

# The Harvester



## Preparing Souls

## To Serve The Lord



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### A Closer Look At First Timothy 5:23

By Brian R. Kenyon

In last month's Harvester article, "Some Thoughts on Alcoholic Beverages," First Timothy 5:23 was mentioned in connection with the medicinal use of alcohol. Since it is the only New Testament passage that positively commands the use of "wine," it seems necessary to examine this verse in more detail than space allowed in last month's article. As was established in that article, the term "wine" in the Bible does not of itself indicate alcoholic wine—the word simply means grape juice (cf. Isa. 65:8). The context of the word "wine" must determine whether or not it was intoxicating (see Woods 52).

First Timothy 5:23 is rendered as follows in the major translations:

Drink no longer water, but use a little wine for thy stomach's sake and thine often infirmities. (KJV)

No longer drink only water, but use a little wine for your stomach's sake and your frequent infirmities. (NKJ)

Be no longer a drinker of water, but use a little wine for thy stomach's sake and thine often infirmities. (ASV)

No longer drink water *exclusively*, but use a little wine for the sake of your stomach and your frequent ailments. (NAS)

(No longer drink only water, but use a little wine for the sake of your stomach and your frequent ailments). (ESV)

#### "No Longer Drink Only Water"

The command, "No longer drink only water" is translated from only two Greek words (Μηκέτι ὑδροπότηι). "No longer" is from an adverb (*meketi*, μηκέτι) that means "no longer, not from now on" (Bauer 648).

"Drink only water" is from a Greek verb (*hydropoteo*, ὑδροποτέω) that only occurs here in the New Testament. Although some translations leave out the idea of "only"

(cf. "Drink no longer water," KJV), and some italicize the idea (cf. "No longer drink water *exclusively*," NAS), the idea of "only" seems to be inherent in the word. According to Bauer, *hydropoteo* means, "drink (only) water of an abstemious [nonindulgent] way of life" (832). Mounce says it means to "drink water to the exclusion of anything else" (319). Thus, Paul was not telling Timothy to stop drinking water, but to stop drinking just water. Now, the question naturally arises: Why was Timothy drinking only water? Mounce suggests, "Paul's opponents were drunkards, and to disassociate himself totally from them and their teaching, Timothy apparently had chosen to abstain to the point that it was hurting him physically" (318-319). Lipscomb adds, "Timothy, a model and true Christian, a young man trained from childhood in the knowledge of the Scriptures refuses to use wine at all, even in sickness" (175). Whatever the reason, Timothy was only drinking water. Of course, by implication of Timothy's faithfulness in following God's will, the young evangelist would drink at least a small portion of "fruit of the vine" in the Lord's Supper on every first day of the week he was able (cf. Mt. 26:26-29; Acts 20:7; 1 Cor. 11:23-29). Again, it is interesting to note that "fruit of the vine" and "the cup" are the only ways the liquid communion element is described. The term "wine" is never used in the New Testament in connection with the Lord's Supper.

#### "Use A Little Wine"

The command to "use a little wine" is stated in strong contrast (*alla*, ἀλλά) to drinking only water. One might expect the imperative here to be "drink," as in "drink a little wine," but Paul said to "use [a little wine]" (from *chraomai*, χράομαι), which means to make use of (found

again in 1 Tim. 1:8). The adverb “little” limits the quantity of wine to the amount it takes (which Paul does not specify) to address Timothy’s health issues. This would keep Timothy from violating the qualifications he had just given for elders to be men “not given to wine [not addicted to wine, NAS]” (1 Tim. 3:3) and for deacons to be men “not given to much wine” (1 Tim. 3:8).

Here, the question arises as to what kind of “wine” Paul was recommending. While First Timothy 5:23 does not explicitly say anything about the alcoholic content of the wine, the context seems to indicate that the wine here does contain alcohol. Those who deny the alcoholic content of the wine do so based upon two factors. First, they point to the nutritional value of unprocessed grape juice, which, of course, is undeniably true. In fact, the purported “benefits” of “a glass or two of wine per day” by the modern medical community can actually be met by drinking unfermented grape juice—no alcohol needed! Second, they say that alcoholic wine would not do anything to the parasites in Timothy’s stomach that were causing his problems. However, the text itself does not reveal the exact nature of Timothy’s stomach ailment nor his “frequent infirmities” (see discussion below); thus, any conclusion dogmatically based on the exact nature of his health problems is unwarranted.

There are at least three reasons why the “wine” Paul is recommending to Timothy would likely contain alcohol. First, as previously mentioned, Timothy was already drinking at least a small, weekly portion of “fruit of the vine” (i.e., grape juice) in the Lord’s Supper. Since Paul did not say “use a little more wine,” indicating that he

was to drink more of what he already consumed weekly, it stands to reason that Paul was telling Timothy to use a little of a type of “wine” that he was not regularly using. What other kind of “wine” could that have been besides alcoholic wine? Second, while there is plenty of reasons why Timothy would be abstaining from alcoholic wine, why would the young evangelist have reason to abstain from grape juice? He would not, unless, as some suggest, he had taken the Nazirite vow, but, aside from the fact that the old law was done away (Gal. 3:24-25; Eph. 2:11-22; Col. 2:14), that would also rule out Timothy’s consumption of grape juice in the Lord’s Supper (cf. Num. 6:1-4). Third, alcohol content in the “wine” would address some common, likely causes of Timothy’s stomach ailment and “frequent infirmities” (see below).

## “Your Stomach’s Sake And Your Frequent Infirmities”

As stated earlier, we cannot be dogmatic on the exact nature of Timothy’s ailments. In fact, commentators still ask whether Paul is actually identifying more than one ailment (i.e., stomach problems and other infirmities) or whether the “and” connects two related parts with the idea being “frequent stomach ailments.” The grammar and syntax would allow for both renderings. However, one thing seems to be the case either way: whatever

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9:40 "End Times" Preaching in Acts Daniel Stearsman  
10:20 BREAK  
10:50 Intertestamental Expectations David Dixon  
11:30 LUNCH

#### Forum: Living for the "Then," Not the "Now"

1:30 Your Life Matters Now and Forever Ty Rhymes  
2:00 Esau: Living for "Now" (Heb. 12:16) Forest Antemesaris  
2:30 Moses: Living for "Then" (Heb. 11:26) Hiram Kemp  
3:00 BREAK  
3:30 Questions And Answers On Forum Topic  
4:30 DINNER  
6:30 Congregational Singing  
7:00 Parable of the Virgins Thomas Wise  
7:45 Jesus' Authority to Judge Sam Jones

### TUESDAY

9:00 "End Times" Teaching in Mt. 24 T. Brownlow-Dindy, Sr.  
9:40 Daniel's "Seventy Weeks" Emmanuel B. Daugherty  
10:20 BREAK  
10:50 "End Times" in the Book of Hebrews Stephen Atnip  
11:30 LUNCH

#### Forum: Which "End" Is What?

1:30 Is the "Shortened Time" (1 Cor. 7:29) the End? E. Edwards  
2:00 When Does the OT End and the NT Begin? George Beals  
2:30 Knowing the "AD 70 Doctrine" David Hester  
3:00 BREAK  
3:30 Questions And Answers On Forum Topic  
4:30 DINNER  
6:30 Congregational Singing  
7:00 Parable of the Talents Bryon R. Schulz  
7:45 Judgment Scene in Revelation 20:11-15 Jimmy Clark

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9:00 "End Times" Teaching in Luke 21:5-36 Bruce Daugherty  
9:40 Daniel's Final Revelations Emmanuel B. Daugherty  
10:20 BREAK  
10:50 "End Times" in Second Thessalonians Jimmy Clark  
11:30 LUNCH

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1:30 Islam Trent Wheeler  
2:00 Mormonism Nathan Franson  
2:30 Jehovah's Witness Charles Broyles  
3:00 BREAK  
3:30 Questions And Answers On Forum Topic  
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7:00 Parable of the Dragnet David Stearsman  
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9:00 "End Times" Teaching in First Corinthians Earl Edwards  
9:40 Premillennialism and Its Variations Walt Person  
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10:50 The Living and the Dead at His Coming Melvin Otey  
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#### Forum: End Times and the Book of Revelation

1:30 Political Leaders, "Mark of the Beast," Etc. Bob Bauer  
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2:30 The Holy City John Saw Coming Down Sam Hester  
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Timothy's stomach problem, it was "related to water consumption, with water either causing the sickness or making it worse" (Arichea and Hatton 133). Safe drinking water was not common in the first century. This would argue for the wine being "fermented" because "the alcohol content would act as a purifying agent. It was in fact recognized at that time that wine was effective as a tonic and as an antidote to the effects of impure water" (Arichea and Hatton 133). Paul's Spirit-inspired advice would be comparable to today's verbal prescription, "Take a tonic for your stomach."

### Conclusion

"Alcohol continues to stand the test of time as a frequent and reliable source of ruin" (Kenyon 166). Timothy, aware of this, refrained from using alcoholic wine, even to the detriment of his own health. First Timothy 5:23 comes at the end of Paul's instructions to Timothy about keeping himself pure (cf. 1 Tim. 4:12–5:22). Paul parenthetically inserted this instruction to "use a little wine for your stomach's sake and your frequent infirmities" to encourage the young evangelist "not to go to an extreme in refusing wine as a medicine" (Lipscomb 174). At least two lessons emerge. First, because this is the only New Testament

verse that positively commands the use of alcoholic (or at the very least, potentially alcoholic) beverage, and it is in a medicinal sense, all non-medicinal uses of alcohol are unauthorized and must be avoided. "There is no passage in the Bible connecting non-medicinal alcohol use with godly wisdom" (Kenyon 168). Second, the proper use of medication does not render a Christian morally impure. Timothy completely avoided alcoholic wine, perhaps so as not to appear hypocritical (cf. 1 Tim. 3:3, 8) and/or to avoid being like the world. Ultimately, however, the cause of Christ would suffer to the extent his health suffered, so Paul recommended the medicinal use of "wine."

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