

Alcohol - To Drink or Not to Drink?

Within the Christian world, there are different outlooks on drinking wine, beer, or other alcohols. Some Christians believe scriptures forbid it, some Christians are alcoholics, others think getting drunk is acceptable behavior. Drinking in moderation, but avoiding drunkenness as a sinful act, is an alternate view. The purpose of this paper is to bring out an overview of what the scriptures reveal on the topic of alcohol.

There are over two hundred passages in scripture that speak of wine or strong drink so I will not cover all these scriptures but will try to fairly refer to any scripture that would give implication of positive or negative attributes about alcohol.

The first example in scripture is when Noah drank wine and was drunk. (Gen. 9:21-27) This did not lead to a good experience for Noah because of what his younger son, Ham, did to him. This is an example of where drunkenness can lead.

The next example is Gen. 14:18 when Melchizedek, king of Salem, brought out bread and wine to share with Abraham. The Hebrew word "wine" is yayin and is the same word for the wine which made Noah drunk. Some say that the word wine refers to unfermented grape juice, but these two scriptures refute that explanation as you cannot get drunk on unfermented grape juice. Melchizedek, priest of the Most High, drank wine with Abraham. This is a positive example of drinking wine.

Genesis 19 tells the story of Lot's daughters who gave him wine thus making him drunk so that they could lay with him to "preserve the seed of their father." Lot was not aware this happened. Obviously, drinking too much wine and therefore acting inappropriately is not a positive thing! We are held accountable before God for all that we do. (Rom. 14:12, Heb. 4:13, 1 Pet. 4:5)

In Genesis 27 Isaac ate and drank wine before blessing his sons. In his blessing he said, "Therefore may God give you of the dew of heaven, of the fatness of the earth, and plenty of grain and wine." The word used for wine here is a different Hebrew word, "tiyros." Brown-Driver-Briggs' Hebrew definitions says it means "wine, fresh or new wine, must, freshly pressed wine." Some say this is unfermented wine, grape juice, but that does not appear so by the BDB definition. Actually, by the blessing given in this verse it seems an abundance of grain and wine is a blessing from God.

This word "tiyros" is used in many verses, but to those who believe it only refers to unfermented wine, Hosea 4:11 seems to imply differently. It says, "Harlotry, wine (yayin), and new wine (tiyros) enslave the heart." How can grape juice (unfermented wine) be spoken of in this way?

God instructs Israel concerning the daily sacrifices that were to be made to him in Exodus 29:38-41. An offering of a lamb, flour mixed with oil, and wine (yayin) were to be offered for the morning and evening sacrifices as a "sweet savor unto the Lord." As you read through the many instructed offerings in Numbers, wine was typically a part of the offering. Why would God want wine as a sacrifice if it was something that was displeasing to Him?

There were times when God's instruction was to refrain from drinking wine. In Leviticus 10:9, God spoke to Aaron and told him, "Do not drink wine nor strong drink, you, or your sons with you, when you go into the tabernacle of the congregation, lest you die." This instruction relays

only to Aaron and his sons and reveals that they were not to drink wine at certain times. If they could not drink when they went into the tabernacle, this would imply that outside the tabernacle it was not forbidden.

Numbers 6 also gives the instruction from God that if a man or woman chose to take a Nazarite vow to God they were not to drink wine. All the days of his vow he was not to drink grape juice or eat any form of a grape, moist or dried, nor drink any wine or strong drink. The Hebrew word for juice is "mishrah" and is defined in BDB Hebrew definitions as "juice". This is the only place in scripture where the term "grape juice" is used but clearly there is a way to differentiate between grape juice and wine (fermented juice). At the completion of the vow the "Nazarite may drink wine". (Numbers 6:20)

The feasts of God spoken of throughout scripture were times of rejoicing before God. "You shall observe the Feast of Tabernacles seven days, when you have gathered from your threshing floor and from your winepress." (Deut. 16:13) "You shall eat before the LORD your God...the tithe of your grain and your new wine and your oil." He further explains if the journey was too far to take their grain, wine, oil and flocks they were to exchange it for money and take the money and "spend that money for whatever your heart desires: for oxen or sheep, for wine or strong drink...you shall eat there before the LORD your God, and you shall rejoice, you and your household." (Deut. 14:22-26) The Hebrew word for strong drink is "shekar" and means intoxicant, extremely intoxicating liquor.

An abundance of food and wine was a blessing from God and actually instructed by God to be used in rejoicing before Him. When God told Israel he would send curses on them if they did not obey Him, one of the curses was "you shall plant vineyards and tend them, but you shall neither drink of the wine nor gather the grapes; for the worms shall eat them." (Deut. 28:39)

David speaks positively of wine in the Psalms. "And wine makes glad the heart of man, and oil to make his face to shine, and bread which strengthens man's heart." (Psa. 104:15) Wine is a symbol of joy and blessing. These verses in Joel show this also; "Yea, the LORD will answer and say unto his people, Behold, I will send you corn, wine and oil, and ye shall be satisfied therewith...and the floors shall be full of wheat, and the vats shall overflow with wine and oil." (Joel 2:19, 21)

In Proverbs, Solomon has some positive examples of wine: "Honor the LORD with your possessions and with the first fruits of all your increase; so your barns will be filled with plenty, and your vats will overflow with new wine." (Prov. 3:9-10) Wisdom speaks and says, "Come, eat of my bread and drink of the wine I have mixed." (Prov. 9:5)

But Solomon also gives many warnings about wine. "Wine is a mocker, strong drink is a brawler, and whoever is led astray by it is not wise." (Prov. 20:1) "He who loves pleasure will be a poor man; He who loves wine and oil will not be rich." (Prov.21:17) "Do not be with heavy drinkers of wine or with gluttonous eaters of meat; for the heavy drinker and the glutton will come to poverty." (Prov. 23:20-21) The admonition in these verses is not to be a heavy drinker, or to be led astray by it, or to "love" it. But the same warning is for gluttony. We must also eat with moderation!

Solomon continues in Proverbs 23 saying, "Who has woe? Who has sorrow? Who has contentions? Who has complaints? Who has wounds without cause? Who has redness of eyes? Those who linger long at the wine, those who go in search of mixed wine. Do not look on the wine when it is red, when it sparkles in the cup, when it swirls around smoothly; at the last it bites like a serpent, and stings like a viper. Your eyes will see strange things, and your

heart will utter perverse things. 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: 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?" (Prov. 23:29-35) What an excellent description of someone who is drunk! These examples reveal wine and alcohol can be a negative influence in one's life if not used in moderation and with self control.

In Proverbs 31:6-7 it says, "Give strong drink unto him that is ready to perish, and wine unto those that be of heavy hearts. Let him drink, and forget his poverty, and remember his misery no more." Scripture teaches there is a time when wine is beneficial to people.

Eccl. 9:7 says "Go thy way, eat thy bread with joy, and drink your wine with a merry heart; for God now accepts thy works." This is yet another example of support for drinking wine.

The prophet Isaiah warns of the misuse of wine, "Woe unto them that rise up early in the morning, so they may follow strong drink; that continue until night, till wine inflames them!" (Isa. 5:11) "But they also have erred through wine, and through strong drink are out of the way; the priest and the prophet have erred through strong drink, they are swallowed up of wine, they are out of the way through strong drink; they err in vision, they stumble in judgment. (Isa. 28:7) Here's an example of one who drinks day and night, perhaps an alcoholic. It is also unacceptable to drink so much alcohol so that you make bad judgments in what you do or say.

The New Testament also speaks about wine. The Greek word used for wine is "oinos" and means wine. Jesus speaks of putting new wine into new wineskins so that the wineskin does not break and the wine is not lost. (Matt. 9:17, Mark 2:22, Luke 5:37-38). It is the fermentation process that would cause the wineskins to break. This is not grape juice. John the Baptist was known for never drinking wine or strong drink, (Luke 1:15) yet, Jesus was known to drink wine. "The Son of man is come eating and drinking and you say, 'Behold a gluttonous man and a wine-bibber, a friend of publicans and sinners.'" (Luke 7:34) Jesus' first miracle was turning water to wine at the wedding feast when his mother told him they had run out of wine. This wine was better than the first and it was six water pots full; each containing 20 or 30 gallons. (John 2:3-10) Would Jesus have supplied wine for people to drink if he believed it was wrong to drink alcohol? And do you really think they would be celebrating at a wedding feast with grape juice?

Paul says it's good not to eat meat or drink wine or do anything that would make your brother stumble. (Rom. 14:21) He also says "do not be drunk with wine, for that is debauchery; but be filled with the Spirit." (Eph. 5:18) Paul teaches Timothy that overseers and servants (deacons) and older women in the congregation should not be addicted to wine. (1 Tim. 3:3, 8; Titus 1:7, 2:3) Then he says, "No longer drink only water, but use a little wine for your stomach's sake and your frequent infirmities." (1 Tim.3:23) These scriptures show that wine is permitted, even recommended, but not in all cases and not in excessive amounts.

Peter also speaks against the way of the Gentiles as drinking excess of wine, and being involved in drunkenness and drinking parties. (1 Pet. 4:3-4)

I believe the abundance of scripture has shown that first of all, wine, not grape juice, is spoken of as a blessing from God. It is also clear drunkenness is not God's intent for this blessing He has given. "The works of the flesh are... drunkenness...and those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God." (Gal. 5:21)

Another argument against drinking alcohol is that it causes so much grief. When misused, this can be true. But so does the misuse of food (gluttony), and the misuse of sex. Does that mean

we should refrain from eating and sex? Obviously not! Good food, sex within marriage and wine are all blessings from God to be enjoyed.

Paul sums it up in 1 Cor. 10:31 by saying, “therefore, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God.”

Copyright © 2004-2011 by the Austin Church of God