

SALTY SPIRITUALITY
A Life that Makes a Difference
October 4, 2009

Salt as a Biblical Image

Imagine that salt is a big part of life in biblical times. The Dead Sea, often referred to as the Salt Sea, is a prominent dimple on the face of the Holy Land. The ocean has a three percent salt content. The Great Salt Lake in Utah is ten percent salt. The Dead Sea is an astounding thirty-three percent salt. I have fresh memories of lying on my back in the Dead Sea, reading a book as if I were lying in a lounge chair. The water is *that thick* with salt! So salt was plentiful in biblical times and places.

Early on we see salt in the story of Sodom and Gomorrah (Genesis 19:26). As the city is cursed and destroyed, Lot's wife "looks back." Since the angels of the Lord have specifically warned against looking back, the consequence is dire. Lot's wife is fixed to the spot of her indiscretion and turned into a pillar of salt.

This leads us to a primary use of salt in the Old Testament--as a symbol of **desolation**. In Judges 9:45, a captured city is destroyed and then covered with salt, as if to say, "No one will ever live here again." In Deuteronomy 29:23, doom is pronounced for a land that "will be a burning waste of salt and sulfur--nothing planted, nothing sprouting..." for the land that abandons the covenant of the Lord. Jeremiah 17:6 refers to a desolate spiritual life as a "parched place...in a salt land where no one lives.

Again, the Dead Sea area is a desolate place – a moonscape of sun-parched and salt-seared reality. It is the lowest point on the planet and almost as hot as Death Valley. I was surprised to find, during my trip to Israel, that you can actually see the Dead Sea from the hillsides in Jerusalem.

In the New Testament (Mark 9:49), Jesus urges pure feet and pure eyes with a warning of hell as a place where "Everyone will be salted with fire." In James, Jesus' brother warns about an unbridled and impure tongue, from which cursing flows like salt water, rather than blessings from fresh water.

Salt of the Covenant

As in the human body, which requires salt in proper portions, salt also has positive implications in scripture. Over and over (Leviticus 2:13, Numbers 18:19, 2 Kings 2:20, 2 Chronicles 13:5, Ezekiel 43:24) salt is sprinkled as a symbol of God's covenant. Like water and oil, salt is sprinkled on offerings and on other objects of God's promise as a declaration of God's loyalty and healing power.

Salt of the Earth

Jesus sees us as agents of promise and healing in the world. He calls us salt of the earth and lights to the world. Again, salt isn't always desolation. Sometimes salt brings life and flavor and salvation. In fact, the word *salt* and the word *salvation* come from similar origins in the English language (tied to the Latin *sal*). Salt would have been used as a preservative (*saving meat from spoiling*) even more than it would have been used as a seasoning. It is also a *salve*, or a remedy for what ails us (imagine how Epsom salts are used).

The Natural Effects of Salt

First, we think of salt as a **flavor enhancer**. It brings out the taste in food. Mined from the earth or evaporated out of water, salt adds so much to our meals.

Table salt is fine-grained and processed to remove other minerals. Iodine is added to supplement the thyroid and anti-caking compounds are also added to keep the salt flowing out of our shakers.

Kosher salt is designed to draw the liquid out of meats. Kosher salt is more rounded and less intense in flavor and irregularly shaped. It has no additives.

Sea salt is less refined still and has all kinds of minerals that natural food fans believe are quite good for us. The shape and color of sea salt depends on the region from which it comes. Celtic sea salt from the Brittany Coast of France is considered the “Mercedes” of salt.

Salt is also a **preservative**. Before the days of refrigeration, people salted food to keep it from spoiling.

Today, we use salt as a **purifier**. Many homes and clubs with pools are shifting away from chlorine solutions toward saline solutions for hygiene. Of course, God used salt for this purpose when he created the oceans as they are.

As for **health**, salt is absolutely necessary in our diet. Yes, too much salt can exacerbate blood pressure issues. But the right amount of salt activates salivary enzymes and stomach acids for the digestion process. Salty amniotic fluids provide a critical growth environment in the womb. Salt nourishes the adrenal glands, which are necessary for a host of purposes. And salt water has always been used as a salve, or an ointment.

There are other less obvious purposes for salt. It melts ice and snow in northern cities. Salt is used in explosives, chlorine gas, soda, fertilizers and plastics. Only seven percent of salt production goes toward food-related purposes.

A Salty Spirituality

Jesus urges us to salt the earth. Obviously, he's not asking us to make it a desolate place. Rather, we are agents of a new covenant, sprinkling God's promises on a hope-hungry world. We are agents of preservation and seasoning and purity.

Closer to the Fire: Images of a Vibrant Community

Using an acrostic, the Christian community:

Seasons the world. We bring out the best in others by proving God's goodness with our good interest in people. We season the world with grace, living as a forgiving and redeeming force of mercy. And we express the genius that's birthed by a Spirit-led, Spirit-empowered, Spiritually gifted lifestyle.

Advocates God's values. We heal wherever we can, using the touch of love and a spirit of reconciliation. We help and serve and come alongside others. And we season the world with hope when others are cynical or desperate or depressed.

Leads the cause of community. We gather people together to affirm the value of relationship. We give because God has given so much to us. And we grow and urge others to grow under God's influence.

Transmits the Truth of God to a forgetful and fiercely independent world. We tell about Jesus and teach about God's goodness and purpose for our lives. We temper the raging anger and violence of the nations with a gospel of peace.

We season and flavor the world. We preserve all that's good and bring salvation in the name of Christ. We purify, not by throwing salt at people, but by laying down our lives in the pathways and pools of human interaction, hoping that our presence melts the ice of a hardened heart and brings refreshment to putrid waters. We are agents of health and wholeness. Our gospel is best; not because we are best, but because it is true, transformative and altogether good.

Jesus asks us to be salty. God grieves the sadness and lostness of the human experience. As our hearts become aligned with God's heart, we are spread and sprinkled around the planet in strategic ways to season, save and salve.

If salt loses its saltiness, says Jesus, how can it be restored? It's lost its value. Un-salty salt is like lukewarm water that neither refreshes like cold water or cleanses and transforms like hot water. Jesus urges us to stay salty, whatever it takes. And like Jesus himself, we're called to pour yourself out generously on a needy world.