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Sobriety and Drunkenness: The New Sense and Sensibility

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May 28, 2017

Ashley Huizinga

Daily Scripture Texts

[Acts 1:6-14](#)

[John 17:1-11](#)

[1 Peter 4:12-14, 5:6-11](#)

Last semester, I spent four months wondering what it would feel like to be drunk.

I returned from my semester in the Netherlands less than a week ago as I write this, and during those four months I did a lot of thinking. I thought about my identity as a Christian and a foreigner, about my individuality, and the group mentality of two dozen Americans thrust into a European setting. And, driven by one of the classes at the international university, I reflected on culture and society—including social issues like drinking, smoking, recreational drugs, and everything else that the Netherlands (and other progressive European countries) has legalized in the recent past.

Having celebrated my 21st birthday on the plane to Amsterdam, my first legal drink was fairly anticlimactic (the drinking age in the Netherlands is 18). Throughout the next four months, I spent a lot of thought on social drinking, peer pressure, and drinking culture (a fellow American student wrote an entire research paper on the topics). But by the end of the semester, I had yet to experience the utter release of inhibitions that drunkenness promises—as well as the lack of control, the inability to think straight, or the simple unguarded other-ness of a friend or peer whose personality has been cranked to the extreme and beyond.

As I read 1 Peter 5:6-11 in preparation for this devotion, then, one phrase in particular stood out to me. “Be sober, be vigilant” (vs. 8). What does it mean to be “sober”?

“Sober” is usually associated with the act of refraining from alcohol and strong drink. But how do soberness and drunkenness compare, really? Soberness is sense, seriousness—clarity of perspective. Drunkenness, on the other hand, is the inability to think straight, being lost, a state of being guided by impulse and emotion alone. Whereas sobriety is clarity, as a newly washed window, drunkenness is the act of fogging up a glass or mirror through which one views one’s self and the world.

Soberness in this passage is not referencing the act of refraining from drink, but rather a use of metaphor for a state of spiritual alertness. In Hosea, the Lord accuses the people of having a lack of knowledge. “My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge” (Hosea 4:6 KJV). This lack of knowledge about Him is the sin that actually contributes to their destruction, even though later on in the chapter, the prophet writes that “wine and new wine take away the heart” (Hosea 4:6, 11 KJV). The more significant drunkenness, then, is the state of spiritual ignorance.

In the context of this passage, God’s people are dealing with intense persecution, “exiles of the Dispersion” (1 Peter 1:1) of churches brought about by religious persecution in the five Roman provinces of Asia Minor. These elect lived in the midst of a wicked society, undergoing the loss of the flesh and passions of the world—“For the time past of our life...when we walked in lasciviousness, lusts, excess of wine, revellings, banquetings, and abominable idolatries” (1 Peter 4:3). To them, soberness represented a renewal, a sign and symbol of the redemption brought by the nature of their election. They were new to the virtues of walking as a Christian and the virtues of what we strive after in the fruits of the Spirit—new to the knowledge of the Lord. But Peter wrote for them to rejoice “that, when his glory shall be revealed, ye may be glad also with exceeding joy” (1 Peter 4:13). Rejoice, that one day you will understand the glory of the Lord you now confess!

The knowledge of the Lord, earned in time and due diligence, is what keeps us from being “ineffective and unproductive in [our] knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ” (2 Peter 1:8 NIV). Peter knew the difficulties these Christians faced in putting away the sins that they had once considered normal, the sins that society puts forth as freedom from responsibility and inhibition (and consequence). In place of these false freedoms, Peter offers words of encouragement: “But the God of all grace, who hath called us unto his eternal glory by Christ Jesus, after that ye have suffered a while, make you perfect, stablish, strengthen, settle you” (1 Peter 5:10).

Why contemplate the release, the so-called “freedom” of drunkenness, when our Lord tells us to be sober and vigilant in order that we may fully enjoy the benefits of His presence and the gift of redemption He promises? Nothing would be more worth staying alert for than these.

Last semester, I wasted a lot of time wondering what drunkenness might be like, when all around me were the sounds of winter in the Netherlands, the tastes of spring in Italy, the sights of an evening and a morning in France. All around, the Lord breathed through the elegant book that is His creation. All around, the nightlife of a spiritually indifferent society breathed in an alcoholic haze of willful blindness.

But as for me? I stayed sober, and I didn't miss a moment.