

BIBLICAL INSIGHTS #116:

“PASS THE SALT”

By John Temples

People have been “passing the salt” at meals for a long time. As far back as early Bible times, in fact. Job (who may have lived before Abraham) said, “Can flavorless food be eaten without salt?” (Job 6:6). Salt was an important part of Jewish family meals and also of the sacrificial system of the Old Testament. God told the Jews, “Every offering of your grain offering you shall season with salt; you shall not allow the salt of the covenant of your God to be lacking from your grain offering. With all your offerings you shall offer salt” (Leviticus 2:13). Newborn babies were rubbed with salt, as we read in Ezekiel: “As for your nativity, on the day you were born your navel cord was not cut, nor were you washed in water to cleanse you; you were not rubbed with salt nor wrapped in swaddling cloths” (Ezekiel 16:4).

In Jesus’s day, Roman soldiers were paid partially in salt rations, called *salaria*. From this word we get our word meaning pay for work performed: salary. We still say of someone who earns his pay, “He’s worth his salt.” Also in Bible times, salt was a symbol of long-lasting friendships and covenants. Let’s look at some interesting Bible references to salt:

LOT’S WIFE BECAME A PILLAR OF SALT

There were vast deposits of salt around Sodom and the south end of the Dead Sea (which was also called the Salt Sea, Genesis 14:3). So there were (and still are) many “salt pillars” or piles of salt in the area. Remember that God sent two angels to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah because of great wickedness. Just before they destroyed Sodom, they led Lot and his wife and daughters out of the city to safety (Genesis 19:12-25). However, Lot’s wife looked back (evidently not with just a casual or curious glance, but a look of fervent longing to return), and became a pillar of salt (Genesis 19:26).

It may be that while she was lingering, gazing, and perhaps even returning to Sodom, she was caught in the hailstorm of fire and brimstone (Genesis 19:24) and was so immediately encrusted that she maintained an erect posture--she became

a “pillar” of salt, not just a pile. Did God miraculously turn her into salt, or was her death a natural consequence of her reluctance to leave Sodom? The Bible does not say she was “changed into” a pillar of salt, as some translations render the text; it just says she “became” a pillar. The Bible also isn’t clear whether she was covered in the salt that rained down with the brimstone or if her remains were dusted with a coating of salt later. Either way, the result was the same.

The great lesson for us from the case of Lot’s wife is that once we have begun to follow the Lord, turning back will bring sure destruction.

“YOU ARE THE SALT OF THE EARTH”: JESUS

This famous saying of Jesus is found in the Sermon on the Mount, Matthew 5:13. Why did Jesus call His followers salt? He was making a point about the power of personal influence and example. He meant that just as salt alters the taste of food by coming in contact with it, God’s people ought to influence and alter society. Consider the properties of salt that make this analogy appropriate:

- **Salt preserves.** Before there were refrigerators, people kept meat from spoiling by salting it. Just as salt preserves meat, righteous people can preserve cities and even nations. Remember, ten righteous people could have saved Sodom from destruction. Regarding the coming destruction of Jerusalem, Jesus said, “And unless those days are shortened, no flesh would be saved; but for the elect’s sake those days will be shortened” (Matthew 24:22). Has America been spared God’s wrath because of the presence of us who believe?
- **Salt flavors.** Think how bland food would be without salt. Now, think how insipid and empty life would be if there were no Scriptures, no Christians, and no church of Christ. Ponder the loss to mankind if there were no religious art, music, benevolence, schools, hospitals, etc. Christianity imparts flavor to life! The religion of Christ makes good citizens, good wives and husbands, good employees. The religion of Christ imparts flavor to society through its uplifting teachings and moral principles.

- **Salt purifies.** A salt solution (saline) is routinely used to treat wounds and hasten healing. A Christian's influence can heal broken hearts and troubled souls. Our moral example can influence others to lead a purer life.
- **Salt creates thirst.** If you come upon someone dying of thirst, you don't offer him some salted nuts! The "salt" of our influence ought to create thirst in others for the peace and joy we have.
- **Salt is potent.** You don't have to bury meat in salt for it to be effectively seasoned. We use a salt shaker, not a salt pourer. Remember, just ten righteous souls would have preserved Sodom. Twelve apostles "salted" the whole world with the gospel. A few Christians turned the Roman Empire upside down (Acts 17:6). We are outnumbered by the wicked, but we have great power *as long as we stand out from the world*. (That's what Jesus meant when He said in the same verse, "But if the salt has lost its flavor [if Christians lose their purity, influence, and distinctiveness], how shall it [the earth] be seasoned?")

But in order for Christians to "salt" society, they must exert a direct influence on it. Burton Coffman writes, "Another pertinent observation regarding salt is that it must come in contact with that which is to be benefited by it. So must Christians come in contact with the rest of mankind. Christ did not encourage monasticism or asceticism. It is also proper to observe that SALT IS INDISPENSABLE. So are Christians. Some people pity believers; some have a patronizing air in their attitude; a few would abolish Christians; but, in this passage, Christ shows that Christians are truly indispensable to this world. THEY ARE THE SALT OF THE EARTH! Let us be salt!" (Comments on Matthew 5:13.)

A COVENANT OF SALT

There are two puzzling references to a "covenant of salt" in the Old Testament:

- Numbers 18:19--"All the heave offerings of the holy things, which the children of Israel offer to the Lord, I have given to you and your sons and daughters with you as an ordinance forever; it is a *covenant of salt* forever before the Lord with you and your descendants with you."

- 2 Chronicles 13:5--"Then Abijah stood on Mount Zemaraim, which is in the mountains of Ephraim, and said, 'Hear me, Jeroboam and all Israel: 5 Should you not know that the Lord God of Israel gave the dominion over Israel to David forever, to him and his sons, by a *covenant of salt*?"

An Internet source explains that a covenant of salt is a "Biblical phrase for a two-way agreement, the inviolability of which was symbolized by salt. A Middle Eastern saying, 'There is bread and salt between us,' meant that a relationship had been confirmed by sharing a meal. Salt symbolized the enduring nature of the alliance. In the OT salt appears in the relationship between God and Israel (Lv 2:13). As a purifying agent and preservative in the cereal offering, salt symbolized the indissoluble nature of the covenant between God and Israel."

Adam Clarke notes an interesting contrast between salt and leaven: "Salt was the opposite to leaven, for it preserved from putrefaction and corruption, and signified the purity and persevering fidelity that were necessary in the worship of God. Everything was seasoned with it, to signify the purity and perfection that should be extended through every part of the divine service, and through the hearts and lives of God's worshippers. It was called the salt of the covenant of God, because as salt is incorruptible, so was the covenant made with Abram, Isaac, Jacob, and the patriarchs, relative to the redemption of the world by the Incarnation and death of Jesus Christ." (Commentary on Leviticus 2:13)

So, a "covenant of salt" in Old Testament times involved promises and conditions which were meant to be long-lasting, incorruptible, and indissoluble as long as the covenant relationship between God and Israel lasted. That relationship did change with the death of Christ and the establishment of the New Testament. Hence, with the coming of the New Covenant, the entire Old Testament passed away, with all its "sub-covenants" such as covenants of salt.

SOWING A CITY WITH SALT

Judges 9:45 says that Abimelech, a son of Gideon and a would-be king of the city of Shechem, "...fought against the city all that day; he took the city and killed the people who were in it; and he demolished the city and *sowed it with salt*." Why did he cover the city with salt? Adam Clarke explains: "[He intended] that the destruction of this city should be a perpetual memorial of his achievements. The

salt was not designed to render it barren, as some have imagined; for who would think of cultivating a city? but as salt is an emblem of incorruption and perpetuity, it was no doubt designed to perpetuate the memorial of this transaction, and as a token that he wished this desolation to be eternal. This sowing a place with salt was a custom in different nations to express permanent desolation and abhorrence.”

“LET YOUR SPEECH BE SEASONED WITH SALT”

This colorful expression is found in Colossians 4:6--”Let your speech always be with grace, seasoned with salt, that you may know how you ought to answer each one.” Sadly, many Christians’ speech is seasoned, all right; but with pepper, not salt! What did Paul mean? Remember the qualities of salt: it preserves, flavors, purifies, and creates thirst. Therefore, it is a fitting symbol for our speech. Only gracious and helpful words should come out of our mouths. We should never say to anyone, "Now, take what I say with a grain of salt"! We must make sure our speech is pure, savory, and pleasing to sincere inquirers. "Let no corrupt communication proceed out of your mouth" (Ephesians 4:29). Our speech must be pure and positive.

“HAVE SALT IN YOURSELVES”

Jesus was on His way to Jerusalem, shortly to give His life for us. Along the way, He was preparing His disciples for the monumental events to come. He told them, “For everyone will be seasoned with fire, and every sacrifice will be seasoned with salt. Salt is good, but if the salt loses its flavor, how will you season it? Have salt in yourselves, and have peace with one another” (Mark 9:49-50).

In this passage, Jesus used two contrasting metaphors: fire and salt. Fire is a destructive agent, while salt is a preservative agent. He was telling His disciples, and us, that while we will be tested by the fires of persecution and temptation, as long as our lives continue to be “seasoned with salt” (we maintain our Christian distinctiveness, identity, and influence), we will prevail.

Jesus is saying that the fires of persecution can have a purifying and refining effect on our lives IF we continue to have “salt”--we maintain our Christian character and continue to “flavor and season” those around us. The last part of verse 50 says, “Have salt in yourselves, and have peace with one another.” Instead of slandering and falsely judging one another (as the disciples had just

done with the man casting out demons, Mark 9:38-40), we ought to encourage one another and be at peace with one another.

CONCLUSION

Salt is one of God's most beneficial gifts to mankind. It makes our food tasty, it preserves, it purifies; and so it is a fitting symbol of our Christian identity, influence, and speech. Let us be grateful for salt and be salt to others. --John Temples