

Is it a sin to drink alcoholic beverages?

O, for a draught of vintage that hath been cooled a long age in the deep-delved earth...

This is how poet, John Keats, yearned for a glass of good wine. Many other famous personalities, both ancient and modern, have waxed eloquent on the subject of the drinking of alcoholic beverages – some for and some against. Here are a few quotes, which illustrate the diversity of viewpoints on this topic. First some humorous ones:

Actor, W. C. Fields:

I cook with wine. Sometimes I even add it to the food.

Author, Robert A. Heinlein:

Be wary of strong drink. It can make you shoot at tax collectors – and miss.

Author, Herman Melville:

Better sleep with a sober cannibal than a drunken Christian.

British statesman, Sir Winston Churchill:

I have taken more good from alcohol than alcohol has taken from me.

With our apologies to any readers who might be tax collectors or cannibals, we will move on to two quotes in a more serious vein:

Irish playwright George Bernard Shaw:

Alcohol is the anesthesia by which we endure the operation of life.

Confederate General Robert E. Lee:

My experience through life has convinced me that, while moderation and temperance in all things are commendable and beneficial, abstinence from spirituous liquors is the best safeguard of morals and health.

General Lee's viewpoint on this topic follows the same line as that of some professing Christian denominations which claim that the Bible teaches that any consumption of alcoholic beverages is a sin.

It is true that there are some scriptures that might, at first reading, seem to teach total abstinence from wine and other strong drink. Here is one example:

Hear, my son, and be wise; and guide your heart in the way. Do not mix with winebibbers, or with gluttonous eaters of meat; for the drunkard and the glutton will come to poverty, and drowsiness will clothe a man with rags... 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?" (Proverbs 23:19-21 and 29-35)

These verses are among those often quoted by those who believe that it is wrong to drink alcoholic beverages. They claim that this passage proves that it is sin to drink wine, and, by extension, any drink containing alcohol. But this scripture does *not* command these things. What then does it say? It warns that:

- The *excessive* drinking of alcohol is a sin (See also Ephesians 5:18),
- *Improper* use of alcohol is as poisonous as a snake's venom (verse 32),
- God's children should avoid frequent company with winebibbers (verse 20; See also Matthew 24:49 and I Corinthians 5:11),
- Poverty is just one potential negative result of drunkenness (verse 21),
- Other potential – even probable – negative consequences of chronic drunkenness include woe, sorrow, contentions, complaints, bloodshot eyes, hallucinations, nightmares, addiction, lack of self-control in speech and other matters, and bodily injuries without apparent cause – the cause being forgotten because of drunken stupor (verses 29, 33 and 34),
- We should not tarry long at the wine (verse 30)

On this last warning, we know that a person who tarries long at wine can so easily become a winebibber or, in plain, modern English, a drunkard. God, through Paul, lists drunkenness as one of the works of the flesh, and gives a warning that no drunkard will inherit God's Kingdom:

Now the works of the flesh are evident, which are: adultery, fornication, uncleanness, lewdness... envy, murders, drunkenness, revelries, and the like; of which I tell you beforehand, just as I also told you in time past, that those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God. (Galatians 5:19, 21)

Look not upon red wine?

Let us take a closer look at verse 31 of Proverbs 23, which offers some seemingly unusual advice:

Do not look on the wine when it is red, when it sparkles in the cup, when it swirls around smoothly.

This is from the New King James version. The "old" King James version puts it this way:

Look not thou upon the wine when it is red, when it giveth his colour in the cup, when it moveth itself aright.

What does this mean?

The terms "red" and "moveth itself" refer to wine when it is in the process of fermentation. This is the period before the wine is fully fermented. If during this time a person "looks on it" so as to finally drink it, he may become sick and possibly even die. In fact, instances are recorded of winery workers becoming asphyxiated by merely leaning over the wine vats "looking on" the fermenting wine and being overcome by the poisonous gases, then falling into the vats and drowning. "What a great way to die!" we might joke. But not so long ago, just such an accident happened at a winery here in Canada. Here is an excerpt from a recent fatal accident alert in the Workmen's Compensation Board of British Columbia's Health and Safety Centre:

The owner of a winery collapsed while taking a sample from a wine fermentation tank. A second person entered the tank in an attempt to rescue him, and he also collapsed. They could not be revived.

Both men died because they looked upon the wine when it was red! So we see, once again, that God's advice was not just for the people of previous millennia. It is, in fact, right up to date.

Old Testament approval

God's Word shows that it is perfectly alright to drink wine in moderation. It is replete with accounts of the proper uses of wine... accounts of people considered righteous according to God's standards. Here are some examples:

Melchizedek, who we believe to have been Jesus Christ Himself, brought some wine to His meeting with Abram:

And Melchizedek king of Salem brought forth bread and wine: and he was the priest of the most high God. (Genesis 14:18)

When giving his blessing to his son Jacob (who he thought was Esau), Isaac drank wine and asked for plenty of wine as a blessing from God:

He said, "Bring it near to me, and I will eat of my son's game, so that my soul may bless you." So he brought it near to him, and he ate; and he brought him wine, and he drank... "Therefore may God give you of the dew of heaven, of the fatness of the earth, and plenty of grain and wine." (Genesis 27:25, 28)

Is it likely that Isaac would have asked God to bless his son with an abundance of wine if he knew that He forbade it? Wine was included in other blessings too. Through His servant Moses, God told the Israelites that wine would be included in the many blessings He would pour out upon them if they would obey Him:

And He will love you and bless you and multiply you; He will also bless the fruit of your womb and the fruit of your land, your grain and your new wine and your oil, the increase of your cattle and the offspring of your flock, in the land of which He swore to your fathers to give you. (Deuteronomy 7:13)

Then Israel shall dwell in safety, the fountain of Jacob alone, in a land of grain and new wine; His heavens shall also drop dew. (Deuteronomy 33:28)

Here we read of wine promised by God for the Israelites as a blessing for obedience but, conversely, if they were to disobey Him, He solemnly warned them that He would take their wine and vineyards away from them as a curse:

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... And they [fierce foreign invaders] shall eat the increase of your livestock and the produce of your land, until you are destroyed; they shall not leave you grain or new wine or oil, or the increase of your cattle or the offspring of your flocks, until they have destroyed you. (Deuteronomy 28:3, 51)

In many scriptures in Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy – too many to list here – God commanded that wine be used in Israel's drink offerings to Him. In addition, God's people were commanded to pay to Him His tithe of all the wine they produced:

The firstfruits of your grain and your new wine and your oil, and the first of the fleece of your sheep, you shall give him. (Deuteronomy 18:4)

In His instructions on the proper use of festival tithe (or "second tithe" as we often refer to it today) for the celebration of His feasts, God authorizes the purchase and use of wine and similar beverages (Hebrew *shekar*: strong drink or intensely alcoholic liquor):

And thou shalt eat before the LORD thy God, in the place which he shall choose to place his name there, the tithe of thy corn, of thy wine, and of thine oil, and the firstlings of thy herds and of thy flocks; that thou mayest learn to fear the LORD thy God always... And thou shalt bestow that money for whatsoever thy soul lusteth after, for oxen, or for sheep, or for wine, or for strong drink, or for whatsoever thy soul desireth: and thou shalt eat there before the LORD thy God, and thou shalt rejoice, thou, and thine household. (Deuteronomy 14:23, 26 KJV)

New Testament approval

And so the instruction and example continues throughout the Old Testament. But let us turn now to the New Testament and let us begin with a question. In the transition between these two eras of time covered by the volumes we call the Old and New Testaments, did God change His mind regarding the use of alcohol?

It is certainly true that drunkenness and excess of alcohol are clearly condemned in many New Testament scriptures as they are in the Old:

But if that evil servant says in his heart, ‘My master is delaying his coming,’ and begins to beat his fellow servants, and to eat and drink with the drunkards, the master of that servant will come on a day when he is not looking for him and at an hour that he is not aware of, and will cut him in two and appoint him his portion with the hypocrites. There shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

(Matthew 24:48-51; see also Luke 12:45-46)

But take heed to yourselves, lest your hearts be weighed down with carousing, drunkenness, and cares of this life, and that Day come on you unexpectedly. (Luke 21.34)

Let us walk properly, as in the day, not in revelry and drunkenness, not in lewdness and lust, not in strife and envy. (Romans 13:13)

But now I have written to you not to keep company with anyone named a brother, who is sexually immoral, or covetous, or an idolater, or a reviler, or a drunkard, or an extortioner—not even to eat with such a person. (I Corinthians 5:11)

Nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners will inherit the kingdom of God. (I Corinthians 6:10)

For in eating, each one takes his own supper ahead of others; and one is hungry and another is drunk. What! Do you not have houses to eat and drink in? Or do you despise the church of God and shame those who have nothing? What shall I say to you? Shall I praise you in this? I do not praise you. (I Corinthians 11:21-22)

And be not drunk with wine, wherein is excess; but be filled with the Spirit; (Ephesians 5:18)

For a bishop must be blameless, as a steward of God, not self-willed, not quick-tempered, not given to wine, not violent, not greedy for money... The older women likewise, that they be reverent in behavior, not slanderers, not given to much wine, teachers of good things. (Titus 1:7, 2:3)

For we have spent enough of our past lifetime in doing the will of the Gentiles—when we walked in lewdness, lusts, drunkenness, revelries, drinking parties, and abominable idolatries. (I Peter 4:3)

Jesus and His apostles mention wine and other strong drink numerous times in the New Testament, but nowhere do any of them say that moderate consumption of alcoholic beverages is wrong. A few verses strongly indicate that Jesus Himself liked the occasional glass of wine:

For John the Baptist came neither eating bread nor drinking wine, and you say, ‘He has a demon.’ 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!’ (Luke 7:33-34)

Why would anyone call Him a winebibber if it were anything other than wine that He had been seen drinking? Jesus drank wine with His disciples at His last Passover services and promised that He would again join them in a glass of wine after their resurrection:

But I say to you, I will not drink of this fruit of the vine from now on until that day when I drink it new with you in My Father’s kingdom. (Matthew 26:29)

The very first miracle Jesus performed was to turn water into wine:

On the third day there was a wedding in Cana of Galilee, and the mother of Jesus was there. Now both Jesus and His disciples were invited to the wedding. And when they ran out of wine, the mother of Jesus said to Him, "They have no wine." Jesus said to her, "Woman, what does your concern have to do with Me? My hour has not yet come." His mother said to the servants, "Whatever He says to you, do it." Now there were set there six waterpots of stone, according to the manner of purification of the Jews, containing twenty or thirty gallons apiece. Jesus said to them, "Fill the waterpots with water." And they filled them up to the brim. And He said to them, "Draw some out now, and take it to the master of the feast." And they took it. When the master of the feast had tasted the water that was made wine, and did not know where it came from (but the servants who had drawn the water knew), the master of the feast called the bridegroom. And he said to him, "Every man at the beginning sets out the good wine, and when the guests have well drunk, then the inferior. You have kept the good wine until now!" (John 2:1-10)

Here we see that, not only did Jesus condone the proper use of wine, but He knew what the qualities of a good wine were. This fact is confirmed in Luke 5:39:

And no one, having drunk old wine, immediately desires new; for he says, ‘The old is better.’

Some have argued that, at the Cana wedding, Jesus changed the water into unfermented grape juice, not wine. But the Greek word translated "wine" throughout John 2:1-10 is *oinos*, which means fermented wine. Also, grape juice is grape juice. Its quality does not vary very much. And, although it still would have been a miracle for Jesus to change the water into fresh grape juice, a well-to-do householder might have sent his servants out to crush some more grapes into juice. The greatness of the miracle was in the fact that six large waterpots of highest quality, fully matured wine were produced.

The apostle Paul followed His Master's lead on this subject. In the same letter to Timothy in which he soundly condemned excessive alcohol consumption (I Timothy 3:3, 8), Paul advised him to drink some wine to help ease his chronic stomach problems:

A bishop then must be blameless, the husband of one wife, temperate, sober-minded, of good behavior, hospitable, able to teach; not given to wine, not violent, not greedy for money, but gentle, not quarrelsome, not covetous... Likewise deacons must be reverent, not double-tongued, not given to much wine, not greedy for money. (I Timothy 3:2-3, 8)

No longer drink only water, but use a little wine for your stomach's sake and your frequent infirmities. (I Timothy 5:23)

God gave us wine and other alcoholic beverages for enjoyment and so that we may learn to use them properly. We can develop character by properly exercising wisdom and self-control with them.

The proper use of alcohol is a great responsibility, but it is only the wrong use of it that is sin.

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