

MESSAGE 12

DRINKING OF WINE AND OTHER INTOXICATING BEVERAGES FORBIDDEN TO PRIESTS ON DUTY

Leviticus 10:8-11

Introduction

Jehovah spoke this MESSAGE directly to Aaron. He did not speak it to Moses with instructions that Moses tell it to Aaron and his sons, as he had in previous MESSAGES (Lev. 6:9,20,25). Probably Jehovah spoke directly to Aaron as he remained behind in The Holy [Place] while Moses and the rest of the people went out to bury Nadab and Abihu. It was a comfort to him to hear the voice of Jehovah while he and his sons remained behind alone. God had not turned His back on them or deserted them. However, the MESSAGE was not one of comfort. It was a MESSAGE of warning. It was a command to the priests not to drink wine or other intoxicating beverages while on duty.

The question arises as to whether drinking may have been involved in the sin of Nadab and Abihu. If they had been drinking, it could explain their frivolous attitude and their unauthorized offering. However, the Scripture does not state that they had been drinking; and we should not be too quick to add that accusation to the sin the Scripture records. Perhaps Jehovah gave Aaron this warning simply because drinking of intoxicating beverages was one evil that could lead a priest to commit a sin similar to Nadab and Abihu's. So, whether or not Nadab and Abihu had been under the influence of liquor, the warning in this MESSAGE was appropriate for the occasion.

This MESSAGE has no sub-topics.

Interpretation

CHAPTER 10

Verse 8. **Then Jehovah spoke to Aaron, saying,**

These words are the familiar words used to introduce a new MESSAGE from Jehovah; however, they were addressed to Aaron instead of to Moses. Jehovah was able and willing to speak directly to Aaron or others when it was appropriate, even though ordinarily He gave His MESSAGES through Moses, because the people had requested it. (Ex. 20:18-20).

Verse 9. **You must not drink wine or strong drink, you and your sons with you, when going to The Tent of Meeting, and you will not die. [This is] a statute [for] an age into your generations.**

You must not drink. This command is not an imperative but an imperfect that should be understood as a subjunctive. It should be translated, "You must not drink." It was not a command, but it was an obligation. It would bring tragic consequences if they disregarded it.

wine or strong drink. The word translated "wine" means fermented wine. The Hebrews had another word for "new wine" or the fresh juice of the grape. To the Hebrews, the word "wine" usually connoted a drink of very light alcoholic content, since they were accustomed to drinking wine diluted with water. Their purpose was as much to make the water safe from causing illness as it was to provide a beverage. On the other hand, the word translated "strong drink" means any drink that intoxicates. It includes strong wines and other intoxicating beverages besides wine. Both words were used in this verse to indicate that all form of alcoholic beverages were forbidden to priests while they were performing their holy duties, from wines

with the smallest alcoholic content to beverages with the highest alcohol content.

you and your sons with you. Though the MESSAGE was spoken to Aaron, the prohibition applied to ordinary priests as well as the high priest.

when going to The Tent of Meeting. The verb form in this clause is an infinitive and can most literally be translated into English as “in your going.” The preposition following the infinitive strictly means “toward.” It can be understood to mean “when you go into,” but its strictest meaning is “when you go toward.” The literal meaning best describes what Jehovah intended. The priests were forbidden to drink intoxicating beverages, not only after they entered The Tabernacle complex, but also when they prepared to go to The Tabernacle to serve in their official capacity. They were not to be under the influence of alcohol at all when serving at The Tabernacle.

and you will not die. Obeying this command would assure that they would not die for performing their duties incorrectly, but that assurance definitely implies that they would die if they disobeyed the command. The same stern penalty would result from disobedience to this command as from any other deviation from the instructions of Jehovah to the priests (see comments on Lev. 8:35 in MESSAGE 10 under the heading And you will not die, and on Lev. 10:2 in MESSAGE 11; see also Lev. 20:2 and Introduction to Chap. 20 in MESSAGE 24). Any deliberate deviation was rebellion, deserving of death.

[This is] a statute [for] an age into your generations. This prohibition was not only for Aaron and his sons but also for all the priests of the future, as long as the Aaronic priesthood lasted. The words translated “statute [for] an age” are the same words that are found in Lev. 3:17 (see comments on that verse in MESSAGE 1).

Verse 10. **Both to make a distinction between the holy and the common and between the unclean and the clean.**

Both to make a distinction between. Jehovah gave Aaron two reasons for the prohibition against

drinking intoxicating beverages. The first was to enable the priests to make the spiritual and moral distinctions that are important in the worship of Jehovah. A priest needed his mental faculties at their peak of perfection when he served Jehovah. He could not afford to dull them with even the smallest amount of an intoxicating beverage. Jehovah mentioned two kinds of distinctions that were important to a priest. Those distinctions were between holy and common and between clean and unclean.

the holy and the common. The meaning of the word translated “holy” has been discussed in Lev. 2:3 (see comments on that verse in MESSAGE 1 under the heading [It is] a holiness of holinesses). It means any person or object devoted to God. This statement contains the first occurrence of the word translated “common,” though the verb related to it was used in Genesis 49:4 and in Exodus 20:25; 31:14. The word in this verse is a noun and refers to objects and persons who were not set apart to the Jehovah’s service. The translation “common” or “secular” is nearer to its meaning than “unholy.” “Secular” actions or objects were not necessarily evil. They simply were not “holy” in the sense of being set aside to Jehovah’s service.¹ The priests were not to cloud their minds with alcohol, so that they could clearly distinguish between objects and persons who were set apart to Jehovah’s service and those who were not.

and between the unclean and the clean. . . . “Unclean” persons, objects, or conditions were symbols of sins. Contact with them made a person ceremonially unclean (concerning the concept of “cleanness,” see comments on Leviticus 4:12 in MESSAGE 2 under the heading he shall take out to the outside of the camp to a clean place and on Leviticus 6:11 in MESSAGE 5; concerning the concept of “uncleanness,” see comments on Leviticus 5:2 in MESSAGE 2 under the heading that it was unclean, on Leviticus 5:3 in MESSAGE 2, and on Leviticus 7:19-21 in MESSAGE 7). The purpose of the symbolism of clean and unclean in

¹ In this verse, ASV, RSV, and HCSB translate the word as “common”; SGV, NASB, NEB, JB as “profane”; DRV as “unholy”; LB as “ordinary”; and ABV as “common [or] unholy.”

objects and persons was to teach the Israelites that contact with sinful person or deeds contaminated and damaged a person morally. “Clean” and “unclean” were symbols of moral concepts, in distinction to “holy” and “common,” which were spiritual concepts themselves. It was important for Israel’s religious leaders to be able to make clear distinctions in both realms if they were to be true servants of Jehovah. Even the smallest amount of alcohol that might dull the ability of a priest to make clear moral and spiritual judgments was dangerous and deadly in the lives of men who led Israel morally and spiritually. It was not only dangerous for their clear understanding of spiritual matters. It was also dangerous for all Israel because the priests taught Israel and set an example before them. If the priests went astray in their understanding of spiritual matters, the whole nation in time would also go astray.

Verse 11. **And to teach the sons of Israel all the statutes that Jehovah has spoken to them by the hand of Moses.**

A second purpose for the prohibition against drinking alcoholic beverages was to enable the priests to clearly teach the people the commandments of Jehovah. The word translated “statutes” is the same word used in Leviticus 6:18 (see comments on that verse in MESSAGE 5 under the heading [It is] a statute [for] and age through

your generations concerning Jehovah’s fire-offerings). This verse shows that the priests were to be more than leaders of ceremonies at The Tabernacle. They were to be responsible for teaching the people to understand the ceremonies, but their teaching responsibilities went far beyond teaching the meaning of the ceremonies. They also were responsible for teaching the Israelites the great spiritual and moral truths that Jehovah revealed to the Israelites for all the world. Teaching the pure truths of God is impossible to a mind clouded with alcohol. Since the priests were commanded not to drink intoxicating beverages when going toward The Tabernacle, it follows that this verse contemplates that teaching the people was an activity that would be done in or at The Tabernacle. No doubt, The Tabernacle was an adequate place for teaching under the circumstances of the wilderness. When the Israelites later settled in the Land, the priests spread across the Land with the people. Teaching was done in all the villages and towns. Under those conditions, priests were to understand not to drink intoxicating beverages when engaged in teaching anywhere. The priests were to totally avoid drinking intoxicating beverages when serving in the duties to which Jehovah had called them.

Application

A Christian minister is always on duty. His every action and word is an example that either teaches truth about God or misinterprets God and His truth. Every move that he makes either points people to God or away from God. A minister must be at his spiritual and moral best all the time. Since modern scientific tests have shown that the first effects of alcohol are on the center of judgment in the brain, a minister cannot afford to dull his spiritual and moral judgment with alcohol at any time, even to the smallest extent. When a minister does dull his spiritual and moral insight through imbibing alcohol, he is in great danger of teaching erroneous insights to others. The result is that God’s people are led to darkness and defeat.

In addition, abstinence from all alcoholic beverages is a necessity not only for Christian ministers but also for all Christians. All Christians are representatives of Christ every hour of every day. We must be at our spiritual and moral best all of the time. We cannot be at our best with their minds clouded with even the smallest amount of alcohol. Total abstinence is the only acceptable course of action for a Christian who wants to be faithful to his high calling to be a servant of and witness to Jesus the Christ. This principle applies not only to alcoholic beverages but also to mind-changing drugs.