

Knowing God in the Word

That I may know Him and the power of His resurrection, and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death. Philippians 3:10.

Alcohol and the Believer Part 3: The Use of Alcohol Today

In our last two messages on the issue of alcohol and the believer today, we examined the various words used for alcohol in both the Old and New Testaments, what they meant, and what the Bible's attitude towards alcohol seems to be. We saw that we cannot make any difference between the words used to speak positively of alcohol and the words used to warn against the use of alcohol to cause drunkenness. The same words that are spoken of in a positive light are used in a negative light of not getting drunk. Yet I suggested last time that our study of the issue would be incomplete if we did not pause to consider why God said such things as in Ecclesiastes 9:7 and Amos 9:14.

*7. Go, eat your bread with joy,
And drink your wine with a merry heart;
For God has already accepted your works.*

*14. I will bring back the captives of My people Israel;
They shall build the waste cities and inhabit them;
They shall plant vineyards and drink wine from them;
They shall also make gardens and eat fruit from them.*

Those who encourage the use of alcohol today would suggest that such passages clearly give us the permission and the Biblical right to drink alcohol if we so desire. If God Himself encourages it and offers wine as a blessing, then how can we have any problem with drinking it or suggest that a believer should not be involved with it? The Lord Himself drank wine, they would point out, using a verse following on one quoted above regarding John the Baptist not drinking wine in Luke 7:33. We will examine the passage here more completely.

33. For John the Baptist came neither eating bread nor drinking wine, and you say, "He has a demon."

34. The Son of Man has come eating and drinking, and you say, "Look, a glutton and a winebibber, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!"

35. But wisdom is justified by all her children."

Since they called Christ a "winebibber" (Greek word related to "oinos"), those who support the use of alcohol today would point out that Christ clearly drank wine. And if He did so, how can any of His followers today suggest that we should not? I think a revealing passage in this regard is one I singled out as important in the Old Testament, Genesis 27:28.

*28. Therefore may God give you
Of the dew of heaven,
Of the fatness of the earth,
And plenty of grain and wine.*

Notice that grain and wine (tirosh) are used here together for the blessing of the Lord. I believe in this passage we can clearly see that grain, as perhaps the most common form of food in that day,

is used as being symbolic for all kinds of food, and wine, as being perhaps the most common kind of drink in that day, is used as being symbolic for drink. This, I think, helps us clear up the positive references to wine in the Bible.

It is hard to conceive of in our day with the vast multitude of drinks available to us what it would be like to have very little available to drink. Israel was a land that, in many places, was rather dry and arid compared to what we are used to in the Midwestern United States where I live. Water was scarce, and the fact is that even the water that was available was not always trustworthy or good. When animals and men drank from the same water, when the water that was used for drinking also had to be used for washing, when an animal could fall in the water and die and pollute it, and so forth...I say, with all these concerns, water was not always safe to drink. As we know today, water can be polluted with bacteria and amoebas and such things and become unsafe to drink. The fact is that even the water that was available was not always the safest thing to drink at that time.

Now when water was such a questionable source of liquid sustenance, naturally one would want to consider other things to drink that might be safer. Fruit drinks would seem to be a logical choice in a land that had many fruit trees, and we know that the trees could absorb the water and transfer it to the fruit free of any contamination that might have been in the water to begin with. But this source of liquid too is questionable when we consider that they lived in a hot climate without refrigeration. Fruit drinks would be likely to spoil very quickly and become useless. The same would be true of milk, which, although fine to drink, could easily spoil without the methods of preservation we use today. Thus, wine with its preserving alcohol was the logical answer to the problem. The alcohol, being a poison, would kill any microscopic creatures that would otherwise spoil the juice, and thus the wine would keep for a long period of time and be available to drink without the hazards of contamination that were in the water. For this reason, wine would have been a primary source of liquid for them at that time, maybe even THE primary source. In fact, it remains so in many countries even today (or at least it did until recently).

Thus, we can see why the production of wine would be considered a blessing, why the Lord would approve of its use, and why even the Lord Jesus Christ Himself would have consumed it. It was a primary source of liquid at that time. It was quite simply one of the only things they had to drink!

This covers the first use of alcohol in the Bible. Now in Paul's letters, as well as in other places in the Bible, we see wine used for a second purpose that is encouraged in the Bible: as medication. The passage in Paul's letters is the well-known one to Timothy in I Timothy 5:23.

23. No longer drink only water, but use a little wine for your stomach's sake and your frequent infirmities.

Even today alcohol can be used in this way. It is mixed with some medicines to help them be processed better by the body. One example is cough syrup, which contains alcohol. It is also used in some mouthwashes to help kill germs in the mouth.

So these are two uses of alcohol in the Bible that are encouraged. But there is a third use of alcohol mentioned in the Bible, and that is its use for intoxication. The first mention of wine is in this regard in Genesis 9:21, the first mention of alcohol, in fact, in the Bible.

21. Then he drank of the wine and was drunk, and became uncovered in his tent.

It has been suggested that if the atmosphere was different before the flood, it may have slowed the decay process, making it so that food could be left out without preservation. If so, Noah may have accidentally drunk wine, not realizing that his grape juice had spoiled. At any rate, the results of this first use of alcohol as an intoxicant mentioned were disastrous, as Noah's son Ham used the occasion of his parents being drunk to sleep with his mother and produce an illegitimate child, Canaan.

The use of alcohol as an intoxicant is often warned against or condemned in the Bible. One well-known example is in Proverbs 23:29-35. I quote the passage in full below.

29. *Who has woe?
Who has sorrow?
Who has contentions?
Who has complaints?
Who has wounds without cause?
Who has redness of eyes?*
30. *Those who linger long at the wine,
Those who go in search of mixed wine.*
31. *Do not look on the wine when it is red,
When it sparkles in the cup,
When it swirls around smoothly;*
32. *At the last it bites like a serpent,
And stings like a viper.*
33. *Your eyes will see strange things,
And your heart will utter perverse things.*
34. *Yes, you will be like one who lies down in the midst of the sea,
Or like one who lies at the top of the mast, saying:*
35. *“They have struck me, but I was not hurt;
They have beaten me, but I did not feel it.
When shall I awake, that I may seek another drink?”*

This passage sets forth a very poetic picture of drunkenness and the havoc it causes upon a person, as well as providing the most solemn warning against it. The Hebrew words used are *yayin* and *mimsak*, as discussed in part one on the Old Testament words for alcohol. It is clear that those who become alcoholics are looked at very dimly in this passage. It would be hard to set forth a stronger argument against intoxication with alcohol and the addiction it causes than this.

Paul too warns us against drunkenness, as we saw above. A good example is Ephesians 5:18.

18. *And do not be drunk with wine, in which is dissipation; but be filled with the Spirit.*

It is clear by looking over Paul's teaching on the subject above that he (and the Holy Spirit through him) wanted believers to avoid drunkenness and overindulging in alcohol.

So how can we compare the use of alcohol today with the three uses given above? Clearly, the use of alcohol as medication is still in effect, but the alcohol itself is often added to the medicines we use before we ever take them. It hardly seems necessary that we worry about buying alcohol for this use when we can get medicines that might include alcohol and other ingredients that would make them even more effective. Yet we would certainly not condemn the use of alcohol for medicinal purposes.

But what about the other positive use in the Bible, the use of it as a primary source of liquid? Certainly this hardly seems like something that applies to today. Have you ever considered the vastness of the numbers of beverages available to the citizen of the United States at this time? I can walk into the grocery store and literally find dozens upon dozens of things to drink. In the dairy aisle I can find milk of different fat levels, from various farms, and with various things mixed in, most often chocolate. In the health food aisle I can find various drinks like soy milk or other milk substitutes. I can find flavored waters and even soda pop made from natural ingredients. In the soda pop aisle itself I can find dozens of various flavored carbonated beverages. In the water aisle I can get bottled water from many different springs around the world. In the juice aisle I can get fruit juices and even blends of fruit juices in a myriad of varieties. In the specialty drinks aisle I can get various flavored drinks of every kind imaginable. In fact, I would bet that if I included all

brands and all flavors of drinks, I could easily drink a different beverage for every day of the year just using those sold in my local grocery store!

How is it that we can have such a multitude of drinks when they had so few in Bible times? We can list several reasons. One is the invention of refrigeration. Another is the discovery of preservatives, such as sugar. A third is the discovery of pasteurization to keep things from spoiling. And a fourth is the many chemical preservatives we have discovered. Alcohol is no longer the only way of preserving beverages available to us.

So, in such a country and with such a variety of beverages available to us, is alcohol necessary for us to drink alcohol because it is a primary source of liquid and one of the only few safe things there is out there to drink? Not at all! This reason for drinking alcohol has basically become obsolete. Modern methods of preservation mean that alcohol is no longer the only way to preserve a beverage long-term.

But if this is the case, then why do so many in our society, even so many of our fellow believers, drink alcohol as they do? It is not for medicinal purposes, as alcohol is already added to our medications when it has a positive effect. Nor is it because it is our primary source of reliable and safe liquid, for we have a plethora of choices in this regard that are non-alcoholic. Why then do we drink alcohol in our society today? The answer can only be because of its intoxicating properties. That is the only reason that anyone really has to drink alcohol today. But that is exactly the use of alcohol that is not supported, but rather is condemned, in the Word of God!

Yet many believers today like to imagine that they are strong enough to drink alcohol and not become alcoholics. They like to quote Romans 14:1-3, which states:

1. *Receive one who is weak in the faith, but not to disputes over doubtful things.*
2. *For one believes he may eat all things, but he who is weak eats only vegetables.*
3. *Let not him who eats despise him who does not eat, and let not him who does not eat judge him who eats; for God has received him.*

These would suggest that, according to this passage, those who do not believe that we are free to ingest all things, including alcohol, are “weak.” They claim that they are not weak, but rather are strong, and thus realize that they are free to drink alcohol as they wish. Now I do not deny our freedom in Christ from laws regarding eating and drinking. Yet I think those who argue this way seldom go on to consider what is said later in Romans 14 in verse 21.

21. It is good neither to eat meat nor drink wine nor do anything by which your brother stumbles or is offended or is made weak.

Now, I ask myself, if anyone would ask me if there is any one thing in our society and our culture which above all other things I could point to that is openly, manifestly, and without question causing my brothers in Christ to stumble, what would that thing be? And without a doubt one of the first things I would point to would be alcohol. When one considers all the driving deaths caused by intoxication with alcohol; when one includes all the people who foolishly indulge in or are forced into sexual intercourse while under its influence; when one realizes all the beaten, battered, and otherwise abused spouses who could point to it as the primary influence in their partner’s lack of control; when one considers all the misery brought into the lives of children because of its use by the adults around them; one can hardly help but conclude that, if there is any one thing on earth that is causing our brothers and sisters to stumble, then alcohol must be on the top of the list!

“But I am strong enough to handle it,” some believers will say. “I can use it in moderation. I will not indulge in it or allow it to control me.” But what alcoholic ever started out drinking without the belief that he would be able to handle alcohol and not let it get control of him? Science tells us that there is a certain, albeit small, percentage of people who will be an alcoholic from the time they take their first drink! And others have a tendency towards alcoholism that has little to do

with how “strong” they perceive themselves to be. No one can guarantee that he will be “tough enough” to handle alcohol before he attempts it, and what an experiment and a gamble to take with one’s own life!

And even if this were not so and one could know that he will never fall to the control of alcohol, what of the weaker brother who may be encouraged to drink because of a stronger brother’s use of alcohol, and might end up stumbling himself because he does not have the strength that his brother did? Can we deny the charge that the stronger believer has done what Romans 14:15b condemns by saying, “Do not destroy with your food the one for whom Christ died”?

Abraham Lincoln said of alcohol that it “has many defenders, but no defense.” And as we look at the wake of sorrow, heartache, pain, and death it leaves behind it every year and every day in our society, we can little doubt that this is true. How, then, can a believer in clear conscience indulge in something that he knows is having so much of an evil influence upon our culture and produces so little that is in any way remotely good or beneficial? How can he risk not only harming his own life and relationship with God, but also those of his brothers and sisters around him? Others may choose to do this, but I will say regarding alcohol what Paul said regarding meat in I Corinthians 8:13:

13. Therefore, if food makes my brother stumble, I will never again eat meat, lest I make my brother stumble.

I know for a fact, having seen it in the lives of believers around me and heard of it in the lives of others, that alcohol, perhaps above anything else, is causing my brothers and sisters to stumble. Therefore, I will take the words of I Corinthians 8:13 for myself, and declare that, since alcohol is clearly making an untold number of my brothers and sisters to stumble, that I will never myself indulge in it. Others might speak of their “freedom in Christ,” but I know that alcohol is taking away the freedom of many, and so I say that let others make the choices they will, but as for me, I will avoid alcohol, as the King James puts it, “while the world standeth, lest I make my brother to offend.”

Nathan C. Johnson