

A Study in Isaiah 5:11–17

Woe to Those Who Rise Early for Strong Drink — Music and Self-Indulgence — Sobriety vs. Levity

We are reading Isaiah chapter 5, beginning at verse 11.

"Woe unto them that rise up early in the morning, that they may follow strong drink; that continue until night, till wine inflame them. And the harp and the viol, the tabret and pipe, and wine, are in their feasts: but they regard not the work of the LORD, neither consider the operation of his hands." — Isaiah 5:11–12

"Therefore my people are gone into captivity, because they have no knowledge: and their honourable men are famished, and their multitude dried up with thirst. Therefore hell hath enlarged herself, and opened her mouth without measure: and their glory, and their multitude, and their pomp, and he that rejoiceth, shall descend into it." — Isaiah 5:13–14

"But the LORD of hosts shall be exalted in judgment, and God that is holy shall be sanctified in righteousness. Then shall the lambs feed after their manner, and the waste places of the fat ones shall strangers eat." — Isaiah 5:16–17

Rising Early for Strong Drink — An Extreme Case

Woe unto them that rise up early in the morning that they may follow strong drink. This is an extreme case of the sin of drunkenness — not drunkenness that falls upon someone in the evening after the day's work, but drunkenness that is the first thing of the morning, the thing the soul rises early to pursue. It is an

inversion of everything: the early morning hour, which ought to belong to seeking the Lord, is given over to the pursuit of intoxication. On the day of Pentecost, Peter could counter the charge of drunkenness simply by noting the hour: it is but the third hour of the day. Even among sinful men, drunkenness so early was an absurdity. Yet here is a woe pronounced on those who sought it out as a way of life.

Exodus 32:6, quoted in 1 Corinthians 10:7, gives the pattern: the people sat down to eat and drink, and rose up to play. Paul calls them idolaters. They were not bowing down to images — they were leaving the work of the Lord undone and not considering the operation of His hands, which is exactly what verse 12 says of these in Isaiah. Living for pleasure, regarding not the Lord — that is idolatry. The idol is the belly. The belly has become their god, as the New Testament puts it in one of its most sobering phrases. And the name of God is invoked alongside it: Let the counsel of the Holy One of Israel draw nigh and come that we may know it — verse 19 — all while pursuing strong drink from morning to night. The mixture is characteristic: religious language in the mouth, self-indulgence in the life.

Music in Connection with Drunkenness — Saul, Belshazzar, and Christian Rock

Verse 12 lists the instruments at their feasts: the harp, the viol, the tabret, the pipe — four musical instruments — and wine. They all go together. There never was a harp that spoke to anyone's conscience. There never was a stringed instrument that exercised the soul about good and evil. The music that accompanies self-indulgence is not chosen because it speaks truth; it is chosen because it does not. Self-indulgence does not want to be reminded of God.

Two Old Testament incidents illuminate this. In 1 Samuel 16:23, when the evil spirit from God was upon Saul, David took a harp and played, and Saul was

refreshed and the evil spirit departed from him. The harp assuaged Saul — not because his conscience was exercised, but because it was not. It provided relief from distress without the agency of truth. Saul's trouble left him through the instrument, not through repentance. In Daniel 5, Belshazzar made a great feast, drank wine before a thousand, and commanded that the golden vessels taken from the temple of God be brought out so that the king and his princes, his wives and his concubines, might drink in them. They drank wine and praised the gods of gold and of silver, of brass, of iron, of wood, and of stone. Then, in the same hour, came forth fingers of a man's hand and wrote on the plaster of the wall. They regarded not the work of the Lord — until they had no choice. The hand of God wrote a message of destruction.

This mixing of the vessels of God with fleshly indulgence has its counterpart today. What is called Christian rock music takes the form of the world's self-stimulating music and attaches to it religious language and the name of Christ. The result is not worship but a stimulation of the emotions — what some call a high — that bypasses the conscience entirely. The pattern is the same as Belshazzar's feast: vessels belonging to God's house used to induce a state that has nothing to do with God. People come away revved up, stimulated, having experienced a neurological effect that feels like something but is not the work of the Spirit. The music does not speak to conscience, it bypasses it; and what bypasses conscience is not Christian experience.

Darby's preface to the hymn book identifies three requirements: a basis of truth and sound doctrine, something of the spirit of poetry without poetry itself (which addresses the sensibilities of man, not the spiritual nature), and suitability for spiritual singing. Music works on the sensibilities — it can affect how a person feels without any reference to truth. That is precisely why it is present at Belshazzar's feast and at the drunken revels of Isaiah 5. And that is precisely why sobriety in connection with music is not a minor matter.

Sobriety — What It Really Means

Christians are called to sobriety throughout the New Testament. But sobriety does not merely mean abstaining from intoxicating drink. It describes an attitude of heart — the opposite of levity. The Lord Jesus wept in Scripture; He is never described as laughing or engaging in levity. He was God and man, the God who is love, and the character of His spirit was always solemn, earnest, and attuned to the things of God. To live for levity — to make humour the atmosphere of one's life, to seek stimulation and excitement as ends in themselves — is the opposite of the sobriety that Scripture calls for.

The charismatic movement provides a clear example of what happens when sobriety is abandoned in a religious setting. A physician who attended Catherine Kuhlman's meetings over several weeks, investigating her healing ministry, reported that the force in those meetings was tremendous, and that he himself found his hand going to his shoulder to feel whether his bursitis had gone — so powerfully had the atmosphere worked on him. He subsequently documented that a person already recently pronounced healed had since died of the underlying disease. The high was real; the healing was not. The mental effect was powerful. What was absent was truth and conscience. And that is the nature of self-indulgence in religious dress: it produces an experience, but not the experience of God.

God's sovereign grace can bring genuine converts out of any setting — just as He used Balaam's ass. But that does not constitute endorsement of the setting. Come out of her, my people, says the Lord of Babylon. The fact that God's people are in Babylon is not a reason to stay — it is the reason to leave. Sovereign grace operating in impossible conditions is evidence of God's mercy, not a validation of the conditions themselves.

Self-Indulgence Precedes Perversion of Judgment

There is a sequence in this passage that is worth marking carefully. First come the woes against drunkenness and feasting (verses 11–12). Then comes the captivity for lack of knowledge (verse 13). Then come the woes against calling evil good and good evil, putting darkness for light, being wise in one's own eyes (verses 18–21). Self-indulgence precedes the perversion of moral judgment. This is not accidental — it is the mechanism. When a soul indulges itself, when the flesh is given what it demands without reference to God, the judgment is gradually corrupted. The capacity to distinguish between good and evil — which requires the spirit of judgment — is eroded. And then the perversity that was the fruit of the self-indulgence is justified by a perverted judgment that calls it good.

In society at large, this is the dynamic of what is called the culture war. Where Christianity has had an impact, certain things have been restrained and not publicly acceptable. As that restraint is lifted, self-indulgence increases. As self-indulgence increases, judgment becomes perverted so that the indulgence must be justified — it must be called loving, or freedom, or progress. And those who maintain the older standards are called harsh, judgmental, unloving. Evil is called good and good is called evil. This was Israel's trajectory. It is the trajectory of any society that departs from the living God.

The way this passage puts it, no knowledge follows naturally from regarding not the work of the Lord, neither considering the operation of His hands. If the soul is not attending to what God is doing — if God is not in its thoughts, if His word is not being taken in — then there is no knowledge. The honorable men are famished. Their multitude dried up with thirst. All the wine of the feasts left nothing that could nourish or satisfy. The soul that has indulged itself on what does not satisfy finds itself empty, thirsty, and unable to judge. Sheol opened her mouth. The broad road had many travellers, and it leads exactly where the Lord said it leads.

The Lord Exalted in Judgment — and the Lambs

But the LORD of hosts shall be exalted in judgment, and God that is holy shall be sanctified in righteousness. Then shall the lambs feed after their manner. These two verses belong together. The exaltation of the Lord in judgment is not separable from the lambs feeding afterward. The feeding of the lambs is the fruit of the judgment — because God has acted in righteousness, because His holiness has been vindicated, because the ground has been cleared of what defiled it, the lambs can now feed quietly. Propitiation is the rendering of satisfaction to God. God acts in grace toward His lambs because He has received that satisfaction from the work of Christ. His nature and His glory have been satisfied at Calvary. On that righteous basis, the lambs can feed after their manner.

What is the manner of the lambs? The twenty-third Psalm gives it. They are led. They are dependent. Green pastures and still waters are provided for them by the shepherd — not seized by the lambs for their own pleasure, but given by the shepherd for their nourishment. That is the contrast with self-indulgence. The self-indulgent soul rises early to find strong drink. The lamb waits on its shepherd. The self-indulgent soul reaches for what is not his, indulges himself on what does not satisfy, and ends up dried up with thirst. The lamb, led beside the still waters, is satisfied. The feasting of the fat ones, the devouring of what was not theirs — all of that is laid waste. But the lambs feed.

Now none but Christ can satisfy. That is not a boast — it is a prayer. The new nature wants Him exclusively. The flesh wants what Isaiah 5 describes. And the whole passage is written to educate the soul in judging the difference.

But the LORD of hosts shall be exalted in judgment — then shall the lambs feed after their manner.