



PART FIVE— WHAT WINE SAYS ABOUT GOD’S GOOD CREATION

By Pastor David Fields

Psalm 104; Joel 1-3; John 2

"Behold the rain which descends from heaven upon our vineyards, there it enters the roots of the vines, to be changed into wine, a constant proof that God loves us, and loves to see us happy."¹

“He [the Lord] makes the grass grow for the cattle, and plants for the people to cultivate – bringing forth food from the earth: wine that gladdens human hearts, oil to make their faces shine, and bread that sustains their hearts.”

Psalm 104:14-16

Important Caveats

There are important warnings around alcohol in the Bible.

Most of the references in the Bible to wine are in positive terms. In many passages, it's a sign of God's blessing – on His people, on the land. It's a good gift of the good Creator God to humans.

“May God give you of the dew of heaven and of the fatness of the earth and plenty of grain and wine.”

Genesis 27:28 (NRSV).

Like any good gift, wine can be abused, twisted and used in a way it was never intended to be. Think of strength or power. These are good gifts from God, which can easily be used in corrupt and corrupting ways. What is intended to work for good in the world can easily become a tool for violence, greed and/or

self-centeredness.

There are some good and godly reasons why people make decisions they do about their relationship with alcohol.

In the New Testament we find these discussions about how to honour and care for the 'weaker' believers. As Paul says in Romans 14:20-21:

²⁰“All food is clean, but it is wrong for a person to...
²¹...eat meat or drink wine or to do anything else that will
 cause your brother or sister to fall.”

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For Paul, the well-being of the Christian community is not worth flaunting what you know you're free to do.

Wine itself is freighted with symbolic and theological significance throughout scripture. Thinking well about wine can inform our thinking and our living in ways that bring us into greater alignment with who God made us to be as humans.

I. Wine Speaks

A. Wine speaks of the goodness of God's creation

Psalm 104 presents wine as a good gift from our good God.

In the story of Israel, the presence of wine a sign that there is peace in the land. You don't plant and tend a vineyard unless you are settled and at peace. The land itself is experiencing peace – there are rains at the right time and heat at the right time.

In the prophet Joel, for example, we find that God's discipline on His people for their wickedness and rebellion includes removing from them the joy of having wine. In Joel 2, when the Lord is restoring His people after this time of discipline, listen to what the prophet announces:

“Be glad, people of Zion, rejoice in the Lord your God, for he has given you the autumn rains because he is faithful. He sends you abundant showers, both autumn and spring rains, as before. The threshing floors will be filled with grain; the vats will overflow with new wine and oil.”

Joel 2:23-24

Along with grain and oil, wine is a staple of human life – and an indication of God's blessing – that the land is at peace and working as it should.

The Blessing of Wine and the Human Experience

The fact that the Bible does speak of wine as a blessing, and that it 'gladdens human hearts,' as we read in Psalm 104, tells us there is a sort of experience linked to drinking wine that goes beyond the mere taste of it.

This, importantly, reminds us that the Christian view is not suspicious of being 'fully alive' to our embodied experience.

The Gnostic heretical view rejected wine because they rejected the goodness of the body and bodily experiences. This is not Christianity. Cyprian, for example, was a third century pastor who gives a lengthy Christian defence of wine against these false views. In defence of wine as a good gift from our good God.

God the Gift Giver

“I give a gift to someone to interact with them. The joy they experience in the gift brings me joy. Our relationship is strengthened most, however, if the joy is expressed in gratitude.”²

“Good gifts don't just do things for us, they remind us of the love we share. They are a sacrament, you might say, a visible symbol of an invisible reality. To hold the world up and say 'thank you' is to treat it as its meant to be, a place where we interact with our Father.”³

B. Wine speaks to God's redemptive plan

The prophets in the Old Testament were looking ahead to a time when God would send a King, a Rescuing Ruler – 'Messiah' was the language they used – to bring about a good and righteous kingdom. These OT prophets associate wine with God's inbreaking kingdom. Back to the book of Joel:

“In that day the mountains will drip new wine, and the hills will flow with milk; all the ravines of Judah will run with water. A fountain will flow out of the Lord's house and will water the valley of acacias.”

Joel 3:18

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Jesus turning water into wine – a sign of God's inbreaking kingdom: John 2:6-10

At one level, Jesus is being kind to the family, saving them from the shame of running out of wine. This miracle is a signal of Jesus' generosity and kindness. Jesus' ministry will be the sort that removes our shame as well.

The wedding that points to the great Wedding:

i. The sheer quantity of wine.

Equivalent to between 640 and 960 bottles of wine. It's ridiculous. It's not just about the saving the wedding feast. It's saying something about what Jesus is up to.

ii. The quality of wine.

“...Everyone brings out the choice 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

This wedding feast in Cana **is pointing to another wedding altogether.** It's pointing to what we hear Isaiah prophecy of God's new creation work:

*“On this mountain the Lord Almighty will prepare
a feast of rich food for all peoples,
a banquet of aged wine—
the best of meats and the finest of wines.”*

Isaiah 25:6

C. Wine speaks of Jesus' Atoning work

The process of wine making parallels Jesus' work of atonement:

- i. Jesus' death is described in Isaiah 53 in the sense of being 'crushed,' as grapes are crushed in a winepress. In the process of making wine, the grapes must be crushed, pressed, and squeezed of their life. Jesus experiences real death. It's not just somberness. Out of death comes new life. Jesus says of the cup of wine:

*“...I will not drink again from the fruit of the vine
until the kingdom of God comes.”*

Luke 22:18

which is a looking beyond death to His resurrection.

- ii. In the fermentation process, grapes are ‘transformed.’ They become something new, that brings joy. In a similar way, Jesus’ sacrifice for us enables our transformation. He forgives our sins, and makes it possible to experience real change. He works in us to bring about Christlikeness. The ‘joy’ that wine brings – as described in the Bible – is a hint, a signal to the kind of joy that new life in Jesus brings.
- iii. Good wines can last hundreds of years, which speaks to the eternal nature of the life Jesus promises. To quote Kreglinger, “[W]ine, like no other food, can speak to us of eternal life, life that will never end.”⁴

II. Wine and Wisdom

“Wine was given to make us cheerful, not to make us behave shamefully; to make us laugh, not a laughingstock; to make us healthy, not sick; to mend the weakness of the body, not to undermine the soul.”⁵

Wine does have a physical impact on humans – and, as we’ve said already – the Christian view isn’t to be suspicious of our lived, embodied experience. As this quote from Chrysostom notes, the need for moderation

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and wisdom is obvious. Wine does make us cheerful. Does make us laugh. And he's not afraid to say it. But he's also clear of excesses.

The Bible clearly forbids drunkenness and any excesses:

"Do not get drunk on wine, which leads to debauchery..."
Ephesians 5:18

Why does he have to say this? Because it was a normal part of life in Christian homes, and in church gatherings, to include drinking wine. But clearly, not in excess.

"In the same way deacons are to be worthy of respect, sincere, not indulging in much wine, and not pursuing dishonest gain."
1 Timothy 3:8

Again, why the warning? It was a normal part of daily life for the early church leaders to drink wine. And so, the warning is there because wine can cause drunkenness, can be addictive and can lead to poor decisions. So, church leaders are not barred from drinking, but there is a temperance they must show.

In the very same little letter, Paul also says to Timothy:

"Stop drinking only water, and use a little wine because of your stomach and your frequent illness."
1 Timothy 5:23

- Paul doesn't say, when it comes to illness: 'Just pray with more faith, and God will heal you.' No. This is basically, 'Hey, take your medicine.'
- Was Timothy was being influenced by this false teaching that had an 'anti-creation' bend, perhaps even avoiding wine as though it was a bad thing (see 1 Timothy 4:1-5)? Maybe he was, and Paul needed to pull him back from those 'anti-creation-as-good' tendencies.

What are some wise boundaries?

A. Abstinence

If you know that you have addictive tendencies, if you can't have one glass of wine – you need the whole bottle – you need to say: 'This isn't good for me to have any.' Draw that line and stick to it.

For others, it may simply be a matter of conscience. You are free not to drink! You just can't impose your views on someone else, to limit what God calls good.

B. Moderation

"Do not get drunk on wine, which leads to debauchery..."
Ephesians 5:18

What equals moderation? There is no hard and fast rule on that. It's going to be a bit subjective based on a person's body weight, their prior experience of alcohol.

When St. Benedict of Nursia, in Italy was putting his rules in place in the early 6th Century, he came to this conclusion: "Of the quantity of drink...we think one hemina of wine a day is sufficient for each one."⁶

That's about 2 glasses in today's measure. Again, that's not a recommendation. It was with hesitation that he allowed that amount, believing it to be moderate in his moment. In the surrounding culture of Italy at the time, it was likely much less than most people would drink.

C. The Company You Keep

Listen to Proverbs 23:

¹⁹ Listen, my son, and be wise,
and set your heart on the right path:
²⁰ Do not join those who drink too much wine
or gorge themselves on meat,
²¹ for drunkards and gluttons become poor,
and drowsiness clothes them in rags.
Proverbs 23:19-21

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PAGE 5



Open Up

What are the biggest indicators, in your perspective, that signal that the world is 'at peace' – that society and 'the land' is functioning well?

Within the storyline of the Bible, the abundance of wine and grain – food and drink – were indicators of God's blessing.

Dig In

1. The question of wine (or alcohol in general) within Christian circles is one of those 'hot topics' that is often filled with anxieties, family histories and religious baggage. In the community or home you grew up in, what sort of relationship did people generally have with wine/alcohol? Negative? Positive? Healthy? Unhealthy?
2. How has your background impacted your current thoughts and feelings?
3. Read Joel 2:23-24. Grain and wine – food and drink – were central indicators of God's kindness, His grace toward the people of Israel. What are those indicators of God's kindness in your life that you can turn back to God in praise? How might food, or wine, or some other blessing, be like that for you or your family?
4. In the message we saw how the wine-making process parallels Jesus' own work of atonement – of bringing us back to God. How might reflecting on that enrich your experience of taking communion?
5. We looked at a number of boundaries around wine/alcohol, including the options of abstaining entirely, of moderation, of keeping company that doesn't lead you astray, and of drinking in community. Take time to discuss further the kinds of wisdom you want to apply in your own approach.

Prayer:

Take time to thank God that He gave us the gift of bodies that help us relate well with Him, and each other. Give thanks for the good gifts He has given for us to enjoy. Pray for any of the particular needs your group has.