

The Bible and Alcohol

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THE Bible is never out of date. Though coming down to us from a civilisation very different in many respects from our own, its words are as vital as ever. The face of the world has changed, but the heart of man is the same, the vices that corrupt human society are the same, and the Bible must always be listened to as the wisest interpretation of human life.

ALCOHOL A MENACE.

What, then, has it to say about alcohol? It lays down no law; but it frankly recognizes alcohol to be a menace of the very gravest kind to individual and social well-being. Isaiah gives a diagnosis, which sounds curiously modern, of the evils from which the society of his day was suffering (v. 8-23); and along with the land-grabbing, which crowded out the poor, he sets intemperance. In those days, as in these, the drink problem was ever present, recognized by the nobler men of the time as a national disgrace and curse (v. 11-22).

Nothing could be more graphic than the well-known description in Proverbs xlii. 22-25 of the drunken man as a fusion to which drink reduces its victim. His red eyes proclaim his dissipation; on the slightest provocation he grows quarrelsome, his tongue runs away with him, his brain is confused, his imagination runs riot, he behaves like a helpless idiot, and his only desire is to get back to his debauch again. The realism of the picture is almost painful, and the phenomenon must have been as familiar then in certain quarters as it is to-day.

DRINK INCAPACITATES.

The Bible is well aware of the power of drink to incapacitate a man from duty. The priests were strictly forbidden to touch it before entering upon their official duties: "Drink no wine nor strong drink, thou, nor thy sons with thee, when ye go into the tent of meeting" (Lev. x. 9, cf. Ezek. xlii. 21). Neither shall any of the priests drink wine when they enter into the inner court. For the discharge of duties so solemn and responsible, the priest must have his brain absolutely clear. And is not this just as true of every other worker and every other sphere? The ancient law-giver knew, as everybody who looks about him knows, that drink affects a man's nerve, his coolness, his self-control, and where the steady hand, the clear, alert mind are needed, the farther drink is removed the better.

This applies to everybody who really cares for his work; for applies even to those who wish to shine in sport. All good work, all fine play needs concentration; and this is always imperilled and may easily be destroyed by indulgence in intoxicants. But it is quite certain that abstinence never made a hand less steady or a brain less clear. Abstinence, then, is surely the safer course—indeed the only absolutely safe course—for those who are anxious to do their work well; it may even become a duty, when the life or the happiness of others depends upon the way that work is done.

DESTROY'S JUDGMENT.

Frequently the Bible emphasizes the power of drink to interfere with a man's judgment, to lead him to forget himself and to say and do things that in his sober moods he would never dream of saying and doing. "Wine," says Hosea (iv. 11) "takes away the understanding," robs a man of his wits. Drink throws him off his guard; it temporarily dethrones the reason which he always

needs for the wise control of his conduct and speech, and which he should never voluntarily be without for one moment—unless he has no objection to making a fool of himself.

I have seen one of the most brilliant students in Oxford drunkenly career around a room, sweeping every ornament that came within reach of his arms on to the floor. That is not the sort of conduct by which one would like to be remembered, and yet that is always an easy possibility for those who temper with strong drink in any form. Alcohol has the fatal power of dragging a man's speech and conduct far below their natural level. Many a time, too, by weakening his power and his usefulness, it has dragged the man himself down inch by inch from his place in society, and has ended, as the Bible says, by clothing him in rags. (Prov. xxiii. 21.)

STRIKING PICTURES.

The prophets give us one or two astonishingly realistic pictures of Hebrew carousals which show how completely the love of strong drink had destroyed all regard for the social welfare in the hearts of the leaders of political and religious life in those days. With a few sharp strokes of his drastic pen, Amos draws for us a company of indolent nobles, stretching themselves on their couches, eating the daintiest fare, drinking wine by the bowlful, and accompanying their revelry with songs and music; the description significantly ends that they are not grieved for the affliction of Joseph, "that is, of the nation (v. 4-6). For the moral decay of the people and the ruin which was impending, those men cared nothing at all. The bowlfuls of wine, and the disregard of the welfare of the people—these things go fittingly together. Strong drink indulged in, drowns a man's interest in everything but his appetite and its satisfaction; the proof of that is in many a ruined home. The money with which the drink was procured was often sold in these days to relieve the poor (Amos iv. 1.) just as many a man gets it to-day by defrauding his wife and children.

REPULSIVE DEGRADATION.

Isaiah also presents us with a picture of quite repulsive realism—priests and prophets, the men in charge of Israel's religious life, staggering beside their filthy tables and hopelessly unfit for the discharge of their professional duties (xxviii. 7-8). Here again we see the power of drink to blind a man to the most sacred obligations. There is a warning picture, not unlike Amos's, of men rising early to go after drink, and sitting late inflamed with it; and to the description Isaiah, like Amos, significantly adds: "but they regard not the word of Jehovah, neither do they consider the operation of His hands" (v. 11-12).

The men given to drink suffer from blurred eyes in more senses than one; they do not see and they do not care what God is doing in human life. Is this not a profoundly true diagnosis of the power of drink to harden the better nature, to destroy the religious sense? Of this indulgence, no less surely than of another, it might well be said, "It hardens a' within, and petrifies the feeling."

THE MODERN THEORY.

"But"—the moderate temper may say—"the ruinous effects of alcohol so graphically described by the Bible are due to its being taken in excess. I am

safe, because I am temperate." This might easily be disputed, for even a little alcohol taken regularly into the system subtly but surely deteriorates it; yet even if it were true that alcohol was dangerous only when taken in excess, it would still, for two reasons, be wisdom to abstain.

INDULGENCE DANGEROUS.

First, for our own sake. Nobody would deliberately choose to make himself ridiculous, to injure his brain, to destroy his nerve, to wrong those depending upon him, or to ruin his career. Yet that is just what hundreds of thousands have done. We may be quite sure that they did not intend or even expect to do these things, but they did them; and they did them because they took their first glass. Had the first glass never been taken, these things would never have happened.

The man who ends by being a drunkard did not begin by meaning to be one; and what happened to one man who thought he could be moderate may happen to any other man who thinks he can be moderate. If the practice be begun no man can tell what the end may be—often it has been sorrow and sometimes death; but the way of abstinence cannot but be the way of safety and happiness. It is quite certain that nobody ever looked back with remorse upon years of abstinence. At best, moderation might be safe, but abstinence cannot but be.

FOR THE SAKE OF OTHERS.

But secondly, abstinence is worth while for the sake of others. A conscientious man always tries to avoid the influence of his conduct upon others, and he should be ready to divest himself of liberties which another following his example, might abuse to his destruction. Are we not, in some real sense, brethren? And if so, must we not care, to the point of sacrifice, for one another's welfare? The man whom drink has led astray is, in the solemn words of Paul, "the brother for whom Christ died." Are we not to consider him at all? Is our appetite more to us than his happiness and safety? And if it is, can we call ourselves Christian men? Have we even the right to call him brother?

Nothing is more certain than that tens of thousands have been and are being ruined by drink—in purse, body, mind and soul; and can we, with a pure conscience, and before God, countenance the thing which has wrought society so deadly a blow, and hurled to destruction so many brethren for whom Christ died? Not so Paul. "It is good," he said, "not to eat flesh nor to drink wine, nor to do anything whereby thy brother stumbleth" (Rom. xiv. 21). "Wherefore, if meat cause my brother to stumble, I will eat no flesh for evermore" (1 Cor. viii. 13).

We know that drink causes many a brother most fatally to stumble—a walk through the streets on Saturday night will furnish sorrowfully abundant proof of that; and what selflessness hinders us all from adapting the immortal words of the Apostle, and making his vow our own—"Since intoxicating drink causes so many of my brethren to stumble, I will not touch it for evermore"—*The Pioneer*.

Those men who destroy a healthful constitution of body by intemperance, as manifestly kill themselves as those who hang, or poison, or drown themselves.—*Sherlock*.