

Is Alcohol Use Permitted According to the Bible?

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"Dear Larry Wilson:

My girlfriend and I are having a conflict over the use of a "little" alcohol. I believe the Bible permits the use of a little alcohol. After all, Jesus turned water into *wine* at a wedding feast. (John 2:9) She disagrees. She believes the wine at the wedding feast was not alcoholic, but she cannot prove this. She says the Bible does not approve the use of alcohol except for medical reasons.

Please help us resolve this thorny issue. Here are three texts that keep us from resolving this issue into a "yes" or "no." (1) 1 Timothy 5:23: **"Stop drinking only water, and use a little wine because of your stomach and your frequent illnesses."** (2) Deuteronomy 14:26: **"Use the silver to buy whatever you like: cattle, sheep, wine or other fermented drink, or anything you wish. Then you and your household shall eat there in the presence of the Lord your God and rejoice."** (3) Ephesians 5:18: **"Do not get drunk on wine, which leads to debauchery. Instead, be filled with the Spirit."**

Sincerely,
James"

Hello James:

Thank you for your e-mail. I am happy to learn that the Bible is important to you and your girlfriend. Much has been written on this topic and I cannot present every aspect of this subject in this short response. However, I will try to give you a summary statement. First, I want you to know I agree with your girlfriend.

Paul did encourage Timothy to use a "little alcohol" for his illnesses because it was widely known in ancient times that alcohol had medicinal value, but Paul also told the believers in Ephesians that Christians are not to get drunk on wine. Some Christians see some wiggle room in Ephesians 5:18 arguing that they can drink a "little" without getting drunk.

To those who use this argument, consider this: In the United States, a person is determined to be legally impaired with a Blood Alcohol Concentration (BAC) of .08%. This means that if you are a female weighing approximately 100 pounds, impairment from wine begins with one 4 oz. drink and your BAC exceeds .08% after a second drink.

So, for a women this size, two 4 oz. drinks of wine makes you legally impaired. If you are a male weighing approximately 180 pounds, impairment begins with the second drink and your BAC exceeds .08% after a third drink. So, three drinks makes you legally impaired. (One drink is 1.4 oz. of 80 proof liquor, 12 oz. of beer, or 4 oz. of table wine.) For what it's worth, commercial drivers are limited to a BAC of only .04%. This is half of the .08% BAC permitted for non-

commercial drivers! It does not take very much alcohol to legally impair a person.

God's Generous Forbearance

When God delivered Israel out of Egyptian bondage, He permitted the Jews to use "a little alcohol" at special occasions. For example, speaking of their compulsory attendance at three annual feasts which would be held in various places, God said, "**[If you live a great distance from the place for the festival, convert the tithe of your harvest into silver for the trip and when you get to the place I have designated]**

Use the silver to buy whatever you like: cattle, sheep, wine or other fermented drink, or anything you wish. Then you and your household shall eat there in the presence of the Lord your God and rejoice." (Deuteronomy 14:26, insertion mine) Some people use this verse inappropriately to justify the use of alcohol. When God delivered Israel from slavery in Egypt, He permitted Israel to keep slaves (Leviticus 25:44), permitted men to have multiple wives (Deuteronomy 17:17 – in fact, the twelve sons of Jacob originated from four women. See Genesis 29:23, 29:30, 30:4, 30:9.), and permitted divorce for reasons other than adultery (Deuteronomy 24:1-4).

When Israel first came out of Egyptian bondage, God permitted Israel to do things that were not ideal. Israel was a backward nation consisting of poorly educated slaves with a lot of bad habits and customs. Initially, God dealt patiently with Israel's illiteracy and degeneracy, but over time, it was God's intention to transform the nation of Israel into a great nation with a high degree of literacy, a marvelous theocracy, a judiciary system that was second to none, and the highest living standards.

God did everything He could do to transform Israel into a great nation that would be the envy of all nations. Tragically, Israel could not stay away from repetitious bouts of apostasy and ruin.

When Jesus was on Earth, He noted Israel's corporate failure in a conversation about divorce. "**Jesus replied, 'Moses permitted you to divorce your wives because your hearts were hard. But it was not this way from the beginning [of marriage].**

I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, and marries another woman commits adultery.'" (Matthew 19:8,9, insertion mine) This verse clearly reveals what was permissible at the time of Moses was not ideal. I am sure that if God had imposed His ideals on Israel at the time of the Exodus, no one would have wanted to leave Egypt. As terrible as Pharaoh and his taskmasters were, Israel's carnal nature, with its degenerate passions and appetites, was rather content in Egypt. This explains why after leaving Egypt, many of the Hebrews wanted to return. (Exodus 16:3, Numbers 11:4-6)

Leading by Example

To get the nation of Israel going in the right direction, God started with Israel's leaders. For example, those who were called to serve God as priests were forbidden to use alcohol.

"You [Aaron, as the High Priest] and your sons are not to drink wine or other fermented drink whenever you go into the Tent of Meeting, or you will die [I will kill you].

This is a lasting ordinance for the generations to come. You must distinguish between the holy and the common, between the unclean and the clean [and you cannot do this when your reasoning is impaired], and you must teach the Israelites all the decrees the Lord has given them through Moses [and how can you teach others and demonstrate the holy ways of the Lord if you are impaired with alcohol?]" (Leviticus 10:9-11, insertions mine)

You may recall how Aaron's sons, Nadab and Abihu, entered the Tent of Meeting while in an inebriated state. They used unholy fire in an atonement service and upon seeing their impudence, God killed them. (Leviticus 10:1,2) The painful point here is that alcohol interferes with reason and self-control. Stupid choices always produce painful consequences.

Wine is a Mocker

When people drink, more often than not, they say things and do things they regret later on – sometimes for a lifetime. Solomon noticed this phenomenon. He wrote, **"Wine is a mocker [it will make a fool out of you], strong drink is raging [intoxication is maddening – it leads to abuse, conflict, and assault]: and whosoever is deceived [by a mind numbing intoxication] thereby is not wise."** (Proverbs 20:1, insertions mine)

The Bible records an incident after the flood when Noah got drunk and took off his clothes. Almost always, nudity, sexual immorality, and drinking go together. **"Noah, a man of the soil, proceeded to plant a vineyard. When he drank some of its wine, he became drunk and lay uncovered [stoned and naked] inside his tent.**

Ham, the father of Canaan, [accidentally] saw his father's nakedness and told his two brothers outside. But Shem and Japheth took a garment and laid it across their shoulders; then they walked in backward and covered their father's nakedness. Their faces were turned the other way so that they would not see their father's nakedness. When Noah awoke from his wine [stupor] and found out what his youngest son had done to him, he said, 'Cursed be [my grandson] Canaan!

The lowest of slaves will he be to his brothers.' " (Genesis 9:20-25, insertions mine) Wine caused Noah to lose his dignity. The great patriarch who built the ark and "saved the world" was highly embarrassed after he learned that he had been seen naked and he cursed his *grandson* for Ham's offense!

It was considered a most grievous offense in ancient times for a patriarch or tribal king to be seen naked. (Note: Noah may have cursed his grandson because the he may have been responsible for guarding his grandfather's tent. Contrary to what some have claimed, there is no evidence that Noah's curse had any effect on Canaan. This curse did not originate from God or through God. Noah was indignant that his nakedness had been exposed, and in reality, he should have cursed himself for getting drunk.)

If You Really Want to Draw Near to God

Throughout human history, there are times when people desire divine intervention. These moments are usually characterized by a desperate situation of some kind that could have a fatal or catastrophic outcome. Historically, the pagans would petition their gods by bringing expensive gifts to the temple of their god. Of course, the priests were delighted to receive these expensive gifts and they assured the worshipers that their petition would be heard.

However, God gave the Jews a very different approach. If someone wanted to petition God or seek His favor, they could temporarily become a "Nazirite." Everyone partaking in a Nazirite vow belonged to a "tribe" which was temporarily, but wholeheartedly dedicated to the service and will of God. "[Moses]

Speak to the Israelites and say to them: 'If a man or woman wants to make a special vow, a vow of separation to the Lord as a Nazirite, he must abstain from wine and other fermented drink and must not drink vinegar made from wine or from other fermented drink. He must not drink grape juice or eat grapes or raisins [because of the possibility of fermentation].' " (Numbers 6:2,3, insertions mine)

A Nazarite vow could last for days or weeks, depending upon the desire of the petitioner. During this time, the petitioner sometimes fasted while devoting much time to prayer, study, and meditation. If a person wished to draw near to God by becoming a Nazirite, God required a clear mind. Hence, the use of grapes or anything fermented was forbidden!

The Wedding Miracle

As soon as a grape is crushed and the juice makes contact with the air, fermentation begins. Depending on the type of grapes, the storage temperature, the yeast involved, and other factors, pure grape juice can deteriorate into an awful tasting liquid within a week or two because of fermentation.

Making a good tasting wine or vinegar is not a casual endeavor. The process involves separating the grape skins, adding the right type of yeast to the juice just at the right time, and then aging the wine in specially prepared containers. The process is lengthy and it involves considerable effort and attention. I mention these facts because Jesus instantly turned 150 gallons of water into wine at a wedding party in Cana of Galilee. (John 2)

When the master of the banquet tasted the wine that Jesus made, he was astonished at its quality! (He did not know that the wine was the result of a miracle when he made this remark to the bridegroom: ". . . **Everyone brings out the choice wine [the most expensive wine] first and then the cheaper wine after the guests have had too much to drink; but you have saved the best till now.**" (John 2:10, insertions mine) It is clear from these remarks that alcohol was served at some Jewish weddings in Christ's time because the master of the banquet mentions that cheaper wines were usually served after the guests "had too much to drink."

Three points should be considered: First, nonalcoholic grape juice was not readily available in Bible times unless it was harvest time. Grape juice begins fermenting as soon as it is expressed from the grape, so grape juice quickly acquires some level of alcoholic content depending on how it is treated.

Second, the Jews often served alcohol at weddings in Bible times. (Many Jews still do this today.) A fine wine today will have an alcoholic content ranging between 12% to 17% and I assume the same would hold true in Bible times. So, depending on the weight of a person, two or three 4 oz. drinks of "fine wine" would render a person legally impaired. Third, there has been much debate through the centuries on whether the miracle wine produced by Jesus was *pure* grape juice or a *fine* wine having alcoholic content.

Personally, I think there is a fourth choice. I am persuaded that Jesus created an exquisite wine that was free of alcohol. Nonalcoholic wine has been around for a long time, although it never has been very popular. My reason for believing Jesus created nonalcoholic wine is simple.

A miracle is a miracle. Instantly, 150 gallons of ordinary water became a "better tasting wine." The technology that Jesus used to make this wine does not exist. His wine has not been replicated. It was not manmade. This wine came from God. Knowing the ministry and mission of Jesus as we now do, I do not think He would give the wedding guests an intoxicating beverage.

We know what happened when Noah got drunk, we know what Solomon says about wine, we know what God required of His priests, we know that Paul told the Ephesians not to get drunk on wine, and we know what God required in the Nazirite vow. Therefore, it is incongruous to think that Jesus created a wine that would make people drunk. The Author of Life came here to draw sinners to God. If the manna in the desert was the food of angels, perhaps the wine created at this wedding was a sample of what angels drink!

James, there is one more aspect to this topic that I hope you will consider. The use of alcohol for recreational purposes has created nine million alcoholics and another nine million people have a chronic drinking problem. Addictive substances have compelling power over human beings and this is why the use of alcohol and tobacco (and other addictive substances) is regulated by our government.

The Bible does not explicitly address the use of addictive substances because God gave mankind the ability to reason from cause to effect. For example, a person can argue that the Bible does not condemn cigarette smoking, the use of marijuana, cocaine, or methamphetamine and they would be *technically* correct.

This silence does not support the recreational use of these substances! God has given us the ability to reason and it does not take a great deal of research to see the harmful effects of these drugs. The facts are crystal clear. Once a person begins experimenting with addictive drugs, the likelihood of addiction is so great and the addiction is so permanent that there is no such thing as moderation after an addiction begins.

Any argument used to support the recreational use of alcohol can be used for recreational

smoking.

Consider the addictive nature of cigarette smoking for a moment. Most people begin smoking before they turn 18. Today, some 82,000,000 people in the USA are addicted to cigarettes. Of course, nicotine does not impair the brain like alcohol, yet according to the Center for Disease Control, almost a half million people die prematurely each year from smoke-related diseases. (The life-span of smokers is reduced by an average of 15 years.)

Given the addictive nature of smoking (one in four is addicted) and the harmful effects on health that follow, what position should a Christian take on smoking? Should we take a position of approval as long as smoking is done in moderation because the Bible does not explicitly condemn the habit? Of course not!

As I wrote earlier, 18 million people are either addicted to alcohol or they have a chronic drinking problem. If each person belongs to a family of four people, the number of people affected by the demon of alcohol approaches 70 million!

Even more, about 100,000 deaths are associated with alcohol in the USA each year; 5% of all deaths from diseases of the circulatory system are attributed to alcohol; 15% of all deaths from diseases of the respiratory system are attributed to alcohol; 30% of all deaths from accidents caused by fire and flames are attributed to alcohol;

30% of all accidental drownings are attributed to alcohol; 30% of all suicides are attributed to alcohol; 40% of all deaths due to accidental falls are attributed to alcohol; 45% of all deaths in automobile accidents are attributed to alcohol; and 60% of all homicides are attributed to alcohol. Given these stats on alcohol, should Christians take the position that recreational drinking is OK? No!

James, the facts tell us that the recreational use of *any* addictive substance is foolish for two reasons. First, 82 million smokers and 18 million drinkers prove how easy it is to become addicted. Science now knows that a *single* cigarette, drink, snort of cocaine or meth rock can produce a life-long addict.

Second, Christians should be clear and unequivocal about anything that has an addictive potential. Total abstinence from these substances, just like total abstinence from premarital sex, aligns with divine wisdom and the Word of God. *Anything* that impairs our ability to resist temptation should be treated with contempt.

The devil is a roaring lion, and he works every angle to bring people down into the pit of hopelessness or at the least, life-long regret. Alcohol causes people to do things they would not ordinarily do. Alcohol is a demon in a bottle, if it conquers you – your life and the lives of those who love you will be full of suffering and heartache. *Being spiritually impaired is far worse than being legally impaired.*

Jesus came to Earth to show us how to live, how to love God and each other, and how to overcome sin. Even though He was tempted in all points as we are, Jesus did not sin and

neither would He want us to impair the power and work of the Holy Spirit in our hearts and minds with a substance that causes us to diminish the seriousness of sin. **"So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God."** (1 Corinthians 10:31)

Your girlfriend is correct! Seems to me, she has a good head on her shoulders.

I hope this helps!

Larry Wilson