

THE COMPASS

SHOCK TALK: *Straight From Jesus' Mouth*

Part 3:

Timing Is Everything

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So you're going to throw a party, what do you do? You count. Preparing for a party is mathematical. How many will be here? Where will they sit? How much will they eat? How much will they drink? If it's my four-year-old's birthday party, you had better be sure that you have the right number of those little goody-bags that you give the little girls who attend. You just hope and pray you don't run out of something.

And I am embarrassed to admit, as much as we enjoy throwing parties at our house, we have had some pretty spectacular disasters — running out of ice, running out of drinks, running out of food.

One time, we had about — oh well, you don't want to hear the gory details. Suffice it to say: man oh man, it's humiliating to make that kind of a mess-up. But it happens. We're human. We miscalculate, we throw a party, we run out of something.

And I guess the more parties you go to, the higher your statistical chances of being at a party where the host runs out of something.

Which means it's no surprise that it happened to Jesus — because the historical record shows that he went to a lot of parties, a lot of social gatherings.

Not out of obligation, like a politician running for office.

He really seems to have enjoyed himself; he enjoyed parties because people were there, and he enjoyed people.

So here he is, in the city of Cana, in his home state of Galilee (**John 2:1-11**) — somebody's getting married, Jesus and his disciples get invited, his mother Mary is invited — but the host apparently got D's in math, because at the big bash after the wedding, long before it was supposed to be over, they had run through all the wine in the place.

Which had to be embarrassing — not the end of the world, but certainly awkward, and probably an unpleasant way for the bride and groom to kick off their life together.

And Mary is concerned.

Or, I don't know, maybe she's just thirsty — but anyway, she says to her son, "**They have no more wine**" (**John 2:3**).

I think it's cool, in a way, because this is the first time in the historical record of Jesus' life and ministry that somebody has brought him a problem situation — and it's not a big crisis.

Mary isn't running to Jesus with news that somebody is out in the parking lot stealing cars, or one of the bridesmaids is throwing up in the guestroom.

She's just mentioning kind of a harmless, ordinary, everyday problem.

Now I think in this quiet little encounter between Jesus and his mother, we can gather some clues about our own interaction with God.

Like, for example, the concept that I don't have to just bring big, life-threatening problems to God.

I can talk to God about my ordinary day-to-day junk.

It doesn't even have to be a request for help — Mary didn't say, "Jesus, would you please run down to the store and pick up some Beaujolais Village, and a couple bottles of Fume Blanc while you're at it."

She just wanted to talk about the situation; she wanted Jesus in the loop.

And it is good for me to keep God in the loop of my own life, in exactly the same way.

When I talk to him, I'm acknowledging that he's a real part of my everyday life; he's not some far-off deity; he's a factor.

And I'm reminding myself that my life is not my own — I don't mean just through prayers that I memorize or read in a church service, although there's nothing wrong with that; but it's good for me to talk to God all through the day, in the ongoing thought-stream of my life. To have a kind of constant conversation going with him in the background of my mind.

Just an ongoing dialogue with my best friend. Not just running to him when I'm in trouble. It's making him a part of my life, moment by moment.

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But then the answer that Jesus gives to his mom is also instructive.

At first glance it looks like he's sassing her:

"Dear woman, why do you involve me?" Jesus replied. "My time has not yet come" (John 2:4).

Now if I had talked that way to my mom in junior high, she may well have popped me in the mouth.

But it's not fair to read my own inferior attitude into Jesus' words, and imagine him having the same kind of attitude that I might have.

When he calls her "Dear woman," he's not being snide; he's using an expression of respect from that time and that culture.

And then his question is the same kind of question we see Jesus asking all through the historical accounts of his life: a "Why?" question.

"Why do you involve me?" In other words, "What's your motivation?"

It's the same question we'll see Jesus asking over and over again — what are you really after here? — and it's the same question God asks me every day of my life.

Doug, this is cool, you're actually remembering that I'm involved in your life, you're actually talking to me at various points through the day.

Now what's your motivation? WHY do you involve me in your life?

He's asking me, do I really see God as my loving Father, committed to giving me his best for me, the way he's promised to?

Or do I actually see God as a genie in a bottle, and I can get stuff off of him for my own pleasure and comfort and advancement?

Because God cares more about the attitude of my heart than anything I could actually

do, any ritual I could perform, any words I could mouth in prayer.
 He wants to be my friend, not my financier.
 God didn't get into the human race business in order to be an insurance underwriter.
 He created human beings because he fell in love with the idea of love, and human
 beings were the perfect way to express love.
 I mean, look, an intelligent person, free to do whatever he wants, *choosing* to love God
 because he recognizes that God has set this whole thing up? God loves that.

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Anyway, Jesus asks Mary the motivation question. And then he makes this statement:
“My time has not yet come” (John 2:4).
 He's saying, “Mom, I'm not ready yet.”
 And honestly, I am in this position with God *all the time*.
 I'm like, “God, help me out with this situation.” And God is like, “Doug, I'm not ready yet.”

Jesus was saying to Mary — just like God says to me, over and over again — “Don't
 just trust my power. Trust my *timing*.”
 God is always going to answer my prayer. But he is always going to be more concerned
 about my heart than my request.
 And he is usually going to have a better idea about the timing than I do.
 His answer may be “Later.”

I hate this. But God's best for me may not always mean my immediate comfort.
 —*God, heal my college buddy Mike, who was just diagnosed with a malignant,
 inoperable brain tumor.*

—*Lord, help me financially.*

—*Father, help me succeed in this job.*

Does God always respond like the genie in the bottle?

No, he does not. Not in *my* life, anyway!

He says, Wait a minute, Doug. Why do you want me involved? What's your motivation?
 Don't just trust my power. Trust my timing.

Of course, my natural attitude is, I want what I want when I want it — and, basically, I'll
 use God to get it.
 But the longing of God's heart is for me to take on a different attitude — an attitude that
 says, I want what God wants for me, and on his timetable.
 Because that's what will be healthiest, most constructive, most productive, most
 effective, most successful for me.

God has a different agenda than I do.

Maybe he just wants me to camp out and spend time with him.

Maybe he's more interested in what I'll learn while I wait, than what I'll gain if he
 advances my agenda.

Maybe he's wiser than me. Imagine that!

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But then comes Mary's response to Jesus, and this is, I think, the best part of the story,
 because it nails me right where I live.
 She doesn't get a response from Jesus.

He doesn't say, Oh yeah, I'll run right out and pick up some Chardonnay.
 He doesn't say, I'm on it — right away.
 He doesn't even say, You know what, Mom? What you have in mind is right.
 She doesn't really know any more after her conversation with Jesus than before.

And I'm in the same boat, an awful lot of the time, in my own life.
 I can talk and talk and talk to God about an issue, and I'm still clueless as to what if anything he intends to do about it, or where this mess is headed.
 But Mary doesn't give up.
 She is still guided by one unchanging bottom-line principle: **“His mother said to the servants, ‘Do whatever he tells you’” (John 2:5).**

Do whatever he tells you.

In my life, if God prompts me to take a certain course of action, that's going to be best.
 If he nudges me to avoid some choice or some activity, that's going to be best.
 I may not hear anything at all from God — but if I do, it's time to take action.

Years ago I had a friend who was — how shall I say this? I want to be diplomatic; I want to express myself graciously: he was a moron. A total idiot.
 I watched him making decisions, watched how he interacted with people, and I was like, What? Is this guy missing some gray matter?
 I mean, the wheel was turning, but the hamster was dead.

But the weird thing is, I liked him, and he respected me, he trusted me.
 So then there was this minor miracle: a pretty bright young lady fell in love with him and married him.
 I don't know what kind of chemicals had gotten into her water but there they were, walking down the aisle: husband and wife.

But then of course he continued being a moron, and the day came, I think inevitably, when that marriage was in some pretty serious trouble; there was some pretty serious conflict between these two.

And he showed up at my door wanting some counsel.
 And what could I say?
 Here's an intelligent woman married to a completely stupid man.
 But he did trust me. I figured maybe I could trade on that.
 So here's the advice I gave him: “Do whatever she wants.”
 —*Yeah, but she says* — Nope, my advice is, do whatever she wants.
 —*But she's trying to* — Nope, my advice stands. Do whatever she wants.
 You want to save this marriage, bubba? Do whatever she wants.
 Try it. See how it goes.

You know what? He tried it. They're happily married to this day; it's been 20 years or more.
 How did it happen? He somehow was convinced to try a simple but radical strategy for life: trusting a superior intellect.

That's exactly what Mary was selling to those servants at the wedding reception 2,000 years ago, and that's exactly what God is selling me today.

—Doug, there's someone you can trust whose intellect is reliably superior to yours.

But there's a prerequisite for doing what anybody wants — God or your wife or anybody else — and that is, you have to be listening.

What Mary was saying to the servants was, Listen to what he says, and then do it.

What I was saying to my pal the moron was, Listen to what she says, and then do it.

And what God says to me today is: Come to me for direction, and then do what I say.

During the times of silence — when I'm not speaking or directing you — keep tuned in.

Keep checking back with me. Don't give up on this; don't bail out.

While I'm waiting for God to answer my prayer or take action in my situation or whatever, I've got to keep listening.

It's not that God might be speaking to me and I can't make it out.

He's going to get through to me if I'm willing to be got through to.

But a lot of times we have some need or some dilemma or some stress point in our lives, and maybe we talk to God about it awhile, but when we don't get action by a certain time — like we have kind of a subconscious emotional deadline, and after that — we veer away from God.

We lose hope. We lose faith in God to be listening, or to be taking care of us.

And here's the reality: God won't force himself on me.

So if I assume he doesn't have an answer for me, and I bail out, get angry, get discouraged, and go looking for help elsewhere — he will usually let me go.

It's up to me.

I sometimes put it this way: I need to get into position to hear the heart of God.

It's not that God won't communicate something I need to hear — he will; he always will.

But I need to get *myself* in a position to hear him. I need to be open and willing.

This is actually kind of a stair-step deal:

The peace that I long for, the peace that God wants me to experience, flows out of my relationship with him.

That relationship flows out of my willingness to do what he says.

My doing what he says follows my *hearing* him.

So my willingness to listen is the key to peace. It's the key to God's heart.

This isn't some magic formula; it's not a get-rich-quick scheme — it's just the basic facts of life.

The more I align myself to what God is doing — draw near to his heart — the better my life will be.

Listening to him, and following his guidance, are the keys to that.

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So Mary tells the servants to do whatever Jesus tells them to do.

Jesus doesn't give them a very glamorous assignment.

There's no spot on *American Idol* or a write-up in *Vanity Fair*.

And God does the same thing to me.

Sometimes, sure, great things come my way — and those gifts are from God, no question about it.

But other times, God just gives me dopey old ordinary opportunities.

A lot of times he just gives me more of the same.

—*Doug, keep doing what you're doing.*

—*Great. Thanks.*

Sometimes God calls me to do hard stuff. Work. Parenting. Going *through* a conflict instead of having it magically evaporate.

I'm not crazy about these Christians leaders who promote the idea of walking with God as all "sweetness and light."

My experience is, it ain't.

Sometimes you dig ditches.

Sometimes you *literally* dig ditches.

About 2,900 years ago, the Old Testament book of **2nd Kings (3:15-20)** tells us, the top spiritual authority in Israel was a guy named Elisha.

And the good guys were facing yet another enemy — you know how it was back then; there was always some nation of bad guys coming to beat up on God's people.

But anyway, they marched out toward the battle, and it was a really long march, and it happened to be through a desert, and they ran out of — wow, hey, look, this seems to be a recurring theme: they ran out of stuff to drink! I just realized this — how cool!

Anyway, they called on Elisha — who was none too happy to be bothered, by the way — but Elisha did represent God in those days; and here's what he made them do:

Dig ditches.

In fact, you see this whole valley? Dig it full of ditches.

Man, that must have been work.

But these guys were listening, and they wanted God's blessing, and they started digging.

And the morning after they finished digging — now there had been no rainstorm, no surprise tidal wave coming through the desert — but the ditches were all full of water.

They drank, they felt stronger, they went out to fight, they won the battle.

Sometimes God is going to call me to fun — but sometimes he's going to call me to drudgery.

There was a widow who was starving (**2 Kings 4**), but she had to gather empty jars before God would provide oil to keep her alive.

There was a politician who had leprosy (**2 Kings 5**), but he had to dunk himself in a muddy river seven times before God would heal him.

Actually, I would say, most of the time, God is not going to call me to fun *or* drudgery — he's going to call me to just persevere. Keep on keeping on.

Keep trusting him, and keep putting one foot in front of the other.

Romans 5:3 suggests that we can "**rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope.**"

In other words, hang in there. God is gonna take care of ya.

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Well, the end of the wine-at-the-wedding story is well known.

There were six stone water jars, 20 to 30 gallons apiece.

Jesus told the servants to fill them with water, then serve the contents.

Bingo! It wasn't water anymore. It was wine.

And the master of ceremonies was most amazed not because someone had turned up some wine, but because, as he put it, **“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” (John 2:10).**

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When I get in position to hear from God — when I communicate from my heart with God, when I include him; when I listen to his leading, and then do what he leads me to do — I often find that he gives me an answer from as nearby as the pantry.

That's what Jesus did at the wedding.

Sometimes I find that the way God solves my problem is, for example, to bring me a friend who happens to have had the same kind of problem, maybe years before, but now they know how to help me.

Sometimes the person who steps in to help me, it's nothing to them — it's huge to me, but it's nothing to them. They were equipped for this. They were ready for it. They didn't even realize it. It was just a God thing.

Sometimes it turns out that God wants me to go through the problem — through the stress, the toil, the pain. There's no “fix” — there's only enduring. But he does it in order to teach me something that can only be learned by suffering.

I also often find that God busts up my preconceived notions about solving my problems. That's what Jesus did at the wedding.

And I usually have to say, the outcome was better than if I had been able to manufacture it myself.

That's what the emcee at the wedding said.

Jesus saved the best for last.

When I give God my problem — when I give God my life, really — the results are better. Better than if I had never had a problem.

Better than if I had never talked to God about it.

Better than if I had gotten the quick, easy answer I was looking for.