“Google” the term “delayed gratification,” in .26 seconds, you will get 529,000 hits: interesting articles linking the ability and discipline “to save the best until last” to every imaginable virtue and delight.

- Financial planners will tell you that this discipline is the secret to accumulating enough wealth for retirement.
- Fitness trainers will laud the choice for “pain now, pleasure later” as the secret ingredient to sustained health and wellness.
- Educators will show the statistical linkage between preschool children who learn this discipline early, and higher SAT scores years later as adolescents.
- Psychologists will laud delayed gratification as a key to unlock well-being and enjoyment throughout life.
Apparently those who learn early, and practice consistently, the virtue and discipline of delayed gratification are on the path to success and blessing in life, according to a wide array of experts.

Easier said than done, right?

We are constantly beset with the temptation to fulfill immediate gratification, to reach for the instant pleasure, to buy (or charge!) the impulse purchase doesn’t matter whether or not we really need it, or can afford it. It is always easier to eat an extra donut on the couch than to sweat out an exercise regimen at the gym. It is easier to succumb to the lure of the advertisers than to buckle down and listen to the soft whispers of our financial planners. It is easier to buy the shiny new car, or new toy, or new pair of shoes when our eyes are wide with desire, than to make monthly layaway payments in advance or save up the money on a disciplined budget. Giving in to the momentary and instant pleasure; that’s easy. What is difficult is staring down our grumbling hunger, or our yearning for immediate pleasure, and saying “No, not now, not yet.”
With this in mind, let’s turn our attention to the Gospel today. Saint John records the first miracle, or “sign,” in the earthly ministry of our Lord. The setting is a wedding in the small Galilean village of Cana, located just 8 miles north of Nazareth where Jesus spent his boyhood. Weddings were big deals in the first century, just like they are today, and it was not unusual for the wedding guest list to spill over to dear friends and family living in the adjoining towns. So this happy couple in Cana, and their parents, were doubtless family friends to Mary and Joseph, hence the invitation to Mary and Jesus to attend the wedding festivities. But you will need to know that weddings often spread over several days in the culture of first-century Palestine. There was the ceremony itself, but before and after the ceremony there were banquets and parties galore, joy and dancing, toasts and blessings in profusion. If there was one thing ancient Israel knew how to do well, it was to throw a wedding party. In the life experience of the typical Israelite, there was no greater moment of unbridled joy and unlimited celebration than a wedding. No wonder the Bible so often compares the glory of heaven to a wedding
feast! In fact, our reading today from the prophet Isaiah draws on the wedding analogy to picture God’s love and commitment to His people. Recall it?: “As a Bridegroom rejoices in his bride, so shall God rejoice in you.”

So at this wedding in Cana, we would not be surprised to hear that the wine was running out. It may have been several days into the festivities at this point. There had been one too many toasts, one too many parties, and now the wine was gone—but the guests were not gone. Needless to say, it was every wedding planner’s nightmare.

Apparently the wedding guests had started to notice, and to whisper, about the shortage of wine, even though the news had not yet reached the head table. When Mary brought this to the attention of her son, Jesus did not immediately jump to the rescue. His reply to Mary surprises us a bit, perhaps. “Woman, how does your concern affect me? My hour has not yet come.” Doesn’t that response sound a bit short, lacking compassion for the wedding hosts, and even lacking appropriate
respect for his mother? Perhaps, to our ears. But Jesus is not refusing Mary’s implied request, he is simply reminding her that his first loyalty, his highest obedience, is to his Heavenly Father. Only God could set his clock, or sound his alarms. This obedience was the secret to his ability to delay gratification throughout his life, even to the point of laying down his own life. So when the urgent call to “do something” came, even from his beloved Mother, and even when it might help to avoid a faux pas at this special moment of joy, Jesus’ first thought was of his obedience to God.

Would that each of us could summon the wisdom to pause and consider our highest loyalties, our noblest values, and our long-term legacy when we are confronted by the “tyranny of the urgent” that bombards each day! What a difference it might make in the trajectory of our lives if we could think clearly… in the midst of our daily turmoil. As Rudyard Kipling advised his 12-year old son in his famous poem:

If you can keep your head when all about you

Are losing theirs and blaming it on you,
If you can trust yourself when all men doubt you,
But make allowance for their doubting too;

If you can fill the unforgiving minute
With sixty seconds' worth of distance... run –
Yours is the Earth and everything that's in it,
And - which is more - you'll be a Man my son!

But then, after due consideration, Jesus turned the water into wine.
It was a miracle, no doubt, but John’s Gospel calls it the first of the
“signs” of Jesus. These were not miraculous acts just for their own sake;
they were also epiphanies, moments that manifest the hidden character
of the Kingdom of God. And so when this miraculous wine was served,
the head wine steward, unaware of Jesus’ miracle, expressed his
amazement as he blessed the bridegroom, thinking that this heavenly-
tasting vintage had been saved for this final moment in the wedding by a
wise and generous groom who “saved the best for last.” In fact it was
not the groom who practiced delayed gratification, but Jesus. And this
sign pointed to the character of God, who often saves His best gifts to us for last too.

God so loves us that He sometimes delays the answer to our prayers, knowing that we are not ready. And God so loves us that He may even deny our requests, given our tendency to seek immediate gratification, because He wants to give us something so much more than we can even imagine asking for at the present moment. This is the way of God. Like melt-in-your mouth dessert after a meal, or a melt-in-your-arms hug at the finish line after a marathon, God saves the best of earthly and heavenly gifts for last, and serves them up with abundance and deep joy to those who wait for Him, who trust Him, who love Him.

The heavenly vintage of God’s blessing ferments slowly, but surely. Just wait, the best is yet to come.