

# **WHAT DOES THE BIBLE REALLY SAY ABOUT ALCOHOL?**

The drinking of alcohol is an issue that is particularly touchy within modern America. As an issue alcohol has been much less in most every other country and times in history (apart from Islamic influence). The influence of the temperance movement and prohibition in American history has probably shaped more Western Christian views on the issue more than Scripture has, even to the point of misinterpreting the Bible. Tradition and opinion can be dangerous (Romans 14:1 & Colossians 2:8) apart from God's wisdom, so let's discover together what the Bible *really* says about alcohol...

**Alcohol brings some good.** God allows for and describes several positive aspects to alcohol. It can serve as a tool for the relief of physical, mental, and emotional pain (Proverbs 31:6-7). In contexts where clean water is unavailable, alcohol can serve as a hygienic drink and has medicinal value (1 Timothy 5:23, Luke 10:34). Alcohol can be responsibly used for the special purposes of celebration and socialization (John 2:1-11).

**Alcohol brings a lot of dangers.** Arrogance. Combativeness. Impaired judgment. Abuse. Anger. Increased sin. Decreased job performance. Poverty. Damaged health. Broken relationships. Diminished Christian witness (Proverbs 20:1; 23:29-35; 31:4-5, Romans 14:21). Many of us have seen and experienced the irreversible damage caused by drunkenness. We've witnessed firsthand the destruction of lives, marriages, families, and friendships from the misuse of alcohol.

**Is it wrong to drink alcohol?** Not usually. In moderation and at appropriate times, alcohol drinking is described in either neutral or positive ways at several places in the Bible (Ecclesiastes 9:7, Psalm 104:15, Amos 9:14). In the Old Testament wine is referenced over 180 times, sometimes as a warning of drunkenness, but mostly as a gift from God to humanity and as a part of the sacrificial system. Jesus' first miracle was the creation of wine from water (John 2:1-11). Jesus used wine at His last supper to symbolize His life-giving blood sacrifice and then pointed forward to Heaven with the inclusion of wine as a beverage (Matthew 26:27-29). But God also points out valid reasons to abstain from alcohol out of personal conviction even when it is biblically permissible (Romans 14).

**Is it wrong to get drunk?** Yes. In excess (whether drunk, tipsy, or slightly impaired) alcohol harms yourself and others. Drunkenness is universally prohibited and warned against by God...for a reason. Drunkenness leads to earthly and eternal destruction (Isaiah 5:11; 5:22, 1 Peter 4:3, Ephesians 5:18, Galatians 5:21). God loves us enough to command us away from drunkenness and lovingly warn us of its dangers. Is it wrong to sell and serve alcohol in our community? No, not if it is legalized. Proper protections and enforcement are needed. But...just because something can be done, doesn't mean it should be done (1 Corinthians 6:12).

**Is it wise to sell and serve alcohol in a community? To bring it into your home? To drink it at all?** Maybe. Maybe not. Many can handle the freedom of alcohol responsibly, but many cannot. There may be some local financial advantages and advantages of convenience and pleasure, but the financial cost of alcohol misuse is actually higher than the gain (<https://www.niaaa.nih.gov/alcohol-health/overview-alcohol-consumption/alcohol-facts-and-statistics>). It could be wise for a community to avoid alcohol because of its many dangers but it could also be unloving to prohibit what

God allows. Ultimately the drinking of alcohol is a personal preference or individual choice allowed by the Scriptures. Some believers who choose to drink see the substance as a gift from God and find themselves not tempted towards drunkenness. Others who choose to abstain see temptations and costs as too high to justify their own personal usage.

- Wisdom tells us to distance ourselves from danger (Proverbs 6:27-28).
- Wisdom tells us to distance ourselves from destructive temptations (Romans 13:14, 1 Cor 10:12-13).
- Wisdom tells us to seek the good of others and our community (Jeremiah 29:7, Philippians 2:3-4).

If alcohol has many implicit dangers, and many destructive possibilities, we must consider if we truly want to bring it closer to our community, families, and self, weighing out the benefits with the risks?

**What about other addictions?** When considering an addictive substance we need to consider 1) its legality 2) its potential benefits 3) its potential harms to self 4) potential harms to others and 5) its potential for control. Romans 14 is a great passage and here is a helpful handout on that passage and topic: [www.trustworthyword.com/what-does-the-bible-say-about-addictions](http://www.trustworthyword.com/what-does-the-bible-say-about-addictions)

- A food addiction can lead to obesity, which can damage one's heart and so much more.
- A smoking addiction can quickly harm one's lungs and those breathing the air around you.
- A shopping, hobby, or gambling habit can quickly consume one's finances and time.
- Workaholicism leads to family neglect. Laziness leads to poverty.
- Pornography is adultery and can short circuit a healthy sexuality within marriage.
- Alcohol abuse can damage one's liver, affect one's decisions, and endanger others.
- A marijuana or drug addiction quickly damages one's brain and ruins lives.

With any potentially addictive substance we need to consider the potential harms in light of the potential goods and make decisions that take into account the impact on our witness and the effect on the lives of others around us. In such discussions we need to avoid temptations to self-righteousness or moralism, realizing we are not saved by our own good works and it is only by God's grace we are not dominated by Satan and our own addictive inclinations.

**Did Jesus make some sort of non-alcoholic wine? Some sort of different, less-alcoholic wine? Did Jesus drink alcoholic wine? Did the disciples drink alcoholic wine?**

Jesus' first miracle involved making "good wine" that was complimented by the master of the feast and not complained about (John 2:1-11). The same greek word used here (οἶνον) is also used in other passages referring to alcoholic wine ([http://biblehub.com/greek/oionon\\_3631.htm](http://biblehub.com/greek/oionon_3631.htm)). Another greek word is synonymously used for wine in four other places by Paul but is described similarly (οἶνον [http://biblehub.com/greek/oiono\\_3631.htm](http://biblehub.com/greek/oiono_3631.htm)) with the emphasis being on moderation (Paul to Timothy to use a little for his health, 1 Timothy 5:23) and not too much or being addicted.

In Luke 7:33-44 Jesus ("The Son of Man has come eating and drinking") is distinguished from John the Baptist ("drinking no wine") and accused by the Pharisees as both a glutton and a drunkard. This distinction and accusation makes a strong suggestion that Jesus did drink alcoholic wine. There is another word used for wine (sometimes translated "sweet" or "new" wine) that appears only in Acts 2:13 (Γλεύκος [http://biblehub.com/greek/gleukous\\_1098.htm](http://biblehub.com/greek/gleukous_1098.htm)) but it is similarly referenced as alcoholic in an accusation of drunkenness.

On the cross Jesus refuses "wine mixed with myrrh" (Mark 15:23 that could have eased his pain) but receives a "sour wine" on the cross (Mark 15:36, John 19:30 that prolongs his pain and fulfilled Psalm 69:21: see - <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/the-wine-jesus-drank>) but he had already told his

disciples he would not taste the “fruit of the vine” again until He was in His Father’s Kingdom (Matthew 26:29, Mark 14:25, Luke 22:18). What is “fruit of the vine”? Could it be grape juice?

Ultimately, without pasteurization or refrigeration, grape juice begins to ferment and become alcoholic. So a freshly squeezed juice may have little or no alcohol, but otherwise outside of grape harvest time (June-September in Israel <https://www.gci.org/law/festivals/harvest>) any drink of fruit would involve fermentation and alcohol. Jesus’ crucifixion would have been late March and early April so any fruit of the vine drink preceding his crucifixion would have certainly been fermented and alcoholic.

It is wise to note that the alcohol of Jesus’ day was probably much less alcoholic by content so anyone who feels the biblical and faith-formed freedom to drink alcohol today should be extra cautious as it can lead to drunkenness more quickly than the alcohol of Jesus’ day. At the same time, any argument that the biblical references to wine is referring to a non-alcoholic substance is unfounded.

**Was wine really the only drink (or only clean drink) available to Jesus and the disciples? Did they drink it more out of necessity than choice?** Water was often plentiful in Israel. Although there were prolonged season of drought, wells (210 meters deep in Tel Beersheeva) and springs were numerous. Cisterns (underground water storage) and pools (above ground water storage) were extremely common, some of which were extremely large (a cistern in Masada held over 1 million gallons). Roman technology had developed to route water long distances through elaborate aqueduct, tunnel, and pipe systems. Israelite kings (Hezekiah especially in Siloam tunnel) had re-routed springs and built significant water storage capabilities.

Other than water and wine, many other drinks were available too. Goat, sheep, and cow’s milk was readily available year round in Israel, mentioned 50 times in the Bible. A method for unrefrigerated milk storage was even discovered as early as 2900 BC (see story of Jael in Judges 4:19 & 5:25). Grain based drinks were common. Other fruit based drinks were made or mixed with honey, figs, dates, citrons, apples (ciders), peaches, plums, apricots, balsam, and pomegranates. Stews and soups provided safe ways of hydration as well. Vinegar drinks such as “posca” (a mixture of water and vinegar along with spices and maybe egg) were common among soldiers for relieving thirst.

**Should pastors not be allowed to drink alcohol?** While there is much wisdom in those who feel personally led to abstain from wine, the Biblical qualifications for pastors and church leaders do not advocate for abstinence from alcohol but rather from drunkenness or addiction to alcohol (1 Timothy 3:3,3:8 & Titus 1:7 [http://biblehub.com/greek/paroinon\\_3943.htm](http://biblehub.com/greek/paroinon_3943.htm)). Some may point to biblical wisdom and commands against alcohol to kings and priests but ignore that this was most often connected to a voluntary (not forced) Nazarite vow (Numbers 6:1-20 or set aside similarly like John in Luke 1:15) after which they can drink wine again. Priests serving in the inner court or on duty (Leviticus 10:9 & Ezekiel 44:21) had a temporary restriction while serving. Kings were warned of using alcohol because it could lead to impairment when clear, timely, and wise decisions were needed (Proverbs 31:4). While some seminaries, denominations, and churches may require abstinence from alcohol as an act of wisdom, the Bible does not. Can pastors drink alcohol? The Bible says yes. Should pastors drink alcohol? The Bible seems to leave that up to the individual conscience of the pastor (Romans 14) and never holds to an external source of coerced abstinence.

We must be consistent. Some point to Romans 14:21 (“It is good not to eat meat or drink wine or do anything that causes your brother to stumble.”) as a reason for pastors or Christians not to drink alcoholic beverages but then steer away from the offense of meat-eating to the vegetarian. They fail to

see that the weaker position in faith is the abstention and that it revolves around false worship (Romans 14 & 1 Corinthians 8 are in view). However the next verse indicates the focus on personal faithful conviction from and accountability to God on the issue of food and drink (Romans 14:22 “The faith that you have, keep between yourself and God”). Drinking alcohol is a personal conviction.

**Why is drunkenness so serious?** Unlike some other addictions (gluttony, gambling, smoking, shopping, hobby-ism, workaholism, etc.) alcohol misuse presents a more sudden and direct harm to others through vehicular accidents, abuse, and neglect. Even more concerning, ongoing & unrepentant drunkenness is pointed to as an identification of those without salvation who are headed towards an eternity in Hell (1 Corinthians 6:9-11 & Galatians 5:19-21).

**Does the Bible say alcohol is evil? Did Jesus say alcohol is evil? If alcohol is so dangerous, why are we biblically allowed to drink it?** Throughout Scripture blame is not attributed to a substance or object, but the sin of our heart is the main concern.

- Food is not the main concern, the love of food seen in gluttony is the sin (Proverbs 23:2 & 23:20-21 and Philippians 3:19).
- Money is not the main concern, the love of money seen in greed or covetousness is the sin (1 Timothy 6:9-10).
- Carved images (idols) are not the main concern (they are nothing but wood ultimately, Isaiah 44:19 & 1 Corinthians 8:4), the love of idols seen in the making, retention, and worship of idols that is the sin (1 John 5:21 & Revelation 9:20).
- Alcohol is not the main concern, it is the love of alcohol seen in drunkenness is the sin.

So what? There is biblical wisdom in avoiding tempting substances and in avoiding it as a stumbling block in the lives of others...but the application of those truths are more personal practice than universal prohibition or universal allowance.

**Doesn't Proverbs 20:1 call wine and strong drink a sin?** This passage (“Wine is a mocker, strong drink is a brawler, and whoever is led astray by it is not wise.” Proverbs 20:1 (ESV)) is often quoted out of the context of the type of literature: a proverb. A proverb is a general truth statement and observation from which to derive wisdom. Accordingly the emphasis again is not on the substance but on not being led astray by them to where one's judgment and behavior (mocking and brawling) is influenced by the substance.

**What should I do if someone I love has a strongly different opinion than me on this issue?** Be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to get angry (James 1:19-20). Study the Scriptures together on the topic but don't let a difference of opinion become a source of division. Love the person more than winning an argument. Ask good questions. Prioritize the Gospel and the Scriptures as you talk. Reconsider your own traditions in the light of the Word. Realize the Bible grants freedom of differences on issues like food (not gluttony) and drink (not drunkenness).

**Should we use wine with the Lord's Supper/Communion?** Jesus did. The Early Church did. The vast majority of churches today still do. In 1869 that the pasteurization of grape juice was discovered by Thomas Welch, a dedicated Methodist and Prohibitionist, who made “Dr. Welch's Unfermented Wine” (grape juice) that was used by churches as for the Lord's Supper. This was the first time in history that non-alcoholic wine was documented to be used in the Lord's Supper. Is there wisdom in offering a non-alcoholic “fruit of the vine” since it is now? Could be. Is wine a better symbol and more accurate to the original Lord's Supper? Yes. Individual churches must come to their own conclusions based on their culture and the Scriptures. Consider Paul when writing to the church at Corinth on the Lord's Supper/Communion. He rebukes them for using the bread and the cup for

gluttony and drunkenness, warning that their misuse has led to sickness and death as a consequence, yet he never advocates for alcoholic abstinence or for the change of the cup to a non-alcoholic substance (1 Corinthians 11:17-34).

## **Here are some of the relevant Bible passages**

### **Alcohol brings some good:**

- Psalm 104:14–15 (ESV) “You cause the grass to grow for the livestock and plants for man to cultivate, that he may bring forth food from the earth and wine to gladden the heart of man, oil to make his face shine and bread to strengthen man's heart.”
- Proverbs 31:6–7 “Give strong drink to the one who is perishing, and wine to those in bitter distress; let them drink and forget their poverty and remember their misery no more.”
- Ecclesiastes 9:7 “Go, eat your bread with joy, and drink your wine with a merry heart, for God has already approved what you do.”
- Amos 9:14 “I will restore the fortunes of my people Israel, and they shall rebuild the ruined cities and inhabit them; they shall plant vineyards and drink their wine, and they shall make gardens and eat their fruit.”
- 1 Timothy 5:23 “No longer drink only water, but use a little wine for the sake of your stomach and your frequent ailments.”
- Luke 10:34 “He went to him and bound up his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he set him on his own animal and brought him to an inn and took care of him.”
- John 2:1–11 “On the third day there was a wedding at Cana in Galilee, and the mother of Jesus was there. [2] Jesus also was invited to the wedding with his disciples. [3] When the wine ran out, the mother of Jesus said to him, “They have no wine.” [4] And Jesus said to her, “Woman, what does this have to do with me? My hour has not yet come.” [5] His mother said to the servants, “Do whatever he tells you.” [6] Now there were six stone water jars there for the Jewish rites of purification, each holding twenty or thirty gallons. [7] Jesus said to the servants, “Fill the jars with water.” And they filled them up to the brim. [8] And he said to them, “Now draw some out and take it to the master of the feast.” So they took it. [9] When the master of the feast tasted the water now become wine, and did not know where it came from (though the servants who had drawn the water knew), the master of the feast called the bridegroom [10] and said to him, “Everyone serves the good wine first, and when people have drunk freely, then the poor wine. But you have kept the good wine until now.” [11] This, the first of his signs, Jesus did at Cana in Galilee, and manifested his glory. And his disciples believed in him.”
- Matthew 26:27–29 “And he took a cup, and when he had given thanks he gave it to them, saying, ‘Drink of it, all of you, for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. I tell you I will not drink again of this fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father's kingdom.’”

### **Misuse of Alcohol brings a lot of dangers:**

- Proverbs 20:1 “Wine is a mocker, strong drink a brawler, and whoever is led astray by it is not wise.”
- Proverbs 23:29–35 “Who has woe? Who has sorrow? Who has strife? Who has complaining? Who has wounds without cause? Who has redness of eyes? Those who tarry long over wine; those who go to try mixed wine. Do not look at wine when it is red, when it sparkles in the cup and goes down smoothly. In the end it bites like a serpent and stings like an adder. Your eyes will see strange things, and your heart utter perverse things. You will be like one who lies down in the midst of the sea, like one who lies on the top of a mast. “They struck me,” you will say, “but I was not hurt; they beat me, but I did not feel it. When shall I awake? I must have another drink.”
- Proverbs 31:4–5 “It is not for kings, O Lemuel, it is not for kings to drink wine, or for rulers to take strong drink, lest they drink and forget what has been decreed and pervert the rights of all the afflicted.”
- Rom 14:21 “It is good not to eat meat or drink wine or do anything that causes your brother to stumble.”
- Isaiah 5:11–12 “Woe to those who rise early in the morning, that they may run after strong drink, who tarry late into the evening as wine inflames them! They have lyre and harp, tambourine and flute and wine at their feasts, but they do not regard the deeds of the LORD, or see the work of his hands.”
- Isaiah 5:22 “Woe to those who are heroes at drinking wine, and valiant men in mixing strong drink”
- 1 Peter 4:3–5 “For the time that is past suffices for doing what the Gentiles want to do, living in sensuality, passions, drunkenness, orgies, drinking parties, and lawless idolatry. With respect to this they

are surprised when you do not join them in the same flood of debauchery, and they malign you; but they will give account to him who is ready to judge the living and the dead.”

- Ephesians 5:18 And do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery, but be filled with the Spirit”
- Galatians 5:19–21 “Now the works of the flesh are evident: sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these. I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.”
- 1 Corinthians 6:9–11 “Or do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor men who practice homosexuality, nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. And such were some of you. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.”

### **Use Wisdom In Your Preferences and Practices**

- 1 Corinthians 6:12 “‘All things are lawful for me,’ but not all things are helpful. ‘All things are lawful for me,’ but I will not be dominated by anything.”
- Colossians 2:16 “Therefore let no one pass judgment on you in questions of food and drink”
- Proverbs 6:27–28 “Can a man carry fire next to his chest and his clothes not be burned? Or can one walk on hot coals and his feet not be scorched?”
- Rom 13:14 “put on the Lord Jesus Christ, & make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.”
- 1 Cor 10:12–13 “Therefore let anyone who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall. No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation he will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it.”
- Jeremiah 29:7 “But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the LORD on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare.”
- Philippians 2:3-4 “Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others.”
- 1 Corinthians 8:8–9 “Food will not commend us to God. We are no worse off if we do not eat, and no better off if we do. But take care that this right of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak.”
- Romans 14:13 “Therefore let us not pass judgment on one another any longer, but rather decide never to put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of a brother.”

Check out [gotquestions.org](https://www.gotquestions.org) for some helpful perspectives on this and many other issues!

For statistics on alcohol use and misuse in America visit: <https://www.niaaa.nih.gov/alcohol-health/overview-alcohol-consumption/alcohol-facts-and-statistics>

- Alcohol generates \$223 billion annually in the US but costs \$249 billion from misuse. 10% of all kids live with a parent with alcohol problems. 88,000 people die from alcohol related causes every year. 15 million Americans have an alcohol use disorder, affecting many through neglect, abuse, and assault. Alcohol is the leading “gateway drug” into illicit drugs.

### **10 Questions to Ask When Evaluating Your Personal Practice (whether the freedom to drink or a choice to abstain) with Alcohol:**

1. **The Word’s Work:** What does the Bible say? Am I willing for my tradition & opinion to be changed and shaped by Scripture? Is my stance consistent with all Scriptures?
2. **The Prayer Test:** Have I sincerely, openly, honestly prayed about it?
3. **The Spirit’s Work:** Am I ashamed? Convicted? Should I be?
4. **Godly Counsel:** What do my godly friends and family think?
5. **Government’s Work:** Is it legal or illegal?
6. **The Transparency Test:** Am I hiding this behavior from anyone? Why?
7. **Gospel-Harm:** Does it harm my Gospel witness to others? In license or legalism?

8. **Others-Harm:** Is it helpful or harmful to others? Put others at risk or tempting them? Or am I withholding something good from them that God permits?
9. **Self-Harm:** Is it helpful or harmful to me? Is it use of time/talent/treasures?
10. **Offensive:** Does it offend others around me? Set a good example? Can I agree to disagree? Or am I trying to force my personal convictions about a debatable issue onto others?

*“All things are lawful for me,” but not all things are helpful. “All things are lawful for me,” but I will not be dominated by anything. (1 Corinthians 6:12)*

*If with Christ you died to the elemental spirits of the world, why, as if you were still alive in the world, do you submit to regulations—“Do not handle, Do not taste, Do not touch” (referring to things that all perish as they are used)—according to human precepts and teachings? These have indeed an appearance of wisdom in promoting self-made religion and asceticism and severity to the body, but they are of no value in stopping the indulgence of the flesh. (Colossians 2:20–23)*

**Here are some reasons people may genuinely have underlying their preference and practice regarding alcohol use. Do not read this in order to argue, but read to be more understanding and thoughtful concerning your own position as well as the personal convictions of others on a permissible issue.**

Romans 14:1–3 “As for the one who is weak in faith, welcome him, but not to quarrel over opinions. One person believes he may eat anything, while the weak person eats only vegetables. Let not the one who eats despise the one who abstains, and let not the one who abstains pass judgment on the one who eats, for God has welcomed him.”

### ***Reasons to Drink Alcohol***

(in no particular order)

- It is a gift from God to be enjoyed
- Taste is sweet and pleasing
- Lubricating (relaxing) effect, stress and anxiety relief, medicinal effect for body, mind, and emotions
- Social & entertainment customs
- Cultural benefit/norm in celebrations
- Emotionally uplifting
- Organic and natural
- Shown to have some health benefits
- Biblically normative throughout Old and New Testament, Jesus and disciples used
- Lord’s Supper/Communion celebration always used alcoholic wine until 1869
- More accurate depiction of Christ’s sacrifice
- Helps to appropriately relate to others
- Can be perceived as unkind and disrespectful to refuse to drink in some cultural settings
- Models moderation to others
- Instructs and demonstrates responsible drinking to children
- Personal freedom of faith

### ***Reasons to Abstain from Alcohol***

(in no particular order)

- Concern over gospel witness being compromised to some individuals
- May be tempting to others around you
- Concern over example it sets to others
- Distasteful or unenjoyable
- Desire to distance oneself from potential harm
- Can be habit forming
- Can distort reality and memory
- Dangerous with certain medicines
- Intoxicating effect limits and impairs judgment and abilities
- Drunkenness leads to damaging behaviors
- Alcohol misuse can cause aggressiveness
- Particularly temptations to overuse
- Past history of misuse and drunkenness
- Overuse can cause blackouts & death
- Liver disease and damage
- Personal conviction of faith
- Too many calories
- Expensive, not affordable beverage option
- Desire not to fund organizations that profit primarily off of drunkenness
- Personal past hurts and experiences