

What Does the Bible Say about Alcohol?

By Rebecca S. DeWitt

- *Does the wine in the Bible contain alcohol?*
- *Does the Bible forbid the drinking of alcohol?*
- *Does the Bible promote the drinking of alcohol?*

Many Christians today understand the Bible to forbid drunkenness but permit drinking. Most, if not all, evangelical churches and seminaries, however, require its members to abstain from all forms of alcohol. Obviously, there continues to be differences of opinions on what God thinks about drinking. Because of this, and the large amount of space given to the subject in the Bible (the word 'wine' is mentioned in the Bible 256 times), it is worth taking another look at what the Bible says about wine, drinking, and drunkenness.

Wine and Alcohol

I have heard it said that the wine mentioned in the Bible had no alcohol in it—that it was grape juice. Yet, if the wine in the Bible had no alcohol in it, then it wouldn't mention drunkenness, but it says, *do not get drunk with wine ...* (Ephesians 5:18) and to be *not addicted to wine ...* (1 Timothy 3:3). How can you get drunk on grape juice? The 1 Corinthians church, for example, was getting drunk while celebrating the Lord's Supper (1 Corinthians 11:17-34). We can assume, therefore, that when the Bible mentions wine, it is referring to an alcoholic beverage.

Wine and Blessing

There are many positive statements about wine in the Bible. God suggests that Israel spend part of their tithe ... for whatever your heart desires, for oxen, or sheep, or wine, or strong drink, or whatever your heart desires; and there you shall eat in the presence of the Lord your God and rejoice, you and your household (Deuteronomy 14:26).

A parallel is made between joy in the Lord and an abundance of wine (Psalm 4:7 and 104:15).

Paul said, *I know and am convinced in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself...* (Romans 14:14). He also recommended to Timothy that he take wine for medicinal purposes (1 Timothy 5:23).

Isaiah speaks of a *lavish banquet* in which the Lord Himself will prepare aged wine (Isaiah 25:6), perhaps just as Jesus did when He performed His first miracle, turning water into wine, at the wedding in Cana (John 2:10). In fact, we know that Jesus Himself drank wine (Luke 7:33-34).

Not only is a lack of wine understood throughout the Old Testament as the judgment of God (Jeremiah 48:33, Lamentation 2:12, Hosea 2:9, Joel 1:10, Haggai 2:16), the presence of wine is associated with the blessing of God. When Isaac pronounced God's blessing on Jacob, he said, *Now may God give you of the dew of heaven, and of the fatness of the earth, and an abundance of grain and new wine* (Genesis 27:28; see also Proverbs 3:10 and Daniel 10:3).

Dan Wallace, a Greek professor at Dallas Theological Seminary, said, Wine is so often connected with the blessings of God that we are hard pressed to figure out why so many modern Christians view drink as the worst of all evils ("The Bible and Alcohol" www.bible.org). It is, therefore, biblically inaccurate and ridiculously inconsistent for any "Christian" or "Evangelical" institution to forbid the consumption of alcohol and yet permit, for example, divorce and women teaching men.

Alcohol and Drunkenness

Getting drunk is a sin. Why? Because God says so (Ephesians 5:18). They were, of course, drinking alcohol in biblical times. The real issue, therefore, has nothing to do with drinking but with the possible effects of drinking. Primarily, it removes the ability for sound judgment. Put simply, ... *whoever is intoxicated is not wise* (Proverbs 20:1).

Consider these examples: Noah drank himself drunk and was humiliated (Genesis 9:21). Lot was incapable of resisting sin because of his drunkenness (Genesis 19:32). Nabal's drunkenness proved his foolishness (1 Samuel 25:36). Elah, king of Israel, was murdered because of his drunken vulnerability (1 Kings 16:9). Being drunk is so incapacitating to men that it is used as a metaphor for the immorality of man (Revelation 14:8, 16:19). And it is so despised by God that it is used as an overall theme for the judgment of God (Lamentations 4:21, Nahum 3:11).

Alcohol and Excesses

There are other issues to consider besides the general acceptability of drinking and the specific sin of drunkenness. Drinking which does not lead to drunkenness can still be done in excess. What is excess? It's too much. What is too much? You have to determine that for yourself. It's just like every other gift of God. Just remember, you will give an account for what you decide (Romans 14:12).

Overeating is a good parallel to the sin of overdrinking. *Do not be with heavy drinkers of wine, Or with gluttonous eaters of meat ...* (Proverbs 23:20). The Bible is not against food, just like it is not against wine. But eating can lead to gluttony and drinking can become excessive.

Not only is it wrong to drink in excess, it's wrong to love to drink. This leads to addiction. *He who loves pleasure will become a poor man; He who loves wine and oil will not become rich* (Proverbs 21:17). God may have suggested to the Israelites that they spend their tithe on alcohol, but notice that He told them to drink it *in His presence* (Deuteronomy 14:26). Drinking, without accountability, tends to become the habit of someone with an addiction, or someone who loves to drink.

And finally, we should not be associated with heavy drinkers (Proverbs 23:20).

Alcohol and Judgment

Freedom to drink does not mean it is never a sin to drink. We should deal with this issue according to the formula given in Romans. *Now accept the one who is weak in faith, but not for the purpose of passing judgment on his opinions* (14:1).

We should not judge a brother or sister who chooses not to drink in the same way that we should not judge a believer who chooses not to eat meat. *Let not him who eats regard with contempt him who does not eat, and let not him who does not eat judge him who eats, for God has accepted him* (Romans 14:3).

We should not drink in front of a believer who is trying not to drink or who struggles with alcoholism. *It is good not to eat meat or to drink wine, or to do anything by which your brother stumbles* (Romans 14:21).

The faith which you have, have as your own conviction before God (Romans 14:22). We need not judge one another because *each one of us shall give account of himself to God* (Romans 14:12) as to why we choose to drink or why we choose not to drink. Drinking, like anything else we do, should be done for Christ and done in thankfulness (Romans 14:5-9).

Questions and Answers

Q: *Does the wine in the Bible contain alcohol?*

A: Yes. Hannah (1 Samuel 1:14), the Apostles (Acts 2:13), and Christ Himself (Luke 7:34) would not be accused of being drunk if the wine they were consuming did not contain alcohol. (*See also* Ephesians 5:18 and 1 Timothy 3:3.)

Q: *Does the Bible forbid the drinking of alcohol?*

A: No. A lack of wine is understood throughout the Old Testament as the judgment of God (Jeremiah 48:33). God even suggests that the Israelites' yearly tithe could include the purchase of strong drink (Deuteronomy 14:26).

Q: *Does the Bible promote the drinking of alcohol?*

A: No. The Bible allows it if you are a strong enough believer to resist the negative consequences—excess drinking, addiction, drunkenness, association with heavy drinkers, causing a brother to stumble, or judging others.