the Church's celebration of the Eucharist and to the feast of the blessed at the banquet of the Messiah in the Kingdom of God. As we have already seen, John depicts the life of Christ as taking place on three planes: (1) the historic event, once and for all in time; (2) the sacramental event, extending redemption to all people in every age and time; and (3) the eternal event beyond the realm of time and space.

Here John also tells of Jesus' introduction of the mystery of the Eucharist to His disciples and its effect on those who could not accept the teaching. This teaching, that Jesus is truly present in the Eucharist, caused many of His disciples to leave Him [Jn 6:66]. Although they did not yet understand Jesus' words, the Apostles remained because, as Peter said, "You have the words of eternal life." These words would become clear to them only after the Last Supper and the inspirational gift of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost.

**The Witness of the Father** [Jn 8:12-59]. Any claim to divinity must require the corroborating testimony of God Himself. Here John addresses the question: "How can we know that the claims of Jesus are true?"

Read this passage again, slowly, and see how the Father bears witness to the unique Sonship of Jesus. It is the glorification of the Son by the Father which sets the seal of divine approval and bears witness to the truth of the claims of Jesus. In the *Prologue* we saw how important John

considered the idea of Christ's glory. Here Jesus tells those who believe and those who do not believe that the supreme moment of that glory is the *hour* of Christ's passion, death and resurrection.

**Unity of the Two Testaments.** John frequently makes use of features of Old Testament life and institutions to symbolize the life and institutions of the new People of God, the Church established by Christ. By doing so he joins the other evangelists in showing us the fulfillment of the Old Covenant in the New. Some examples:

- John contrasts the new sanctuary, the Temple of Christ's Body, with the Temple at Jerusalem [Jn 2:21].
- John also depicts Jesus describing the saving efficacy of His death on the Cross in terms of the bronze serpent of Moses in the desert [Jn 3:14 & Num 21:9].
- Jesus contrasts the Jewish people's wanderings in the desert and God's gift of manna to Himself, the true Bread of the Eucharist sent down from heaven [Jn 6:32].

**In the Liturgy.** In its wisdom the Church treats the *Gospel of John* differently. Unlike the synoptic Gospels which the Church uses on a rotating basis in the three-year cycle of Sunday readings, John's Gospel is included in the Lectionary in all three years of the cycle but primarily during the Lent and Easter seasons. The *Gospel of John* is often called the "spiritual gospel," not because the others are unspiritual, but because it has a special way of drawing our attention to who Jesus is and challenging us to make a personal response to Him. For example, only in John do we find the accounts of Jesus at Cana, with Nicodemus, and with the Samaritan woman, as well as His Eucharistic discourse on the Bread of Life. All of these passages place real demands on us as Christians, and so it is only fitting that we hear these and other powerful passages every year.

**Study Questions:**

1. What does Jesus teach about the *manna* and the Eucharist in John 6? In what way are they related?
2. What is the relationship between the wedding feast at Cana [Jn 2:1-11] and the celebration of the Eucharist?
3. Against the background of Jn 1:29-51, what do you think of the atheist philosopher Nietzsche's comment, "They would have to sing better songs for me to learn to have faith in their Redeemer; and his disciples would have to look more redeemed!"?
4. What was the significance of the cleansing of the Temple [Jn 2:12-22]?
5. How would you evaluate the attitudes of Mary and her sister, Martha, in Jn 11:1-57?
6. Why do you think John the Baptist plays such a prominent role in John's Gospel?