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MINISTRIES

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Does the Bible Permit Drinking Alcohol?

Does the Bible allow for Christians—that is, followers of Yeshua (Jesus) the Messiah—to drink alcoholic beverages?

We will look at this topic from two angles. First, we will see if there are any commandments concerning the consumption of alcohol. Second, we will see if the Bible offers us any wisdom regarding the consumption of alcohol, whether it is encouraged or discouraged.

Let’s first consider whether or not there is a commandment in the Bible prohibiting drinking alcohol.

If God considered drinking alcohol a sin, we can reasonably expect that to be clear in the Scriptures. After all, the Bible unambiguously prohibits the consumption of meat from certain animals, like pigs and shellfish. Surely, if consuming certain drinks were an offense to God, the Bible would clearly prohibit it like it does consuming certain meats. It’s not like alcoholic drinks were unknown in the ancient world.

So, is there a biblical commandment against drinking alcohol? No. And most believers—even fundamentalist Baptists who generally oppose drinking alcohol—will admit that there is no direct commandment against it.

However, sometimes people will offer up Leviticus 10:8-11 as proof that God prohibits consuming alcohol. Here is what it says:

Leviticus 10:8-9

And the Lord [YHWH] spoke to Aaron, saying, “Drink no wine or strong drink, you or your sons with you, when you go into the tent of meeting, lest you die. It shall be a statute forever throughout your generations.

Does this passage give us a law against drinking alcohol? No. It gives *Aaron and his sons*, those who serve as the priests of Israel, a law against drinking alcohol. So, regardless of God’s reasoning for giving this command to Aaron and his sons, it should at the very least be acknowledged that this is not a

general command given to everyone. But why did God give this command to Aaron and his sons? Consider the context:

Leviticus 10:9-11

“Drink no wine or strong drink, you or your sons with you, **when you go into the tent of meeting**, lest you die. It shall be a statute forever throughout your generations. You are to distinguish between the holy and the common, and between the unclean and the clean, and you are to teach the people of Israel all the statutes that the Lord [YHWH] has spoken to them by Moses.

Again, this law is not given to everyone, but only to Aaron and his sons. Furthermore, this law is not a general rule against priests drinking alcohol, but only a command against priests drinking alcohol at certain times—namely, when they go into the tent of meeting.

As everyone knows, alcohol can lead to lightheadedness. The priests were to be sober and diligent in performing their duties to distinguish between clean and unclean and to teach people YHWH’s laws. As we learn from the story of Nadab and Abihu, making a mistake while serving in the tent of meeting could lead to death! Thus, God prohibited priests from drinking before performing their duties.

Some might argue that this passage still prohibits drinking alcohol *in principle*. They might say that there is a general principle here that drinking alcohol leads to a failure to properly discern between right and wrong.

However, first, that’s not the same thing as this passage being a general command against drinking alcohol. We need to be clear in what we are actually claiming, because we don’t want to equate our personal opinions or convictions to God’s divine Law.

In any case, it seems that a more accurate principle derived from this passage is that one shouldn’t drink alcohol before performing an important task, not that one shouldn’t drink at all. For instance, pastors probably shouldn’t drink before giving a sermon. People probably shouldn’t drink before showing up to their job. When we consider the intent of this passage honestly, at best we can only say that the Bible discourages drinking alcohol in certain contexts where it would be inappropriate.

This is the only interpretation that makes sense in light of the many passages that actually seem to *encourage* drinking alcohol.

And that leads to our next consideration. We’ve already seen that there is no direct commandment prohibiting drinking alcohol. But is there anything else in the Scriptures that might lead us to think that God disapproves of his people drinking it even though he doesn’t directly forbid it?

Besides Leviticus 10, which we’ve already covered, many times people will point to passages that condemn the negative effects that alcohol has on people.

For instance:

- Wine is called a “mocker” in Proverbs 20:1, and the author warns us against being “led astray” by it.
- Isaiah 5:11 condemns those who drink all day, from morning ‘til night.
- Additionally, there are many passages warning against being a drunkard (Proverbs 23:21; 1

Corinthians 5:11, 1 Timothy 3:3; Titus 1:7).

- Paul exhorts us, “do not get drunk with wine,” in Ephesians 5:18.
- Paul also says that drunkards will not inherit the kingdom of God (1 Corinthians 6:10).

On the other hand, many passages in the Bible *encourage* people to drink alcohol.

For instance:

- Proverbs 31:6 advises sad people to drink alcohol to temporarily get relief from their distress.
- If people weren't able to take their tithes of livestock, grain, and so forth to Jerusalem for Sukkot, Deuteronomy 14 instructs them to sell it and spend the money on whatever they desire—and Moses specifically mentions “strong drink” as an option.
- Psalm 104:14 says that God gave wine as a gift to “gladden the heart of man.”
- Isaiah 25:6 prophesies of a future time when God will make a feast for his people consisting of “well-aged wine.”
- Paul recommended wine for Timothy to help his stomach (1 Timothy 5:23).
- Of course, Yeshua's famous first miracle was turning water into wine (John 2:1-12).

So how do we resolve the tension between the passages that seemingly *discourage* drinking alcohol with those that *encourage* it? The answer is simple: the Bible condemns not the drinking of alcohol but the *abuse* of alcohol. Scripture is clear that God gave us things like wine and beer to enjoy. Like sweet fruits and other tasty foods, alcoholic drinks are intended to be a blessing when handled properly.

This approach to alcohol is in line with how we would approach some other things in Scripture. To give one example, the Bible condemns overeating (e.g. Proverbs 23:2, 20-21), but that does not mean God disapproves of us enjoying food in general. The fact that the Bible condemns the abuse of a good thing is not evidence that he disapproves of the good thing itself.

Some Christians have tried to resolve the tension regarding alcohol in the Scriptures another way. Fundamentalist Baptists, among some other groups, will often argue that when the Bible speaks of wine and other strong drinks in a positive way, that it's referring to non-alcoholic drinks. When the Bible speaks of these drinks in a negative way, then, of course, it's referring to alcoholic drinks. Thus, the Bible doesn't actually encourage drinking alcoholic beverages at all.

This view, however, is unlikely. For instance, the Greek word for the wine that Yeshua made from water in John 2 is *oinos*. This is the same word Paul uses in Ephesians 5:18 when he said, “do not get drunk with wine.” You can't get drunk from drinking too much grape juice!

As scholar D. F. Watson writes:

All wine mentioned in the Bible is fermented grape juice with an alcohol content. No non-fermented drink was called wine.

-D. F. Watson, “Wine,” *DJG*, ed. Joel B. Green, Scot McKnight and I. Howard Marshall (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1992), p. 870

The bottom line is that the Bible makes a distinction between sobriety and being a drunkard, not between alcoholic wine and non-alcoholic “wine.” The reason for this is that the biblical authors were not concerned with the type of drink being consumed but with the outcome. Again, it's not the alcohol

that's the problem but the abuse of it.

There is one more point worth mentioning. The Scriptures do advise against drinking alcohol in a particular situation. This isn't a general prohibition against alcohol but wisdom to be applied in a certain context. Paul gives these instructions in his letter to the Romans:

Romans 14:21

It is good not to eat meat or drink wine or do anything that causes your brother to stumble.

There are some people you might know who are very against drinking alcohol. They might believe that the Bible forbids it, or they might be against it for another reason. Perhaps someone close to them abused alcohol and it really soured their perspective toward it. Maybe they are a former alcoholic themselves.

Paul encourages us not to drink alcohol in the presence of those who might stumble over it. In other words, while we are free to enjoy alcohol, Paul instructs us to give up that freedom for the sake of our brother. This is wise instruction. If we truly love our neighbor, we should avoid needlessly offending them if possible.

In conclusion, does the Bible permit drinking alcoholic beverages? Yes. Wine, beer, and other fermented drinks are gifts from God intended to bless us. We are free to enjoy them if we choose, but we should consume them wisely.

There are times and places when we shouldn't drink alcohol, such as when a priest is about to enter the tabernacle or if it will cause a brother to stumble.

It isn't the drinking of alcohol that's bad; it's living a life of a drunkard, or an alcoholic. As long as we are avoiding drunkenness and offending our brothers and sisters in the faith, we are free to enjoy this gift.

We pray you have been blessed by this teaching.

Remember, continue to test everything.

Shalom!

For more on this and other teachings, please visit us at www.testeverything.net

Shalom, and may Yahweh bless you in walking in the whole Word of God.

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