

DRUNKENNESS AND OTHER DANGERS

SERIES: CHOOSE WISELY



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Proverbs 23:19–35
Third Message
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Today, we will be continuing our summer series in the book of Proverbs—a series Scott Grant began two weeks ago. Proverbs is, of course, a very practical book, a book that focuses on application. It focuses on applying God's wisdom to our daily lives and on genuinely living out our faith as we encounter the day-to-day challenges, temptations, and struggles of life. It is a book showing us how to walk the walk and not just talk the talk.

As many of you probably know, I am the recovery pastor here at Peninsula Bible Church. I work with alcoholics and drugs addicts, as well as with people who are battling a host of other addictions and dependencies—addictions to pornography, tobacco, gambling, shopping, food, video games, and cell phones, to name a few. Drunkenness, intoxication, and addiction are, of course, nothing new. In fact, the first mention of drunkenness in the Bible is in Genesis 9, when Noah became drunk and ended up lying naked in his tent.

Also, in Genesis 19, Lot's daughters made him drunk, had sex with him, and became pregnant. Sadly, alcohol impairment still results in unwanted sex today. According to *The Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 62% of unwanted sex in the United States occurs when there is alcohol impairment¹, so little appears to have changed since Lot's day.

As I said, our summer series is the book of Proverbs, and, as you've no doubt begun to suspect, the subject of today's passage is drunkenness, intoxication, and addiction. In particular, we will be looking at Proverbs 23:29-35, which is probably the best-known passage in the Bible describing drunkenness and warning against it. It is also a passage that I hope will remind us of how contemporary and relevant the Bible continues to be. As the old saying goes, the more things change, the more they stay the same. Or, as the even older saying goes, "What has been is what will be, and what has been done is what will be done, and there is nothing new under the sun" (Ecclesiastes 1:9).

In case you are perhaps wondering about the extent of alcohol, drugs, and other addictions in modern

American society, I want to give you a few statistics that compare the casualties in the current War on Drugs with the casualties in some of America's military wars. The statistics come from the Center for Disease Control and the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs. I am not citing these statistics to in any way diminish the sacrifices of those in our military. I am merely trying to highlight the dimensions of the conflict in which we are currently engaged—a conflict that I believe we are failing to clearly understand and successfully fight.

According to the CDC, 63,632 Americans died from drug overdoses in 2016, two-thirds from opiates.² That is roughly 174 per day, seven per hour, or one every eight minutes. By comparison, according to the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, in the entire Vietnam War, there were 58,220 American deaths³—5412 fewer than occurred in 2016 from drug overdoses. In other words, there are now more deaths each year in the United States from drug overdoses than in the entire Vietnam War.

In addition, each year, there are 88,000 alcohol-related deaths in the United States.⁴ By comparison, in the Korean War, there were 36,574 American deaths.⁵ Which is to say, each year more than twice as many people die from alcohol as died in the entire Korean War. As for tobacco-related deaths, cigarette smoking now kills 480,000 Americans every year.⁶ In World War 2, there were 405,399 American deaths⁷—nearly 75,000 fewer than from cigarettes.

Combining these statistics: the reality is, drug overdoses, alcohol, and cigarette smoking are currently killing more Americans every year than were killed in the entire Vietnam War, twice the Korean War, and all of World War 2 put together. To picture this horrific toll in different terms, the population of Palo Alto in 2016 was 67,024. That means every year nine cities the size of Palo Alto are being completely annihilated by drugs, alcohol, and tobacco. Moreover, to add to the tragedy, the CDC classifies all of these as 'preventable deaths'. They are deaths that could have been prevented, deaths that did not need to occur.

With this grim picture in view, let us turn to the book of Proverbs and read what the Scriptures have to say. Let us see what drunkenness, intoxication, and addiction look like from God's perspective.

The end of the story

Our passage begins with the end of the story. It begins with a depiction of the final state of those whose lives have become controlled by alcohol—or at least the final state before death.

Proverbs 23:29-30:

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.

Part of the challenge with drunkenness, intoxication, and addiction, as well as with sin generally, is that the end usually isn't evident at the beginning. The end of the story, as we observe here, is a complete disaster. It is a place of woe, sorrow, strife, complaining, wounds without cause, and redness of eyes. Unfortunately, more often than not, the story doesn't appear disastrous at the start. In fact, the road to disaster often begins by looking like the road to paradise. It can begin by looking like the road we've always wanted to go down.

In the Recovery ministry, we say that there are three phases to addiction: the fun phase, the fun plus problems phase, and the problems phase. In my own case, it took about ten years to go from phase one to phase three—to go from the fun phase to the problems phase. For some people, the story unfolds much more quickly, like it did for a man who half-jokingly told me that he went from the fun phase to the problems phase in about twenty minutes. For others, the story can take decades. Whatever the case, the final destination is eventually the same.

As I said, the road to addiction usually begins by being fun. If it weren't fun, no one would go down it. For me, my college years at UC Santa Barbara were mostly spent in the fun phase. I went from one party to the next and somehow made it to most of my classes. Strange as it might sound, I actually did fairly well as a hungover philosophy major even glorifying the idea of

studying philosophy while drunk or high. One of my favorite works in philosophy was Plato's *Symposium*, which records Socrates' discussion about love while he and his friends were at a drinking party, and I decided to follow Socrates' example.

Not surprisingly, after graduating from college, my fun quickly became mixed with problems. The Bank of Mom and Dad closed (which is to say, my parents stopped supporting me), and I moved from Santa Barbara to Berkeley where I became a street artist selling jewelry on Telegraph Avenue. Most of the money I made, which wasn't much, went into buying drugs and alcohol, and life increasingly became a struggle. In my better moments, I realized I was heading in a bad direction, but I thought I could control my drinking and drug use, so I didn't make any effort to change.

To make a long story short, after a ten-year downhill journey, I became the person pictured in Proverbs. I reached the bottom, reached the end. I arrived at the third phase—the problems phase—where all the fun was gone, and nothing was left but sorrow, woe, and redness of eyes. Like the Prodigal Son in the pigpen, the party was over, the money was gone, and I found myself in a horrible place, a place I never imagined I would be.

Proverbs shows us the end of the story first. It shows us the end of the road for those who 'tarry long over wine'. No doubt, the hope is to deter us from heading down such a disastrous road to begin with. If we know the bridge is out ahead, it seems reasonable we will avoid traveling in that direction. A bit later, we'll talk about why this doesn't always work—about why warning signs don't always serve as a deterrent. However, for the moment, let me begin by introducing two complicating factors into the discussion about alcohol.

First, the Bible never forbids drinking alcohol. The Bible never says that drinking alcohol is a sin. Jesus' first miracle was to turn water into wine (John 2:1-11), and, contrary to what some have maintained, I don't believe he turned it into Welch's grape juice or into some version of wine with essentially no alcohol content. The wine we read about in Scripture can unquestionably get people drunk, and there is no commandment not to drink it.

Rather, what the Bible repeatedly and strongly warns against is drunkenness (Proverbs 20:1, Proverbs 23:20-21, Isaiah 5:11, Romans 13:13, Galatians 5:19-21, Ephesians 5:18, 1 Peter 4:3). Indeed, in Galatians 5:19-21, drunkenness is included on the list of "works of the flesh," about which Paul says, "I warn you, as I

warned you before, that those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God” (Galatians 5:21). Later we will talk more specifically about what ‘counts as’ drunkenness. However, for now, the main point is this: the Bible does not forbid drinking alcohol but sternly warns against drunkenness.

As for the second complicating factor, the truth is, some people are unable to stop drinking before they become drunk. They are unable to ‘put the plug in the jug,’ as we say in the recovery ministry. For such people—people whose drinking invariably leads to drunkenness—it would be best not to drink at all. It would be best if they abstained from alcohol altogether. Sadly, many people imagine that they can control their drinking—that they can drink without getting drunk—but, as their friends and family can attest, this simply is not the case.

Scripture strongly warns against drunkenness, but, to complicate matters, it doesn’t forbid drinking alcohol. And, to further complicate matters, some people are unable to stop drinking alcohol without getting drunk, and for such people it would be wise if they didn’t drink at all.

The great deception

After showing us the end of the story, the next verses show us both the beginning and the end. They show us both the fun phase and the problems phase. They are also in the form of a commandment, declaring:

Proverbs 23:31-32:

**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.**

In the beginning, wine looks good and tastes good, but in the end, it bites like a poisonous snake. What I believe is being suggested in these verses, if not explicitly stated, is the idea of deception. The problem with alcohol, drugs, and other potential sources of intoxication and addiction lies in their ability to deceive us. Our senses tell us one thing, but our senses, unfortunately, can be misled. Our senses, as it turns out, are not always a reliable guide for determining what is in our own long-term best interest. Moreover, the Scriptures are alerting us to our inherent susceptibility to being fooled.

This is related to what the Bible calls “the deceitfulness of sin” (Hebrews 3:13). Sin can deceive us into thinking that it is a source of life when it is ultimately a source of death. Sin is like the Trojan horse, which was brought into the city of Troy without the inhabitants realizing that it contained enemy soldiers—soldiers who came out at night, opened the city gate, and brought about the city’s destruction. Troy was conquered by means of deception, and sin attempts to conquer us by using this same strategy.

Although admittedly debatable, I believe the image of a poisonous snake in these verses serves as a reminder of the serpent in the Garden of Eden. The serpent employed deception, apparently drawing attention to the forbidden fruit being a delight to the eyes and desirable to make one wise (Genesis 3:6). Like the wine sparkling in the cup, the forbidden fruit was pleasing to look at and, I suspect, went down smoothly as well.

Throughout human history, deception and lies have been among the devil’s main tools for persuading people that evil is good. As it says in 2 Corinthians 11:14, “Satan disguises himself as an angel of light,” and, as Jesus himself declares, the devil is “the father of lies” (John 8:44). The devil doesn’t make people get drunk, any more than he made Adam and Eve eat the forbidden fruit. Rather, he uses lies, disguises, and deception to persuade us into making choices that bring about our own harm. He convinces us that the wrong road is the right road, and in our deluded condition, we freely chose to walk down a road with a bridge out ahead.

The way, of course, to combat lies, disguises, and deception is with the truth. In the face of misleading information conveyed to us by our senses and in the face of the Evil One’s enticements, we need to cling to what God has declared. Jesus tells us, “Your word is truth.” (John 17:17). God’s word is the truth we need to hold onto, even when our senses and the devil are trying to convince us otherwise. As we are told in Ephesians 6, if we are to be victorious in the battle against evil, we need to wield “the sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God.”

Jesus himself gives us an example of how to do this—of how to use the truth of Scripture to overcome the lies of the Evil One. In a passage usually known as The Temptation in the Wilderness (Matthew 4:1-11, Luke 4:1-13) Jesus repeatedly responds to the devil’s temptations by quoting Scripture. He responds three times with the words “It is written”—“It is written, ‘Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord,’” “It is written, ‘You

shall not put the Lord your God to the test,” and “It is written, ‘You shall worship the Lord your God and him only shall you serve.’”

Similarly, when we see the wine sparkling in the cup and beginning to exert its deceptive power over us, we need to remember what is written. We need to remember the truth and the wisdom of scripture. We need to remember that God’s word has warned us and commanded us, “Do not look at the wine when it is red, when it sparkles in the cup.” In other words, whenever the allurements of alcohol is starting to captivate us—starting to take us captive—we need to disengage as quickly as possible. We need to distance ourselves before it is too late. Otherwise, like the fish that looks too long at the bait, the chances of our getting caught are almost certain.

This can lead to a number of questions. For example, how do we know when alcohol is beginning to exert its power over us? How do we determine when we’re in danger of ‘getting caught’? And what exactly ‘counts as’ drunkenness anyway?

The painful effects

Again, sadly, the answers are not always easy to discern. With alcohol, the line between enough and too much isn’t always readily apparent. However, in the following verses, scripture provides some indicators. It describes the effects of excessive alcohol and lists some of the characteristics of drunkenness. We read:

Proverbs 23:33-35a:

**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.”**

All these effects—all these characteristics of drunkenness—come under the general heading of impairment. Excessive alcohol consumption increasingly has an impairing effect. According to one of the online dictionaries, the definition of ‘impair’ is: “to weaken or damage something (especially a human faculty or function)”. Also, the etymology of ‘impair’ is a Latin word (*pejor*) meaning ‘worse’. At a certain point, the effect of alcohol is to weaken, damage, and make worse.

Alcohol increasingly impairs a person, which is why the Bible warns against it.

Specifically, in these verses, we are told that drunkenness impairs a person in three ways. It has three effects—effects that fall into the categories of distortion, disorientation, and dissociation.

To begin with, alcohol causes distortions. It causes distortions in the way we see things, the way we feel about things, and the way we talk about things. As it says, “Your eyes will see strange things, and your heart will utter perverse things.” No, I don’t believe that alcohol will necessarily make a person see pink elephants and unicorns. Alcohol very rarely produces hallucinations. Instead, alcohol increasingly causes distorted perceptions about situations, which in turn cause distorted feelings, which in turn cause distorted talk. As Jesus said, “Out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks.” (Matthew 12:34).

A friend of mine once became drunk at a restaurant and then climbed onto a table, began jumping up and down, and yelling, “I’m king of the barbarians! I’m king of the barbarians!” Clearly, he had a distorted perception of reality, and when the police arrived things only got worse. He attacked a large police officer, and, as might be expected, his reign as the king of the barbarians quickly came to an end. Even more tragically, some years later, he was found dead with a bottle of cheap wine, lying under a porch in Santa Monica.

In addition to distortions, alcohol causes disorientation. As it says, “You will be like one who lies down in the midst of the sea, like one who lies down on the top of the mast.” If you’ve ever been on a sailboat in the midst of rolling seas or ever been seasick, you’ll have an idea what drunkenness is like. There’s disorientation and disequilibrium. Your ability to navigate through your surroundings and to respond effectively becomes more and more impaired.

In California, when a person’s blood alcohol concentration is 0.08% or higher, he or she is legally drunk. At that point, in the eyes of the law, a person is no longer competent to be driving a motor vehicle—no longer competent to be navigating the highways and byways. People sometimes ask, “How much can I drink before my blood alcohol concentration reaches 0.08%? How much can I drink before I shouldn’t be driving?” The question is a bit like asking, “How close to the edge of the cliff can I dance before I fall over?” Which is to say, the question itself already suggests a desire to live as dangerously as possible.

However, to answer the question, the amount of alcohol a person can drink before becoming legally intoxicated varies widely from person to person, depending on such factors as weight, medications being taken, ‘chugging’ versus ‘sipping’, drinking on an empty stomach versus drinking on a full stomach, overall health, and even gender.⁸ In other words, if two people drink the same amount of alcohol, one person might reach a blood alcohol concentration of 0.08%, and the other might not. One person might become too impaired to drive, and another might not.

Along with distortion and disorientation, excessive alcohol consumption can cause dissociation. It can cause a break with reality—a break that may include a failure to feel or remember. As it says, “‘They struck me,’ you will say, ‘but I was not hurt; they beat me but I did not feel it.’ Sometimes an intoxicated person passes out entirely. Other times he or she might be a blackout drunk—a drunk who continues to function while intoxicated but later remembers little or nothing about what happened. It’s like the alcoholic who came to church one Sunday with a terrible black eye and a swollen face. When I asked him what had happened, he shrugged and simply said, ‘I might have gotten in a fight.’ While drunk, he had become disconnected from reality and was left physically injured and in a state of amnesia.

Distortion, disorientation, and dissociation: these are the forms of impairment that can occur as more and more alcohol is consumed. These are the ways intoxication can damage, weaken, and worsen a person’s life. It’s a terrible picture—a picture that should deter any reasonable person from pursuing such a life. And yet, as we will see in the final verse of this morning’s passage, addiction is not reasonable. Indeed, there is a dimension to addiction that is often completely resistant to reason.

The road to addiction

After describing the horrible effects of drunkenness, the passage concludes with the unexpected words:

Proverbs 23:35b:

When shall I awake?

I must have another drink.

Why would someone have another drink after suffering the effects we just heard about? Why would someone continue to engage in behaviors that are referred to in recovery circles as “suicide on the installment plan”—killing yourself one drink or one

drug at a time? A more reasonable concluding verse would be, “When shall I awake? I will never drink again!” However, like I said, addiction is anything but reasonable and certainly anything but wise.

In Alcoholics Anonymous, alcoholism is said to be “cunning, baffling, and powerful.”⁹ Painful experiences generally don’t serve as a deterrent; information, reason, good intentions, and willpower usually don’t provide a way out. The truth is, addiction is stronger than we are. In and of ourselves, we don’t have what it takes to overcome addiction. We don’t have the ability to recover from the serpent’s bite.

This inability is the realization of Step 1 of AA: “We admitted we were powerless over alcohol—that our lives had become unmanageable.” The short version is simply, “I can’t.” The road to victory over alcoholism and other addictions begins with an unlikely and counter-intuitive admission of defeat. It begins with an admission of personal powerlessness, an admission of “I can’t.” Until there is a genuine realization of inadequacy and powerlessness, a person will continue to repeat the words, “When shall I awake? I will have another drink.” A person will remain in the bondage of addiction.

Thankfully, Step 2 of AA begins to provide some hope. Step 2 says, “Came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.” The short version is simply, “He can.” I can’t overcome addiction, but He can. I don’t have what it takes to overcome addiction, but a Power great than myself—namely God—does. As one of the sayings in recovery puts it, “God can do for us what we could not do for ourselves.”

Knowing theoretically that God can help—that God has the potential to help—is, of course, different from actually receiving help. God has the power to overcome alcoholism and other addictions, but, from a practical standpoint, how does that happen? How does one receive divine help, real help? How does one genuinely gain freedom from addiction to alcohol, drugs, pornography, gambling, video games, tobacco, and so many other things?

Step 3 of AA contains the answer, or at least a crucial beginning of the answer. Step 3 says, “Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God as we understood him.” The short version is simply, “I’ll let Him.” To receive God’s help—in order for his divine power to begin breaking the chains of addiction and begin healing people from the snakebite of addiction—it is first necessary to turn our will and our lives over to a

Power greater than ourselves. As it is often expressed, we need to “Let go and let God.” We need to let God take charge, rather than seeking to be in charge ourselves.

And how does that happen? How do we turn our will and our lives over to the care of God? In John chapter 3, Jesus talks with Nicodemus about being born again—about coming alive spiritually. In the course of the conversation, the Lord says something very mysterious. He tells Nicodemus, “...as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.” (John 3:14). Clearly, Jesus is drawing a parallel between something in the Old Testament and something that will happen to him personally. For a religious leader like Nicodemus, the Old Testament story would certainly have been familiar, but for many today it is obscure or completely meaningless.

In brief, the story to which Jesus refers—a story from Numbers 21—took place during the Israelites’ forty years in the wilderness. As frequently happened, the Israelites began grumbling against God and Moses, and in response, God sent poisonous snakes that bit people, many of whom died. When the Israelites finally repented and asked what they should do, God told Moses to make a bronze serpent, place it on a pole, and anyone who looked at the bronze serpent would live--anyone who looked at the bronze serpent would be healed from the poisonous snakebite. Moses did what Lord commanded, and everyone who looked at the serpent nailed to the pole was, in fact, healed.

In that same way, Jesus tells Nicodemus, the Son of Man must be lifted up. The Son of Man must be lifted up and placed on a pole just like the bronze serpent was. In retrospect, we know of course that this is a reference to Jesus’ crucifixion, although it was still a future event when Jesus spoke with Nicodemus. On the cross, Jesus became the bronze serpent nailed to the pole. In the same way that the Israelites were healed from the poisonous snakebite when they looked in faith at the bronze serpent, so everyone who looks in faith at Jesus’ sacrifice on the cross will be healed from the deadly snakebite of sin.

How do we turn our will and our lives over to the care of God? It is by placing our faith in Jesus. This is the way to be born again, to come alive spiritually, and to enter into a relationship with a Power greater than

ourselves—a Power that can restore us to sanity, heal us, and defeat alcoholism and any other addiction. We cannot overcome addiction in our own strength, but as the apostle Paul says in Philippians 4:13, “I can do all things through him who strengthens me.” Through Christ it is actually possible to say, “When shall I awake? I will never drink again!”

Ultimately, the addictions currently killing more Americans each year than the Vietnam War, twice the Korean War, and World War 2 combined cannot be overcome by mere human effort. The real intervention that is needed, the real assistance that is required, comes from God. Until we arrive at this understanding, we will continue to fight a losing battle. We will continue to have deaths that could have been prevented and tragedies that did not need to happen.

May the Lord help us to see the truth about alcoholism and addiction—the truth described here in the book of Proverbs—and may we call out to Him, knowing that He is both willing and able to come to our rescue. Today more than ever, we need the wisdom of the Scriptures. We need a gracious, merciful, and loving God to do for us what we could never hope to do for ourselves.

Endnotes

- 1 William F. Flack Jr., Kimberley Daubman, and Marcia Caron, “Risk Factors and Consequences of Unwanted Sex Among University Students: Hooking Up, Alcohol, and Stress Response,” *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* 22, no. 2 (2007): 139-57
- 2 “US drug overdose deaths continue to rise; increase fueled by synthetic opioids,” *CDC Newsroom*, March 29, 2018, <https://www.cdc.gov/media/releases/2018/p0329-drug-overdose-deaths.html>
- 3 *America’s Wars*, U.S Department of Veterans Affairs, va.gov/opa/publications/factsheets/fs_americas_wars.pdf
- 4 “Alcohol Use and Your Health,” *CDC Alcohol and Public Health*, <https://www.cdc.gov/alcohol/fact-sheets/alcohol-use.htm>
- 5 Ibid, footnote 3
- 6 “Fast Facts and Fact Sheets,” *CDC Smoking & Tobacco Use*, https://www.cdc.gov/tobacco/data_statistics/fast_facts/
- 7 Ibid, footnote 3
- 8 “Factors That Affect How Alcohol is Absorbed & Metabolized,” *Stanford University Office of Alcohol Policy and Education*, <https://alcohol.stanford.edu/alcohol-drug-info/buzz-buzz/factors-affect-how-alcohol-absorbed>
- 9 *Alcoholics Anonymous*, Third Edition, Alcoholics Anonymous World Services Inc., New York City, 1976 pgs. 58-59.