



ALCOHOL CAUSES LOSS OF CONTROL: "LIES DOWN IN THE MIDST OF THE SEA"

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In the same way that Jesus used everyday objects and activities to illustrate truth in parables, Bible writers were inspired to use common themes from life to deepen our understanding of truth. Sometimes a word picture connects people to a truth they might have otherwise discarded.

This is especially true when someone struggles with a particular sin. We are all much more apt to listen to God's warnings if we can see a memorable illustration of them. Once the word picture is imbedded, we find it nearly impossible to see that everyday object and forget what God was saying. We can always reject the warning, as some did with Jesus (Mt. 13:10-17 NKJV), but for those with an unseared conscience, illustrations prove powerful in swaying us to God's side.

God employs both literal and figurative language about alcohol. Sometimes, he skips the metaphor and straightly condemns taking intoxicants into the body (Eph. 5:18; Prov. 20:1). He places consuming alcohol in a list of other sins that are evident to all (Gal. 5:19-21). Such plain language takes the issue out of the realm of debate (or at least it should). At other times, he uses word pictures to warn us away from things that keep us out of heaven. This is certainly true for alcohol. God uses many metaphors, including the picture of the sea and the known dangers of it.

Anyone familiar with boating, even if only on a local lake or river, knows that it is a dangerous activity, in spite of its joys. Lifejackets are required on boats for a reason. The greater the depth of the water and the more violent it is, the greater the chance for serious harm or death. Awareness is always mandatory, but a calm lake is much safer than the sea. Even the best captain may struggle to keep a vessel steady in the

violent waves and strong currents of oceans. A false move can capsize a boat and leave people stranded in deep waters. History is full of tragic examples, such as the *Titanic* and the *Andrea Gail*.

Using the strength of that word picture, God connects the use of alcohol with the danger of the sea. Solomon wrote, "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" (Prov. 23:34). Having already exposed the sheer foolishness of thinking alcohol can be controlled (20:1), he offers a sharp rebuke and a warning to abstain from it (23:29-35). His reference to the sea is a lesson showing intoxicating beverages cause a loss of control.

The Meaning of the Passage/Context

The greater context of Solomon's words provides the sharpest rebukes of alcohol in the Bible and specifically warns us to stay away from it. His words, "Do not look on the wine when it is red" (Prov. 23:31), remind us of the obvious truth if we do not look at it, or touch it, we will not drink it.

This is the force of Solomon's inspired rule. Do not look at the alcohol, and you will not drink it. His argument is simple and powerful. Stay away from alcohol. To reinforce the point, he next appeals to reason. Alcohol is dangerous; the prohibition from God is for our own good. God wants what is best for us. Since he is sovereign, holy, and knows all things, he is must also be the one who decides what is right and wrong. He tells us to abstain from alcohol, and he deepens our appreciation for the many ways it can hurt those he loves.

The first picture related to the sea is "like one who lies down in the midst of the sea" (Prov. 23:34). This picture of the sea's

midst is similar to the one drawn when Jonah was swallowed by a great sea creature and taken into the deep (Jonah 2:1-9). This eerie scene shows that, while the sea is dangerous altogether, some parts are exceedingly more dangerous. A boat that crashes near the shore does not present the same level of danger as the boat that loses control in the heart of the sea. Men should be more alert when the level of danger is highest. Yet, the drinking man is asleep. He is oblivious to the danger. Assuming he is the pilot of his small vessel, which Solomon seems to imply, he is drifting straight for catastrophe without a clue as to the ruin that awaits. His drunken stupor has made him ignorant of the impending doom.

The second picture is of the man that “lies at the top of the mast” (Prov. 23:34). A small rock of the boat on the deck is different than the rocking of the boat at the mast. The higher one is from the deck’s surface, the more dangerous his position. The mast experiences more movement than any other part of the boat. Masts were not only smaller in that day but they also lacked many of the safety mechanisms of today’s boats. There was always the danger of a man falling from the mast, even when he was trying his best to survive. This man, however, is asleep (passed out) on the mast from his association with wine. He is bound to be tossed into the sea and perish because he has no capacity to resist. He has lost control.

This is part of God’s case against alcohol. Why would we choose to be in league with something that causes us to lose control? We abstain from it. None of us can be in league with a thing that, by its nature, destroys people physically, mentally, and spiritually and then wonder why we were mangled by it. Alcohol dulls people to the dangers of the sea and then tosses them into the deep. It does not throw out a life-line and then beg for us to grab on. It turns its back and moves on to the next victim. God is showing us in a picture why alcohol must be rejected. To borrow words from Solomon’s earlier argument, we cannot control it (Prov. 20:1). We are foolish if we think we can.

Alcohol Causes a Loss of Control

This metaphor of the sea is a powerful illustration of the devastating effects of alcohol. We can never forget that alcohol is a drug, and all drugs affect the body in some way. Here are two examples for us to consider:

Impairment. The sleep of the man on the boat obviously refers to his unconscious state caused by alcohol. Once ingested, the impact of the drug is experienced immediately. This should cause us to reevaluate any argument that lends support to the casual use of intoxicants, minus a legitimate medical condition (1 Tim. 5:23). The reality is that alcohol impairs bodily function.

Specifically, alcohol affects the prefrontal cortex of the brain. This is the part of the brain responsible for decision-making. When alcohol enters the blood stream and makes its way through the body, a cascade of effects transpires quickly, both mentally and physiologically. Researchers have confirmed repeatedly that this happens with even small amounts of alcohol ingestion. As a standard, most accept that intoxication occurs with the ingestion of as little as one tenth of one percent of alcohol and that “many are under the influence in the 5/100 of one percent range” (*Journal of the American Medical Association*). This means that the entry of only a drop or two of alcohol disrupts normal functions. Only a small percentage of the drug is processed through sweat and urine. Most passes through the liver, which means the body must metabolize it to rid the drug from its systems. There is simply no way to ingest alcohol without experiencing its altering effects.

The state standards for driving and blood alcohol content (BAC) are only the standards for drinking and driving based on the approved measures of each state. They are not indications of the moment alcohol affects the body. For example, a state with a BAC standard of .10 percent for driving under the influence (DUI) does not mean that a person is affected by alcohol only at the moment they reach a .10 percent BAC. “Indications are that .005 percent is about the smallest concentration of alcohol in the blood which can be measured in terms of its effect on some areas of the brain” (Jeffcoat, 99). This requires roughly .14 of a standard drink (1.5 oz of 80 proof spirits). This is a little over a teaspoon of alcohol. It is significantly below the typical “buzz” threshold of .02 percent. The decision-making center of the body is impacted with the introduction of only a teaspoon of alcohol.

“The whole body is affected by alcohol use—not just the liver, but also the brain, gut, pancreas, lungs, cardiovascular system, immune system, and more” (<https://www.niaaa.nih.gov>).

Studies are now showing a link between alcohol and cancer. However, its first and confirmed victim is the brain’s impulse control. Without sobriety, our ability to assess risk, make sound decisions, and coordinate between regions of the brain are all disrupted. This is not just an issue of operating a vehicle. Alcohol operates as a depressant drug. Once normal functions are suppressed, a person is apt to lose balance, slur speech, forget important details, decide a course of action against their better senses, experience a delay in their motor skills, have severe mood-swings, feel physically or mentally exhausted, and trend toward violent behavior.

When one chooses to ingest intoxicating beverages, he charts the course of fools. Willful impairment of our senses is as dangerous as a man asleep on a boat drifting toward the midst of the sea or falling asleep on the mast of the ship.

Immorality. As expected, a person with dulled senses tends to make poor moral choices. History shows that alcohol and immorality tend to be bedfellows and that the first is usually a catalyst for the second. Even in Scripture, alcohol and immorality go hand-in-hand. Is there any wonder why God condemned intoxicants in the wake of Nadab and Abihu's deaths? (Lev. 10:1-9). Do we remember the time a group of drunken men asked Queen Vashti to "show her beauty"—perhaps meaning to parade through the court wearing only her crown? (Est. 1:10-22). Would Lot have been involved in incest if not first made drunk? (Gen. 19:30-38). Even Noah was left exposed in his tent naked after consuming alcohol (Gen. 9:18-29). Alcohol leaves people "asleep on ships," oblivious to the dangers of "the sea."

Recently, a group of researchers from the University of Silesia explored the connection between alcohol and immoral behavior. After establishing strict control guidelines between the non-intoxicated group and the intoxicated group, the answer was revealed quickly and clearly in the test. The study concluded:

Intoxicated participants showed a greater willingness to consider engaging in impure behaviors, such attending an event where participants act like animals, crawling around naked and urinating on stage . . . Drunk people want to do more immoral things than sober people . . . These findings are intriguing and offer a fresh perspective on the relationship between alcohol intoxication and moral judgment. The study suggests that even a single alcoholic drink can

influence individuals' perceptions of right and wrong, potentially making them more open to engaging in behaviors they might otherwise consider immoral (Dolan, 2023).

If this is the case, why would we subject ourselves to a loss of control and open the door for the potential of unholy behavior? This is why God warns so often of the dangers of alcohol. No one can control it (Prov. 20:1), and the end of it is ruin (Prov. 23:29-35).

Conclusion

In Solomon's word picture, all of us are on a ship travelling across the seas of life. The implication of his warning is that we are meant to maintain our awareness through dedication toward God and self-restraint. Sobriety is the way of Christ. Some, though, chose rather to sleep on the ship or on the mast while oblivious to danger. Life and death are in the balance. Which will we choose?

REFERENCES

Scripture quotations are from the NKJV unless otherwise noted.

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