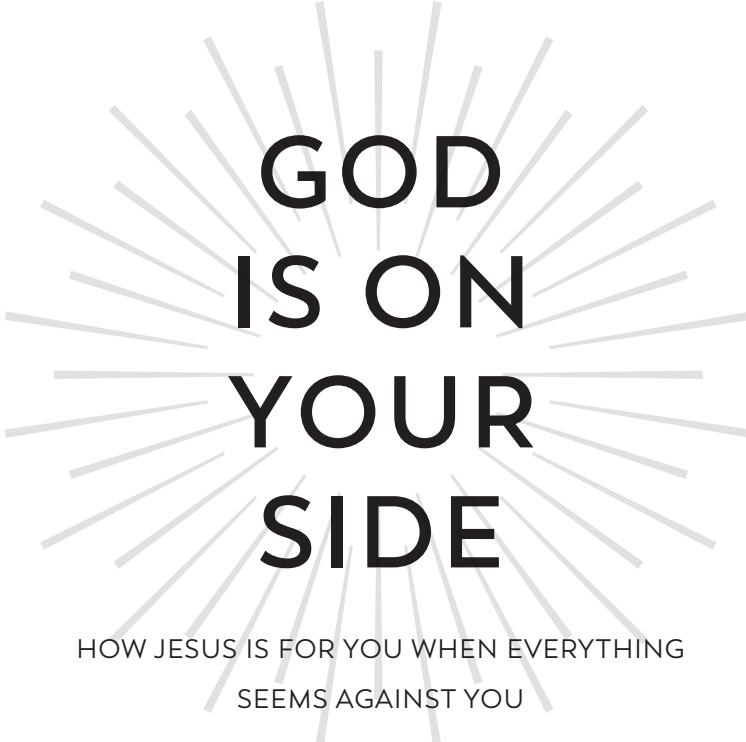


HOW JESUS IS FOR YOU
WHEN EVERYTHING SEEMS
AGAINST YOU

GOD IS ON YOUR SIDE



JOSHUA RYAN BUTLER



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SEEMS AGAINST YOU

Joshua Ryan Butler



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Multnomah

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To my beloved sons, James and Jacob.

I am for you, even when everything else seems against you.

May you know in your bones that your heavenly Father is too.

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION:	<i>On Your Side</i>	00
1 SET THE GPS	<i>When You Don't Know Where You're Going</i>	00
2 BRING DOWN THE HOUSE	<i>When Change Is Painful</i>	00
3 BECOME THE BELOVED	<i>When You Don't Feel Wanted</i>	00
4 ENDURE THE HARDEST MILES	<i>When Jesus Answers Only Half Your Prayer</i>	00
5 RISE UP	<i>When You're Stuck and Can't Get Out of Bed</i>	00
6 FEAST IN THE WILDERNESS	<i>When Your Soul Is Starving</i>	00
7 BLOW THE DAM	<i>When You're Suffering Divine Dehydration</i>	00
8 RAISE THE BAR	<i>When You're Battling Guilt and Regret</i>	00

9 | OPEN YOUR EYES 00*When You Can't See Meaning or Purpose***10 | DISCOVER YOUR DEFENDER** 00*When They Should Have Protected You but Didn't***11 | WALK FREE** 00*When Your Mind Is a Prison***12 | ANTICIPATE SURPRISE** 00*When It Hurts to Hope***13 | CHANGE THE WORLD** 00*When Your Past Seems Bigger than Your Future***CONCLUSION: Be the Beloved** 00**APPENDIX: An Elegant Design** 00**GRATEFUL** 00**NOTES** 00

INTRODUCTION

On Your Side

*I*s God on my side? Is he really for me? It's easy to answer "Yes!" when life is going well. When your body's healthy, your bank account's full, and your best friends are by your side. It's harder to believe when life takes a turn for the worse.

It was harder to believe when my five-year-old daughter had a psychotic break and we spent ten days in the hospital, six months with specialists, and countless sleepless nights worrying that the girl we loved to the moon and back was gone forever. Or when our adopted son received a diagnosis that sparked our fear for his future.

It was harder to believe when my wife and I had the biggest fight of our marriage and went through months of intense counseling to work through significant issues.

It was harder to believe as a newer Christian when the girl I was hung up on for five years said no and I went on a forty-day hunger strike to challenge God on why he'd bring her into my life if it would end in such devastating heartbreak.

It was harder to believe when I went blind in my right eye and

the doctors were concerned I'd soon go blind in my left eye too. Suddenly, I was afraid I'd never see my children's faces as they grew up or be able to read and write or be able to do my job and fulfill my sense of calling.

It was harder to believe when a trusted friend stabbed me in the back and dragged my name through the mud of our community and—though I tried to walk the cruciform path of Jesus and not retaliate—God didn't vindicate me as I hoped.

It was harder to believe when a major dream I thought God had given for my future, confirmed by multiple prophetic words from a variety of people over seven years, came crashing down, disorienting my sense of God's voice and direction for the road ahead.

It was harder to believe during a dark night of the soul when I first heard a sinister voice whispering that it would be better for everyone close to me if I weren't around.

In such seasons, I've found myself wondering, *God, are you really on my side?*

Friend, have you ever wondered whether God is really *for* you? This is, I'd suggest, the question beneath the question. The tension beneath our tension. When we're shaking with anxiety, laid low with depression, or groping in the darkness to discover whether it's really all worth it. When it feels like God has left the building.

In the wake of disappointment and loss, you can find yourself wondering, *Is my Maker for me? Does my Savior have my back? Is God committed to my good?*

Where do you go when you wrestle with such questions?

THE GOSPEL OF JOHN

There's a place I love to go when wondering whether God is on my side: the gospel of John. This beloved gospel is a favorite for so many people. "I run to [it] over and over again," my friend Brenna Blain says, "like a child running toward their favorite pair of arms."¹

This gospel has powerful layers. While it's often the first book recommended for someone new to following Jesus, I'm still experiencing epiphanies after decades of reading it. John's waters are shallow enough for a baby believer to wade in and oceanic enough for scuba-diving Christians to explore for a lifetime.

I want to introduce you to some of these deeper layers. We're going to explore John's gospel throughout this book, focusing on the seven signs Jesus performs and the one-on-one encounters he has. As we'll see, John wants you to discover *yourself* in these stories. We'll also explore the Old Testament background that makes each scene pop in vivid Technicolor. This is the trick to uncovering the deeper layers of this gospel: When you see how Jesus fulfills the hope of the biblical story, you can experience more fully how he encounters you in the depths of your own life story.

Let me first explain what I mean—and don't mean—by God being on your side.

IN IT WITH YOU, FIGHTING FOR YOU, WORKING THROUGH YOU

John introduces us to Jesus as the Word made flesh, the Creator entering *our side* of creation.² Some people do spoken *word* poetry; God does spoken *world* poetry: speaking worlds into existence.³ Jesus is the spoken Word who has entered our spoken

world—the audio become visual—to find you and be with you forever. This means God is in it with us. Literally. You might feel like God’s left the building, but in Christ, he has entered the building to be with you forever.

In Christ, he is *on your side* of creation.

John also introduces us to Jesus as the Lamb of God, the Innocent One who steps *onto our side* as the guilty, to die in our place.⁴ Like that sponge I use when my kid spills spaghetti all over the floor, soaking up the mess until the tile is pristine again, Jesus “takes away the sin of the world.”⁵ This means God fights for you. Jesus has come to bear your guilt, to soak up your shame, to win you back. He isn’t willing to let you go without a fight. He has gone the ultimate distance—all the way to hell and back—to be with you forever.

He is *on your side* in salvation.

One last image: John introduces us to Jesus as the ladder we need, with “angels of God ascending and descending” on him.⁶ The risen Jesus brings his side of heaven *to our side* of earth. He wants to unite you to himself and make you like rungs on his ladder. This means God wants to work through you. Maybe you feel like you don’t have purpose, yet God wants to dwell not only *with* you but also *within* you, to fill you with his Spirit and form you as his body. He wants to partner with you in bringing heaven to earth.⁷ There’s no greater calling than that.

He is *on your side* in restoration.

While writing this book, I heard a worship anthem that sings about God being in it with us, working through us, and fighting for us: “You’re on my side. . . . God is not against me.”⁸ That’s a good summary of John’s introduction. If you struggle believing that’s true, this book is for you.

ON GOD'S SIDE

Okay, here's what God being on your side *doesn't* mean. It doesn't mean he *picks* sides. It doesn't mean he'll make your fantasy football team win. It doesn't mean he'll necessarily back your argument against your spouse, endorse your candidate, or support your nation's battle against its enemies.

There's a famous Old Testament scene where Joshua asked the angelic commander of God's armies whose side he was on:

Joshua went up to him and asked, “Are you for us or for our enemies?”

“Neither,” he replied, “but as commander of the army of the **LORD** I have now come.”⁹

I'm on God's side, in other words. The real question is how we stand in relation to God. When Abraham Lincoln was asked whether he thought God supported his side of the Civil War, he wisely reflected, “Sir, my concern is not whether God is on our side; my greatest concern is to be on God's side, for God is always right.”

The claim of this book is not that God *takes sides* (on a horizontal level) in our messy human spats but rather that God *comes down to our side* (on a vertical level) to encounter us in Christ and transform us in the midst of our mess.

God being on your side doesn't mean he endorses everything you do. Au contraire! Jesus came “full of grace *and* truth,” John tells us.¹⁰ Your Savior shows up with both *grace* to save you from sin and *truth* to call out the sin he's saving you from.

Jesus confronts and challenges us. Yet even here, as theologian Karl Barth observes, God's “No” to our sin is embedded within his bigger “Yes” to our humanity—the very humanity he's

come to rescue.¹¹ God's confrontation, in other words, unveils an even deeper sense in which he's on our side.

Even when Jesus confronts you, he's out to set you free.

THE ARTIST IS PRESENT

The world-renowned performance artist Marina Abramović put on *The Artist Is Present*, an exhibit at New York's Museum of Modern Art. For two and a half months straight, the Yugoslavian-born artist sat in the museum's atrium for seven hours a day, five days a week, and ten hours on Fridays.¹² People were invited to come sit across from her, one at a time, face-to-face, and look into her eyes as she looked into theirs.

People waited hours in line to be part of this unusual experience. Over the course of the exhibit, she sat with more than 1,500 people for a total of 736 hours and thirty minutes.

Here's the crazy thing: People were overwhelmed. As they sat with her, many were moved to tears, or their jaw dropped in awe, or a look of peace and serenity came over them. You can see photos of their expressions online.¹³ After the initial awkwardness of sitting with a stranger in silence, they were moved by the experience of simply being seen.

There's something powerful to being seen.

In Christ, the Artist is present. You're invited in the pages ahead to sit across from the Artist who made the world—and who made you—and encounter his gaze. To lock eyes with Jesus, the God who entered our side of the equation to meet you where you're at, in all your mess and brokenness.

You're invited to see God seeing you.

Friend, God sees you. You were made to be seen. Maybe you feel ignored or unwanted. Perhaps you've been let down by those who were supposed to care for and protect you. Maybe

people have only taken from you rather than giving themselves to you. Christ is different.

Maybe it's hard to believe God sees you right now. If you're having a hard time seeing the Artist, it's okay. I've been there too. I'll share more from my own dark nights of the soul in the pages ahead. Yet I believe God wants to encounter you not in spite of your pain but *through* your pain in a powerful way. Please stick with me.

Jesus approaches you not to take something from you but to give himself to you. Not with self-serving avarice but with life-giving love. He does more than look at you; he *sees* you. All of you. Your story and gifts, your desires and wounds, your trophies and scars. God sees all that lies beneath the tip of your iceberg, his Spirit searching beneath the surface like deep calling to the deep of your ocean floor. God cares about the whole you. Body and soul.

John wants you to see *yourself* in the one-on-one encounters of his gospel. These encounters are more than interesting historical vignettes. Each story is like a stained glass window of that scene, to look through into a greater reality in which you find yourself.

There's a moment in John's introduction when Nathanael, one of the original disciples, first encounters Jesus. He's astounded that Jesus saw him "under the fig tree" before they even met.

"How do you know me?" he asks.

We're not told what Nathanael was doing under the fig tree, but Jesus *sees* Nathanael before he comes to see Jesus. Jesus *knows* Nathanael before he comes to know Jesus. This is what draws him to worship Jesus.¹⁴

He sees Jesus seeing him. And it changes everything.

I wonder, Have you seen Jesus seeing you? He sees your situ-

ation, knows your backstory, is privy to the “fig trees” where you thought you were all alone. Maybe God feels like a distant stranger, Jesus an odd curiosity. But the gospel invites you to come close to the One who’s already come close to you. Encountering his gaze of divine love is what draws you to worship.

The Artist has entered his painting and taken a seat at its center, inviting you to pull up a chair. To look into the face of the One who made you, who knows you more deeply than you know yourself, and to see him seeing you. In his countenance, you’ll discover the divine mercy and unwavering veracity that has long been set on you.

What would it be like to sit face-to-face with Jesus? To stare into the gaze of your Creator? What questions would you think? What stirrings would your heart feel? The pages that follow are an invitation to find out. To meet your Maker, who calls you his masterpiece—a masterpiece worth saving.¹⁵

Is that too good to be true? That even when your world blows up, God is in it with you, fighting for you and working for your good? That even when you feel rejected, discarded, and alone, you can know in your bones that Jesus is on your side?

Then pull up a chair in front of the Artist, and let’s find out.

1

SET THE GPS

When You Don't Know Where You're Going

I remember the first time I had a suicidal thought. *Your family and friends would be better off if you weren't around.* I'd been through a season that felt like crucifixion: publicly mocked, humiliated, and scorned. I lost my reputation, network, job, stability, and community. Many of those close to me needed distance.

Yet I felt called to cruciformity. *Don't retaliate*, I sensed God saying. *Don't try to get even. I'm only calling you to humbly endure.* But months later, the adrenaline I'd been running on wore off. I hit rock bottom.

I couldn't see a future.

What do you do when life's direction doesn't seem clear anymore? When your boss says you're fired, your spouse hands you divorce papers, or the doctor delivers a debilitating diagnosis? It can be easy to think you've hit a dead end.

Sometimes you need to reset your GPS. We're going to Disneyland soon on vacation. Before we hit the road, I'll set the GPS. Once our family's bags are packed, gas tank's full, and seatbelts are buckled, I'll type in our destination. If we get lost, this

will reorient us toward where we're headed. When the kids ask for the thousandth time, "Are we there yet?" it will assure us we're getting closer.

This is true of any journey: It's good to start with the end in mind.

Jesus invites you to realign your GPS with his. In John 2, he shows us where his ministry is heading. It's a famous story, where Jesus turns water to wine at a wedding. At face value, we might misunderstand this as simply a display of his power. (*Cool party trick, Jesus!*) Yet Jesus is doing something much more here.

Jesus is giving us a sign of where his ministry is headed, a road map of the destination he's driving us toward. So buckle up: Jesus is taking us to a resurrection wedding. The road might get rough, but your journey's end is where the rivers run with wine, the celebration never ends, and you encounter your destiny in union with God.

RESURRECTION WEDDING

"On the third day," John opens, "a wedding took place at Cana."¹ *The third day of what?* Is John telling us this wedding takes place on the third day of the week? Or the third day of the year? No, weddings were often a week long back then, not a single day. And this wedding doesn't necessarily follow on the heels of anything earlier in the gospel.²

"The third day" may seem like an insignificant detail, but every detail in John's gospel is significant. As we'll see, John opens stories with clues like this to show us how the story fits into the bigger picture of Jesus's ministry. Which raises the question, Can you think of any other significant Jesus events that happen on the third day? That's right.

Resurrection.

This is a resurrection scene. Jesus's miracle here foreshadows what his rising from the dead will accomplish. On the second day, there was a funeral. On the third day, there was a wedding. On the second day, his body lay in a tomb. On the third day, he rose again. The second day looked like defeat. The third day saw vindication. On the second day, the enemy seemed to have won. On the third day, the devil learned you can't keep a good man down.

Our destination is a resurrection wedding. We live in the second day, when the nations are tearing apart at the seams. But the third day's coming, when every nation, tribe, and tongue will worship in reconciled glory. Right now, disease runs rampant. But at the resurrection, healing will go viral. Right now, you might feel alone and tempted by terrible thoughts. But, Christian, the day's coming when you will enter fully into union with God.

On the second day, the wine ran out and all we had was bathwater to drink. On the third day, the rivers started pumping merlot and cabernet. Why? To celebrate the King rising out of that grave. Why did he rise again? To marry his bride.

Jesus's destination is a resurrection wedding. This is helpful to remember when the road gets rough. When you've run out of gas and are stranded, exhausted and desperate, on the side of the road. Or when you've run out of wine . . .

WHEN YOU'VE RUN OUT

"They have no more wine," Mary tells Jesus.³ This was embarrassing. Parents were expected to host an extravagant feast. Imagine: Your child has been looking forward to this big day their entire life. The whole neighborhood is watching; the social expectations are high. You don't want to let them down.

Have you ever run out? Tried so hard to meet expectations but felt like you have nothing left to give? Maybe you’re worried this will mark your reputation forever. *God, I tried so hard to be what they wanted me to be—what I thought you wanted me to be—and I’ve got nothing left.*

Maybe you’ve run out of patience with your kids, or stamina with your roommate, and said things you regret. Maybe you’ve lost passion for your job, or endurance in your loneliness, and gone places for comfort and connection you shouldn’t have. Maybe you’ve run out of hope and given in to despair.

Maybe you need someone to intercede for you, like Mary intercedes for her friend: *Jesus, do something!*⁴

“Woman,” he replies, “my hour has not yet come.”⁵ Now, if I called my mom “Woman,” she’d slap me. Yet while that can sound rude in English, it’s a sign of respect in the original language—like calling her “Madam.”

When Jesus refers to his “hour,” he’s talking about his crucifixion. This word is used throughout John’s gospel to refer to the hour when Jesus is lifted up on the cross. So Jesus is essentially saying, *Mary, it’s not yet time for me to reveal my glory—that is coming at the cross. But I’m going to give you a sneak preview right now.*⁶

A picture of his destination.

Jesus’s turning of water to wine is a sign of what his crucifixion will accomplish. When you’ve run out, Jesus meets you with his fullness. When you’ve got nothing left to give, he gives you himself. When you feel lost and abandoned, sideswiped and stranded on the side of the road, he pulls up alongside and invites you to journey with him. He’s got plenty of gas for the both of you, and he knows where he’s going.

Jesus’s presence doesn’t always make the pain of your circumstances go away, but his promise can put it in proper perspective.

“I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing,” the apostle Paul said, “with the glory that will be revealed in us.”⁷ You may currently be driving through the hostility and crossfire of a war zone, but you’re on your way to a wedding with a trustworthy guide at the wheel.

And this wedding will have plenty of wine.

RIVERS OF WINE

If you hadn’t noticed, Jesus makes *a lot* of wine. He has the servants fill “six stone water jars . . . each holding from twenty to thirty gallons . . . so they filled them to the brim.”⁸ Add it up: Jesus makes around 150 gallons—that’s *750 bottles!*—of wine. He takes it to a party where the guests are already lit (*they’ve been drinking for days!*). Jesus isn’t the dude who shows up with a half-eaten bag of Doritos and some leftover KFC to contribute to the potluck. No, he drops in with a truckload of the best vintage in town!

You might envision a sour-faced Jesus throwing a wet blanket on your celebration. *Jim, was that joke really appropriate?* *Sarah, are you sure you really need another glass?* *Colby and Claire, yeah, you on the dance floor, make some room for the Holy Spirit!* That couldn’t be further from the truth.

Jesus is the life of the party.

Jesus is out to enliven your life and embolden your celebration. Now, the point of this miracle isn’t about getting wasted. Jesus isn’t condoning anything inappropriate. But he wasn’t crashing this wedding; the family *wanted* him there. They were right to request his presence. Jesus brings better things than we had on our own.

Still, why does Jesus make *so much* wine? *Really, Jesus?* *Isn’t 750 bottles overkill?* This is where some Old Testament back-

drop is helpful. The prophets foresaw a coming wedding when God would be united forever with his people.⁹ When the Messiah came, the prophet Amos foretold,

The mountains shall drip sweet wine,
and all the hills shall flow with it.

I will restore the fortunes of my people Israel,
and they shall rebuild the ruined cities and inhabit them;
they shall plant vineyards and drink their wine,
and they shall make gardens and eat their fruit.¹⁰

Similarly, the prophet Joel foresaw this messianic age of abundance:

In that day
the mountains shall drip sweet wine,
and the hills shall flow with milk,
and all the streambeds of Judah
shall flow with water;
and a fountain shall come forth from the house of the LORD
and water the Valley of Shittim.¹¹

These passages are about more than just wine. They're about God restoring his people's fortunes, rebuilding their cities, and returning them from exile. They're about an end to the day of disaster and a revival of abundance in the land.

This day has arrived in Jesus.

That's why Jesus makes *so much* wine. It's not just a cool party trick; it's a sign the messianic age is here. It's a picture of the fuller kingdom restoration he's come to bring. Jesus arrives to restore the vineyards of his people, to make the mountains and hills drip with the best vintage, and to kickstart the wedding

party with a resurrection river that brings life to the land in vital union with God.

This raises a question, however: Where does this wine come from?

THE SEVENTH VESSEL

The six stone water jars, John tells us, were “for the Jewish rites of purification.”¹² Jewish ceremonies used this water to wash away dirt and deal with impurity. These jars were for cleansing, dealing with things which defiled or were associated with decay and death.¹³ Why does John include this detail? It points to the sacrificial death of Christ.

You used to get washed with water; now you get washed with wine!

In the Gospels, Jesus identifies wine with his blood. “This is my blood of the covenant,” he says while holding up a goblet of wine on the eve of his death, “which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.”¹⁴ Like the wine from the blood of the grape, Jesus’s blood is *poured out* for purification (“the forgiveness of sins”). The miracle at Cana points to something powerful: Jesus’s blood washes us clean.

Jesus has replaced the Jewish rites of purification in the old covenant (represented by the jars of water) with his blood of the new covenant poured out for the forgiveness of sins (represented by the wine).

Wait a sec, you might be thinking. Are you reading too much into this? Is that what John really intends? This is probably a good place to lay some of my cards on the table as to how I think we can best interpret John. First, most scholars agree John was the last gospel written. This means John can echo things written in Matthew, Mark, and Luke—like Jesus’s institution of the Last

Supper, where he associates wine with his blood—without rehashing all the details that were already in circulation.

Second, John loves symbolism. He calls this event a sign, meaning it points forward to something greater. As we'll see, all of Jesus's signs point forward to what his cross and resurrection will accomplish. They are symbols of a greater coming reality. Jesus is intentionally orchestrating the details of this sign to give us a symbolic picture, a living parable, of his gospel.

Finally, John's audience is the early church. Practices like the Lord's Supper and baptism were central to their gathering. John knows his audience is familiar with this symbolism.

Okay, back to getting washed by blood. That image may seem strange. *Wouldn't blood—or wine—stain your clothes? Isn't it almost impossible to get out?* But it points to a deeper theological truth: Jesus's atoning death is what washes away our sin and purifies us before God. As John says elsewhere, "The blood of Jesus . . . purifies us from all sin."¹⁵ And the saints are those who have "washed their robes and made them white in the blood of [Jesus] the Lamb."¹⁶

Some people take ice baths to improve blood flow and decrease inflammation. Others take milk baths to help their skin feel softer and smoother. Yet if you *really* want to feel like new, the gospel says you need to take a wine bath! You need to experience the life-changing power of Jesus's love for you through the dynamic vitality of his blood shed for you. This purification can wash you spotless as his bride and unite his life with yours forever.

Another symbol: You'll notice there are six jars at the wedding. That's because the Jewish rites of purification were good but incomplete (seven is the Hebrew number of completion). Yet when Jesus dies, at the climax of John's gospel, water and blood flow from his side.¹⁷

Jesus is the seventh vessel.

Jesus turns water to wine through his death. He's crushed to make atonement for our sins through the wine of his shed blood. Jesus brings the purification rites to fulfillment. He provides a complete purification from sin: not through the rituals and regulations of the old system but through the power of his new covenant blood.

Jesus's blood is stronger than Dove soap. More powerful than Clorox bleach. You might fear you're too dirty. *If you only knew the mistakes I've made, the people I've hurt, the things I've said and done.* Yet this wine is potent enough to cleanse any stain you've got. You might worry there's not enough to go around, but Jesus made *150 gallons* to show there's plenty to cover you!

With God on your side, there's no mistake big enough, no crime bad enough, no reputational damage severe enough to keep you away from his love.

* * *

A little secret: God turns water into wine all the time. Rain falls to the earth, soaks into the soil, and is absorbed by the vine. It eventually emerges in the grapes, which come bursting off the branches. With this miracle, Jesus is not contradicting nature but rather speeding up the process, through *himself* as the vine.

Yet there's one more crucial step in the process of making wine: You have to crush the grapes. Jesus is crushed to bring forth resurrection wine. His life poured out is what brings life to the world. That's how seriously he wants to cleanse you from your mistakes and regrets, to purify you from your failures and shortcomings.

So bring your dirty old rags to Jesus. Confess your darkest deeds and deepest fears. "There is a fountain filled with blood," the old hymn says, "drawn from Immanuel's veins." *I used to*

think those were some crazy lyrics! But they point to this powerful theological truth: “Sinners, plunged beneath that flood, / lose all their guilty stains.”¹⁸ Let him wash you clean, dress you in his righteousness, and bring you to a wedding where he’s saved the best for last.

BEST FOR LAST

Time for the finale. The servants take the wine to the head of the feast:

The master of the banquet tasted the water that had been turned into wine. . . . Then he called the bridegroom aside and said, “Everyone brings out the choice wine first and then the cheaper wine after the guests have had too much to drink; but you have saved the best till now.”¹⁹

This is a different kind of party. Usually you start with the twenty-year-old cabernet and the fifteen-year-old scotch. Then, once everyone’s lit, you pull out the Two-Buck Chuck and Mike’s Hard Lemonade. Jesus does it backward.

He saves the best for last.

This is a picture of the gospel. What Jesus brings is better than everything that’s come before. His sacrifice is better than all the Old Testament sacrifices. His purification is deeper than the Jewish rites of purification. He can cleanse you more fully than any bleach, beauty exfoliant, or behavioral modification you’ve tried before. His wedding brings more joy than any wedding you’ve ever attended.

Compared with anything you’ve ever tried to manufacture meaning from, find fulfillment in, or cultivate contentment through . . .

Jesus is better.

We generally start with our best. On that first date, you dress to the nines and strive to make a good impression. Then, after twenty years of marriage, you flop your socks on the floor and pop that beer belly out. In our union with Christ, however, it's "further up and further in."²⁰ Things will keep getting better into eternity.

The master of the banquet is a picture of the Father. God the Father is pleased with the sacrifice of his Son. That's the deepest meaning of this final scene. Like the master of the banquet, God the Father presides over the wedding of his Son. He tastes the miraculous wine and declares to the bridegroom, *You've saved the best for last!* The Father savors the sacrificial love of his Son, poured out on the cross for his bride, and delightedly declares, *This is better than everything that's come before!*

This is the gospel. Jesus has offered a "once for all" sacrifice at "the culmination of the ages," in the words of Hebrews, "to do away with sin by the sacrifice of himself," making "perfect forever those who are being made holy."²¹ Jesus's sacrifice brings forth the wedding day Isaiah foresaw, when God would "prepare a feast of rich food for all peoples, a banquet of aged wine—the best of meats and the finest of wines. . . . He will swallow up death forever [and] wipe away the tears from all faces; he will remove his people's disgrace from all the earth."²²

This is the wedding of the Lamb.

Jesus's miracle at Cana is a *living parable* of the gospel. Famously, John doesn't include the parable stories highlighted in the other gospels. Why? I would suggest this is because John does something spectacular: He narrates Jesus's signs—the seven miracles he performs in John's gospel—as living parables, pictures of the gospel in motion. John does have parables; they're just not the *stories* Jesus tells but rather the *signs* Jesus performs.

To be clear, this doesn't mean John invents details, making them up for symbolic purposes. Rather, *Jesus performs these signs intentionally*, with details that set them up as living parables.

John, as the beloved disciple, is being faithful to Christ's intentions. He lived the longest and, as we saw earlier, wrote his gospel last. He had a lifetime to reflect on Christ's actions and to craft his narratives. He highlights details that help us look *through* these stories, like windows, to find ourselves in the greater realities they represent.

So where do we find ourselves in this living parable?

We are the bride. We gaze on Christ the Bridegroom, who loved us so much he shed his blood to wash us spotless for the wedding. We hear the voice of the Father, rejoicing in the sacrifice of his Son and his union with us as the church. We feel the presence of the Spirit, who unites us to Christ in this joyous celebration that will bring new life to the world.

DON'T STOP AT THE SIGN

On our upcoming trip to Disneyland, imagine we see a giant billboard a few hours outside Anaheim with a picture of our destination on it. I pull off to the side of the road, roll out a picnic blanket, and unpack sandwiches and soda from the cooler. I sit beneath the sign and yell out to the kids, "We're here!"

My kids would be confused and disappointed. They'd think I was crazy. The picture on that billboard is an image of where we're headed, but it's not the reality itself. We're still sitting next to the freeway. The moral of the story? Don't stop at the sign.

Keep going to the destination.

Jesus's miracle at Cana is a sign, not the destination. John says it's "the first of the signs through which [Jesus] revealed his

glory.”²³ Jesus is setting the GPS for his ministry. Water to wine is a picture of where we’re headed. We disciples are like children in the back seat of his car, moving ever closer to the destination: our resurrection wedding.

When I face a disheartening thought that knocks me off my feet, the first thing I try to do is look up. To recognize: *That’s not the voice of God; that’s the enemy.* I call my wife and bring the thought out of the dark into the light. I go to see my counselor, spiritual director, or doctor. I focus on the things I can control—like diet, sleep, and exercise. I seek Christ the Living Word in his written Word and the presence of his Spirit in prayer.

And I look beyond the sign toward the destination.

You’re invited to a royal wedding. Don’t stop at the billboard in Cana; set your eyes on the kingdom it points to. Jesus has come to cleanse you of your stains, to wash you white as snow and get you ready for the big day. Jesus pours for you a richer vintage than any wine you’ve ever tasted, a love more satisfying and sacrifice more satiating than anything you’ve tried before. Jesus has inaugurated a celebration that will go on into eternity, when we will discover that the best has truly been saved for last as we are united with God forever.

* * *

When you’re unsure where you’re going, when you’ve lost your way, when life crashes into you and leaves you aimless and disoriented, do you know what I recommend doing? Set your GPS. Align with Jesus. If you need a place to start, check out Revelation 21. Set your sights on this destination he’s bringing you to: union with him forever. You’re on your way to a love that is stronger, a joy that is brighter, and a kingdom that is more secure than any you can imagine.

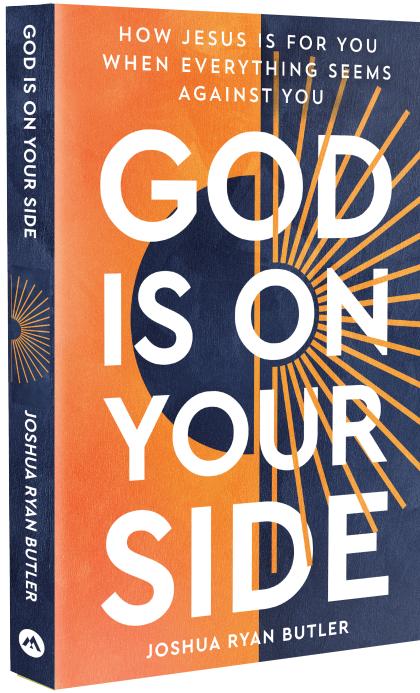
You’re not simply invited to attend this wedding; you’re in-

vited to become the bride. On one side of the scene are the spectators: angels in a chorus of praise; the rocks, rivers, and rainforests that applaud the coming of the King; the whole of the new creation, which rejoices in this wedding that renews the world.

Yet we're not on that side of the scene. We're not in the throng of spectators with cameras outstretched to snap pictures of the spectacle. No, we're in front of the altar, hand in hand with the King. We're indwelt by the Spirit, who lifts the veil so that we can gaze on Christ before us, as we're brought into the home of the Father, who rejoices over us.

It's here, in this wedding at the end of the world—which is, more truly, the beginning of the world—that all things will be made new, including us, through our union with Christ. It's here, on the other side of the altar and the other side of eternity, that we will most fully experience the reality that, in Christ, has been true all along.

God is on our side.



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