I Always Wondered...

(Each issue we will afford our readers the opportunity to ask our staff questions they’ve always had about Scripture, Christian life, and culture. To submit a question, send an email to us at jrichards@urbanministries.com with your question and you may just find it in a future issue of Urban Faith®.)

What does Scripture say about drinking alcohol? Is it OK to drink, as long as it’s done in moderation?

Many Christians have had this question for centuries. While answers may vary, we believe there is a Scripture-centered answer to your question. What’s the default text that most go to when alcohol comes up in Christian conversation? Jesus turning water into wine, of course. Didn’t Jesus turn water into wine? If so, what’s wrong with having a little taste every now and then? Maybe the question should be why we always bring Jesus into our verses. Isn’t that human nature? We have a tendency to excuse our behavior by reading Jesus’ statements and actions in such a way that condones our rebellion. If we read the wedding of Cana passage as permission to drink, we’ve missed the Apostle John’s entire point.

Why would Jesus turn water into wine in the first place? Well, this was Jesus’ first miracle. It’s interesting that Jesus would perform His first miracle at a wedding. Married people reading this column can probably attest that marriage itself is a miracle. Any time you bring two very different lives together to live under one roof, that’s nothing short of a miracle. Besides that, John records this event, not to excuse our drinking, but to announce something—the inauguration of God’s kingdom. Running out of wine represented the spiritual barrenness of the Jewish people. Jesus has come to restore their joy. Wine in the Old Testament symbolized joy and God’s blessing, although drunkenness was reprimanded. And though wine was a staple in the diet of the Jewish community in both the Old and New Testaments, drunkenness was always condemned.

Paul is pretty explicit about drinking, especially as it relates to alcohol’s impact on other believers. He advises the Ephesians, “do not get drunk with wine…but be filled with the Spirit” (Ephesians 5:18, ESV). Why would Paul juxtapose drunkenness against being filled with the Spirit? In drunkenness, one is filled with a spirit—just not God’s Spirit. Paul wanted the Ephesians to be consumed with Someone far greater—the Spirit of God. And we wonder why liquor stores are called “wine and spirits” stores. There’s a reason decimated urban communities almost always have a liquor store on as many corners as churches, not to mention the impact the abuse of alcohol has had on African American families over the years. Scripture is pretty clear that drunkenness is out of the question for Christians.

OK, so drunkenness is out. What about moderation? A few years ago some photographs surfaced of a pastor in a large secular nightclub. Bottles of alcohol were at his table. It’s not clear if he was drinking, or even drunk, but the perception could have caused other believers to stumble. If insert name here is doing it, then it must be fine? See, that’s why I don’t go to church, it’s full of hypocrites.

Our purpose here is not to tell you that you don’t have a right to drink. That’s the beauty of having free will. But we close with some parting words from Paul to the Corinthian Church: “I have the right to do anything,” you say—but not everything is beneficial. “I have the right to do anything”—but not everything is constructive (1 Corinthians 6:12, NIV, author’s paraphrase). Something to think about the next time you consider popping a few bottles.
Features

1 I Always Wondered...
Drinking Alcohol: How Much is Too Much?

16 Living On the 40/12 Parallel
Tips on Dating While Busy (DWB)

28 Urban Ministry Interview
The Stewards’ Market: Incarnational Ministry

36 Decision Points
What’s Your Compass Telling You?

44 The Ideal Woman
What She Looks Like

52 Young Ministry Leader Interview
Brianna Parker—A Woman of Faith and Great Resolve

64 A Tale of Two Rappers
Lil’ Wayne and Lecrae

76 Porn in the Pews
3 Steps to Overcome Porn Addiction

84 Keeping It 100
Dating Tips for Christian Singles
ENGAGE ........................
[verb: in-gaj—to come together and interlock]

5  Something from Nothing
9  The Side Chick
13  Irreconcilable Differences
21  The Sign
25  The City Life
33  How Can I Be Sure?
41  Choose Life
49  No Need to Hate
57  The “F” Word
61  Grab the Mic
69  Freedom Now
73  Freedom is Possible
81  GODISNOWHERE
Something From Nothing

Thomas grew up attending a small church in his hometown. His mother was actively involved at the church, working as the church administrator. His father was part of the church leadership. As far as most were concerned, Thomas grew up in a godly household. After graduating high school, he decided to attend an out-of-state college, and received a full scholarship to a prestigious school. His parents encouraged him to find a church in the area upon arriving on campus. He set out to do just that, but things got busy. He joined several clubs on campus. He started to get involved in student government. There was a “must attend” party every weekend. There just weren’t enough hours in the day. Sundays were his only day off. And he wasn’t so sure he wanted to spend three hours on Sunday morning listening to a message that he didn’t feel connected with him. Besides, he had had a great conversation in one of the organizations he joined about the merits of creationism. Questions began to come up that were unanswered. Did God really create the world out of nothing? Is that even possible? Christians couldn’t even agree on the age of the earth. If the Bible was so clear, why was the Creation account in Genesis so murky?

One day, in his Black History class, the professor discussed pioneering surgeon Daniel Hale Williams. Thomas learned that Williams, an African American, was the first surgeon to perform an open-heart surgery on a patient. The class then discussed the marvels of modern medicine and various inventions patented since Williams’ landmark surgery. Thomas was so intrigued by the discussion that he approached his professor after class and posited, “Isn’t it amazing how much humans have evolved? We’ve been able to create things that have lengthened our lifespans by decades.” The professor tilted his head, looked over the brim of his glasses, and replied, “That’s a very astute observation, Thomas. As creative as human beings are, we haven’t quite been able to figure out how to create something from nothing.” With that, the professor collected his materials and left the room.

As Thomas returned to his desk, he couldn’t shake that statement. Something from nothing, he thought. As intellectually evolved as human beings have become, we still lack the ability to create something without using already existing material. He thought about Dr. Williams and that first open-heart surgery. Then he remembered a verse that he had memorized as a young boy in his hometown church: “Create in me a pure heart, O God…” (from Psalm 51:10). He chuckled and thought, “All this time I was trying to convince myself about the merits of creationism, and all I had to do was look inside my heart to see God’s creative power at work. He, indeed, made something from nothing.” That Sunday, he found his way to a local church.

Where We’re Going

Today, participants will know that God is Creator of all things, appreciate God’s creative works, and express gratitude for the ability to enjoy God’s creation.

Get Them Going

Ask participants to posit their opinions on the greatest human invention ever. Next, have them name several inventions that have become obsolete. Inquire whether they have any gadgets sitting around their homes that are now outdated. Be sure to stress the idea that any human invention is manufactured with already existing material. With that in mind, have the students contemplate the idea of creating something from nothing.

Something From Nothing

Thomas grew up attending a small church in his hometown. His mother was actively involved at the church, working as the church administrator. His father was part of the church leadership. As far as most were concerned, Thomas grew up in a godly household. After graduating high school, he decided to attend an out-of-state college, and received a full scholarship to a prestigious school. His parents encouraged him to find a church in the area upon arriving on campus. He set out to do just that, but things got busy. He joined several clubs on campus. He started to get involved in student government. There was a “must attend” party every weekend. There just weren’t enough hours in the day. Sundays were his only day off. And he wasn’t so sure he wanted to spend three hours on Sunday morning listening to a message that he didn’t feel connected with him. Besides, he had had a great conversation in one of the organizations he joined about the merits of creationism. Questions began to come up that were unanswered. Did God really create the world out of nothing? Is that even possible? Christians couldn’t even agree on the age of the earth. If the Bible was so clear, why was the Creation account in Genesis so murky?

One day, in his Black History class, the professor discussed pioneering surgeon Daniel Hale Williams. Thomas learned that Williams, an African American, was the first surgeon to perform an open-heart surgery on a patient. The class then discussed the marvels of modern medicine and various inventions patented since Williams’ landmark surgery. Thomas was so intrigued by the discussion that he approached his professor after class and posited, “Isn’t it amazing how much humans have evolved? We’ve been able to create things that have lengthened our lifespans by decades.” The professor tilted his head, looked over the brim of his glasses, and replied, “That’s a very astute observation, Thomas. As creative as human beings are, we haven’t quite been able to figure out how to create something from nothing.” With that, the professor collected his materials and left the room.

As Thomas returned to his desk, he couldn’t shake that statement. Something from nothing, he thought. As intellectually evolved as human beings have become, we still lack the ability to create something without using already existing material. He thought about Dr. Williams and that first open-heart surgery. Then he remembered a verse that he had memorized as a young boy in his hometown church: “Create in me a pure heart, O God…” (from Psalm 51:10). He chuckled and thought, “All this time I was trying to convince myself about the merits of the creation of the earth, and all I had to do was look inside my heart to see God’s creative power at work. He, indeed, made something from nothing.” That Sunday, he found his way to a local church.

Real Talk

1. What were some of the things that caused Thomas to question his Christian beliefs?
2. Why do you think young adults have a hard time growing spiritually in the college environment?
3. Does science really challenge the idea of God as Creator, or can the two coexist?

The Big Picture

Today’s passage is a psalm of creation; it gives an account of God’s creative prowess. The Psalmist, whom many scholars believe to be David, retells the Genesis creation account in descriptive, awe-inspiring ways. As he confronts the reader with majestic imagery, the psalm leads one to reflect on God’s role in creation.
“O LORD, what a variety of things you have made! In wisdom you have made them all. The earth is full of your creatures” (Psalm 104:24, NLT).

Psalm 104:5 You placed the world on its foundation so it would never be moved.
6 You clothed the earth with floods of water, water that covered even the mountains.
7 At your command, the water fled; at the sound of your thunder, it hurried away.
8 Mountains rose and valleys sank to the levels you decreed.
9 Then you set a firm boundary for the seas, so they would never again cover the earth.

10:4:24 O LORD, what a variety of things you have made! In wisdom you have made them all. The earth is full of your creatures.
25 Here is the ocean, vast and wide, teeming with life of every kind, both large and small.
26 See the ships sailing along, and Leviathan, which you made to play in the sea.
27 They all depend on you to give them food as they need it.
28 When you supply it, they gather it. You open your hand to feed them, and they are richly satisfied.
29 But if you turn away from them, they panic. When you take away their breath, they die and turn again to dust.
30 When you give them your breath, life is created, and you renew the face of the earth.

It is possible that the Israelites were in captivity during the time Psalm 104 was written. Most people held against their will focus on the things they do not have—freedom, security, and happiness. While in bondage, captives complain, cry out to God, and shake their fists in anger. However, because some scholars attribute this psalm to David, the purpose would be different, for David lived long before the Israelites went into captivity. If David was indeed the author, he did just the opposite of raising his fists in anger when faced with difficult situations. In Psalm 104, he gave an account of the things that he knew could not be taken from him. He focused his attention on God’s creation, emphasizing that it is God who creates, sustains, provides, and preserves. With Psalm 104, David affirms that God has provided all our needs through His creation.

1. God Orders (Psalm 104:5–9)
It is said that God is a God of order, and the first portion of our lesson text proves it. To “order” means to attend to the arrangements of items. The way in which items are arranged is an indication of their size, importance, or when each will be dealt with. David boasted that God is so creative that He hung the earth on its own axis, and no matter how heavy it is or what shock it absorbs, it cannot fall or be moved. Then, God covered it, and “the waters stood above the mountains.” But, because God’s greatest creation—man—could not live in such a place, God reprimanded the waters and they fled to more suitable places, like the valleys. At God's rebuke, a boundary was formed that water could not cross over so that man could live.

2. God Works (vv. 24–26)
Throughout the Bible, God endorses work. Work is good. God created so much that verse 24 reads “the earth is full of thy riches.” God was so productive that He didn’t just create the oceans for show, but He filled them with great and small creatures, both swimming and creeping kinds. In time, humans, the crown of creation, created boats and ships to use these waters as passageways for merchants. His work produced work! He also emphasizes the importance of balance. There can’t be all work and no play. David mentioned the leviathan, a sea monster of immense size and power, that has no other duty than to play in the vast waters it calls home.

3. God Provides (vv. 27–30)
According to Scripture, God’s provision is bountiful and seasonable. Verse 27 reads that “these wait all upon thee; that thou givest them their meat in due season.” The Matthew Henry Commentary on the Whole Bible asserts in its discussion of Genesis 1 that God’s creation patiently waits for His provision because of the natural instinct He put in it. His creation knows that He is bountiful and open-handed (v. 28), and they gather what He gives and are satisfied. Because they desire no more than what God sees fit for them, they have no need to complain or be dissatisfied. They recognize that if God hides His face from them (i.e., ignores
or leaves them to themselves), they will be troubled. They are so dependent upon their Creator that they cannot take their next breath without Him. When, at God's bidding, they give up

their existence, others come behind them as God recreates and replenishes.

Diving Deeper Quiz

1. There isn't any reference to human beings' role in Creation in this text. Why do you think this is so?
2. According to the passage, what kind of imagery is used to describe the creation of mountains and valleys (Psalm 104:8)?
3. After a general reference to sea creatures, the Psalmist names a specific one by name. What sea creature is that (v. 26)?
4. What are some things that those created look to God for (vv. 27–30)? Why is it important we know this?
5. There appears to be a second Creation in this passage (see verse 30). Many early churches utilized this psalm on Pentecost. How do you think this psalm relates to Pentecost?

Next Steps

In a downturned economy, it is easy to focus on what we have lost, things we cannot obtain, and the hopelessness we might feel. In Psalm 104, David chose to focus on God's creation and its riches. We will do well to challenge ourselves to identify resources we can use to produce what we need. Provision is all around us.

Put It Out There

Group Application
Using a mobile device, have the students create an apologetic video on God's creative power. Ask them to think about people in their generation who doubt the idea of intelligent design. Tell them to think about the following: Based on this psalm, what would you say to anyone who is skeptical God exists? How might they convince someone that creation is enough proof that a loving, caring God exists? Once done, have them upload the video to YouTube and share it with others in their online communities.

Personal Application
Encourage your class to personally unplug and set aside time to meditate on God's creation. This may entail sitting outside under the stars or taking an opportunity to learn more about one of the many natural wonders of the world. Ask them to use that time to seek God, asking Him to give them a greater appreciation for His creation.

Wrap It Up

Daily Bread
Ask the class to remember to subscribe to the DAILY BIBLE READINGS through the Urban Faith app on their mobile or tablet device.

Talk to Him
Close in prayer, thanking the Lord for creating each of the participants and providing for all of their needs.

Say Word?

Manifold. .......... MAN-i-fold.
Leviathan. .......... le-VI-a-than.
Innumerable. .......... in-NOO-mer-ab-ul.

"Be angry, and do not sin; ponder in your own heart on your beds, and be silent" (Psalm 4:4, ESV).

"...for whenever our heart condemns us, God is greater than our heart, and he knows everything" (1 John 3:20, ESV).

"...for out of the abundance of the heart his mouth speaks" (Luke 6:45b, ESV).

"The plans of the heart belong to man, but the answer of the tongue is from the LORD" (Proverbs 16:1, ESV).

"Trust in the LORD with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding" (Proverbs 3:5, ESV).
Where We’re Going

Today, participants will look for ways to know that we were all created for relationship, find comfort in the fact that God is at the center of all relationships, and cultivate real, meaningful God-centered connections.

Get Them Going

Ask participants to think about where they’ve received their best relationship advice. Pick a chapter of a popular book that discusses relationships and offers advice contrary to Scripture. A good example is the 90-day rule found in Steve Harvey’s *Act Like A Lady, Think Like A Man*. Ask the participants if they feel like the advice is practical. Be sure to inform them that there’s another best seller out there—the best seller of all time—that has some wonderful, timeless relationship advice, too.

The Side Chick

*Text me back.* Shannon was starting to get irritated. She’d been texting Malik all day, but he wasn’t responding. Here she was sitting on her couch in her quaint apartment, slowly coming to the realization that he had stood her up. And this wasn’t the first time. She sat and thought about the time she had bought tickets to a Jill Scott concert. Initially, Malik seemed excited about going with her, but was never clear in his commitment. Two days before the concert, he called and canceled. Something came up. Shannon wound up going with her girl Tameka. As much as she loved Tameka, she preferred that Malik go with her. It’s sort of hard belting Jill Scott’s “A Long Walk” at an intimate concert venue without being boo’d up.

Tonight was supposed to be date night. This was starting to become a trend. She couldn’t believe she still put up with this foolishness, but she really liked Malik. Besides, she thought, there aren’t very many good black men out there. She had always been told that when you find one, you need to hold on to him. Shannon knew how hard things were for single women. She knew the statistics: the disproportionate number of black men in jail, the overwhelming number of women who attended churches and colleges. Her time was getting short. She was a young, professional businesswoman; she had met Malik at a professional mixer event. He was well dressed and well spoken. She tried to play it cool when they met, though. *Don’t want to seem desperate*, she thought.

After a few great dates, she felt like she and Malik were now an item. It was time to start the process of integrating him into her life. She thought through them all: introduction to her parents and friends, changing her relationship status on all social media platforms, and last but not least, taking him to church. Tonight, though, she began to rethink everything. She was perplexed. “What would Steve Harvey say?”, she asked herself, walking over to the bookshelf to retrieve her copy of *Act Like A Lady, Think Like A Man*. She knew she’d find the answer there.

She decided to call one more time before going to bed. The phone rang three times before someone picked up. “Hello.” It was a woman’s voice.

“Is Malik there?” Shannon asked, reasoning that it may have been a female relative.

“Who’s calling?”

“Tell him it’s his girlfriend, Shannon.”

The woman replied, “Well Shannon, this is his wife Brandi…” Before Brandi could finish, Shannon hastily hung up the phone. She sat glumly on the couch and came to the harsh realization that she was…the side chick.

Real Talk

1. Why do some women feel like there’s a lack of good men out there? Do you think that’s true?
2. Why was Shannon so convinced that her relationship with Malik was going in the right direction? What kind of signs did she miss?
3. Do we depend more on best sellers than the Bible for relationship advice? If so, why?
The creation of Woman introduced mankind to the concept of friendship. According to *The American Heritage Dictionary*, a friend is “a person whom one knows, likes, and trusts.” Adam knew Woman because “the LORD God brought her unto the man” (Genesis 2:22). Adam liked Woman because they were similar, as he said, “This is now bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh” (Genesis 2:23). Adam trusted Woman “because she was taken out of Man” (Genesis 2:23). This first pair was also the first marriage; the text indicates that part of God’s purpose for humans includes the marital union of man and woman.

Moreover, the Bible illustrates other friendships that are not unique to male and female relationships. There was the bond between Jonathan and David recorded in 1 Samuel 18. “And it came to pass, when he had made an end of speaking unto Saul, that the soul of Jonathan was knit with the soul of David, and Jonathan loved him as his own soul. And Saul took him that day, and would let him go no more home to his father’s house. Then Jonathan and David made a covenant, because he loved him as his own soul. And Jonathan stripped himself of the robe that was upon him, and gave it to David, and his garments, even to his sword, and to his bow, and to his girdle” (1 Samuel 18:1–4). The book of Proverbs teaches one how to be a friend: “A man that hath friends must shew himself friendly; and there is a friend that sticketh closer than a brother” (Proverbs 18:24). The Bible describes mankind’s friendship with Jesus Christ, provided we are obedient to Jesus’ commandments (John 15:14). Humans were not created to live in isolation but in community. Companionship is one vital dimension for human flourishing.
Diving Deeper Quiz

1. Why do you think God created Eve from Adam’s side? Is there any significance there (Genesis 2:21–22)?
2. Why is it so important that spouses begin their own life together by leaving their family to create their own traditions and customs (v. 24)?
3. Adam and his wife were naked and shameless. What are the pros and cons of emotional vulnerability in relationships (v. 25)?

Next Steps

Those of us who are healthy, have strong family ties, and are regularly connected to a church family can take companionship for granted. There are people among us who are shut in and shut out because of illness, incarceration, low self-esteem, or poverty. Their circumstances exclude them from continuous human contact. With the popularity of social media, they are ignored and shut out because they do not have the existing technology, negating their efforts to maintain face-to-face contact.

Put It Out There

Group Application
Schedule a mixer event for your group. Ask one of the participants to serve as facilitator for a follow-up discussion on relationships. Think about bringing in a guest speaker to discuss the importance of cultivating healthy relationships.

Personal Application
Encourage the participants to begin properly evaluating their relationships this week. Are their relationships life-giving or life-sapping? Have them evaluate signs in those relationships that may lead to destructive behavior and record them in a journal. Ask them to take 30 days to determine whether keeping the person around is worth the effort they’ve been putting in.

Wrap It Up

Daily Bread
Ask the class to remember to subscribe to the DAILY BIBLE READINGS through the Urban Faith app on their mobile or tablet device.

Talk to Him
Close in prayer, thanking the Lord for creating each of the participants and providing for all of their needs.

Say Word?

Cleave. . . . . . . . CLEEVE.
Naked. . . . . . . . NAY-ked.
Ashamed. . . . . . . . uh-SHAYM-d.

5 Ways to Avoid Becoming the Side Chick:

Esteem Yourself. Never let a man determine your value.

Have Standards. Never compromise your standards for the sake of companionship.

Eliminate the Noise. Don’t value opinions of others over the Word of God.

Watch the Signs. Don’t excuse his destructive behavior. He’s exhibiting bad fruit for a reason.

Prioritize. The kingdom of God should always be your first priority. Do a self-check to see if that’s true.

The amount you value yourself is directly connected to how much you are willing to put up with in a relationship.