



What Shepherds Need to Know about The Biblical Meaning of Salt, Oil, and Lamps

Part One: Salt

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Anyone serious about their faith is apt to recognize the metaphor of believers being the “salt of the earth” (Matthew 5:13) and they may also know the admonition to:

⁶Let your speech always be with grace, as though seasoned with salt, so that you will know how you should respond to each person. Col 4: 6 NASB

Things become less familiar when mention is made of being “salted with fire” (Mark 9:49). Thayer’s Lexicon includes this observation under “salt”:

*The sacrifice is sprinkled with salt and thus rendered acceptable to God...
...every true Christian is rendered ripe for a holy and happy association with God in his kingdom by fire, i.e. by the pain of afflictions and trials, which if endured with constancy tend to purge and strengthen the soul. ...¹*

Some study of the word will show that there are four Hebrew words and four Greek words all usually translated as “salt” or “to be salted.” A student of the Word will likely also know that all offerings made in the Temple required the addition of salt, and that it is also connected with covenants. Curiously, Vine’s Expository Dictionary includes “salt” only in the NT portion, one part of which especially agrees with Thayer’s observation:

(b) metaphorically, of "believers," [Mat 5:13](#) (1st part); of their "character and condition," [Mar 9:50](#) (2nd part); of "wisdom" exhibited in their speech, [Col 4:6](#). ...Being possessed of purifying, perpetuating and antiseptic qualities, "salt" became emblematic of fidelity and

¹ Blue Letter Bible. "Dictionary and Word Search for *halizō* (Strong's 233)". Blue Letter Bible. 1996-2010. 9 Apr 2010. <
[http:// www.blueletterbible.org/lang/lexicon/lexicon.cfm?
Strong=G233&t=KJV](http://www.blueletterbible.org/lang/lexicon/lexicon.cfm?Strong=G233&t=KJV) >

friendship among eastern nations. To eat of a person's "salt" and so to share his hospitality is still regarded thus among the Arabs. So in Scripture, it is an emblem of the covenant between God and His people, [Num 18:19](#); [2Ch 13:5](#); so again when the Lord says "Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace one with another" ([Mar 9:50](#)). In the Lord's teaching it is also symbolic of that spiritual health and vigor essential to Christian virtue and counteractive of the corruption that is in the world, e.g., [Mat 5:13](#), see (b) above. ²

"Purifying, perpetuating and antiseptic qualities" sounds like the biological terms for what we would recognize in Scripture as sanctifying, sustaining and holy (or "set apart" as it holy literally means.) These qualities are useful for a healthy physical life as well as for a healthy spiritual life.

Conversely, many people also know the admonition that believers are not to lose their saltiness which comes in association with the call to be salt. Generally, we have some vague idea that salt is a preservative and maybe even that it brings something special to the world to behave differently than non-believers when believers act as salt. Some may also know that an overabundance of salt is symbolic of destruction. It can also be an indication of barrenness.

"While "salt" is used to fertilize soil, excess of it on the ground produces sterility (e.g., [Deu 29:23](#); [Jdg 9:45](#); [Jer 17:6](#); [Zep 2:9](#))."³

These things are indeed, true, but there is much more! We can learn more by looking into the meaning of the very word itself. Though there are several words in both Hebrew and Greek that are rendered as "salt" in English, their meanings are all closely related.

"Melah" is the transliteration of a common word for salt, used 28 times in the Old Testament/Tanakh. It refers to the idea of seasoning and is also used as "disappear" (as salt does when put in water) KJV renders it as salt, season, temper and vanish.⁴ Although it seems to disappear, we are aware that salt actually remains in suspension in water. It is present with the water but does not lose its characteristics, remaining independent. This, too, sounds like Scripture: in the world but not of it.

² Vine, W. E. "Salt (Noun, Adjective and Verb), Saltness," *Vine's Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words*. Blue Letter Bible. 1940. 1 Apr 2007. 7 Apr 2010.
<[http://www.blueletterbible.org/Search/Dictionary/viewTopic.cfm?type=GetTopic&Topic=Salt+\(Noun,+Adjective+and+Verb\),+Saltness&DictList=9#Vine's](http://www.blueletterbible.org/Search/Dictionary/viewTopic.cfm?type=GetTopic&Topic=Salt+(Noun,+Adjective+and+Verb),+Saltness&DictList=9#Vine's)>

³ Vine, W. E. "Salt (Noun, Adjective and Verb), Saltness," *Vine's Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words*. Blue Letter Bible. 1940. 1 Apr 2007. 7 Apr 2010.
<[http://www.blueletterbible.org/Search/Dictionary/viewTopic.cfm?type=GetTopic&Topic=Salt+\(Noun,+Adjective+and+Verb\),+Saltness&DictList=9#Vine's](http://www.blueletterbible.org/Search/Dictionary/viewTopic.cfm?type=GetTopic&Topic=Salt+(Noun,+Adjective+and+Verb),+Saltness&DictList=9#Vine's)>

⁴ Ancient Hebrew Lexicon (AHLB) by Jeff A. Benner; copyright 2005.

Zodhiates Hebrew Dictionary defines salt, from melah, Strong's #4417 as "powder, salt as easily pulverized and dissolved." It is from a root word, #4415, which means "to eat salt, have maintenance" and is related to #4414, its primitive root which means: to rub to pieces or pulverize; to disappear as dust; to salt whether internally or externally; salt, season, temper together, vanish away."

The Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament also makes this connection;

Ex 30:35 the ingredients used in compounding incense were to be salted (KJV "tempered together") Salt and oil were always mixed with the meal offering Lev 2:13.

Ezek 43:24 notes that the priest will cast salt on the burn offerings of the millennial age. The incense offering, the symbol of public worship to 'God, must also be "seasoned with salt" Ex 30:35

"Melach" is Strong's # 4416, a related word from Aramaic for salt. Since Hebrew uses a root system which means that words that share similar root consonants also are generally related, we note that there is a close relationship here with the word "melek" Strong's #4428 which means "king, prince or leader." What would salt have to do with a leader or king? In the sense of maintenance, it would seem that a leader needs to have self-control or be able to maintain a right attitude under trying circumstances. One who entertains another with food or salt in middle Eastern custom, accepts the responsibility for protection of that one should danger arise no matter the cost or danger to himself. Such a protected one would look to the leadership of the host, and could be said to be salted. One who provides protection could be said to be "worth his salt" though there are also connections to be made with salt being given as a salary or a wage to a good worker. Believers are exhorted to be salt and they are also referred to as a kingdom of Priests, or the Priesthood of all believers, which would be a leadership function. (Ex. 19:5-6; Heb 4:14,16; and one more:

"You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light" (1 Peter 2:9).

Being "salt" in this sense, involves proclaiming His deeds and how we have been brought into His light. Proclaiming His light is one way to banish the darkness of sin and wrongdoing.

It is interesting, too, to note that there are several possible ways to describe a leader or one who rules. One that relates to our word melach, is "meshal", Strong's # 4475. It shares two of the three consonant roots, but is not as close a connection as "melek." It refers to the kind of leadership that rules by example, character and servanthood, rather than "rada" which refers to an aggressive ruling as in the case of ruling over an enemy. "Meshal" has more to do with a

leader who serves those he leads.⁵ Perhaps one might say that he is consumed, or made to vanish as he works and serves among them. This is the verb used to describe the rule of a husband “over” his wife; and is a picture of our Messiah’s rule as Bridegroom over His Bride. Does it seem like an accident that even a distant “cousin” of a word has relevant meaning?

As we pull out some of the descriptive terms here for salt, we find that believers are to be like “salt” in the following ways:

- pulverized
- in the fire
- Emblematic of friendship and fidelity
- Counteract the corruption in the world
- Be tempered, disappear, vanish
- Future inclusion of salt in millennial age in incense offering, public worship.
- rendered ripe for a holy and happy association with God in his kingdom by fire.

It is the last one that seems to represent the final outcome of being “salt.” The picture seems to be one of being maintained and self controlled, yet also being brought through trials and afflictions, and being pulverized to the point of being tempered or vanishing, in fire or in water. Through this seeming destruction salt counteracts the corruption in the world.

Shepherds: are you personally and spiritually prepared for the fire, trials and afflictions that will cause you to be pulverized and appear to vanish in your service to our Creator? Are you “ripe” for association with Him?

Are you ready to function as a shepherd as your people undergo these same trials? Shepherd comes from the Hebrew word, “ra’a” Strong’s #7462 and TWOT #2185. TWOT notes that there is a translation confusion here as the same word is rendered numerous ways in English, though the root meaning is “to pasture” or shepherd. Generally, it means to care for the sheep and is used of leaders such as Jacob, Isaac, David, Rebekah, Rachel and even Messiah, our Great Shepherd. Taking it back to the ancient Hebrew, it is a “resch” and an “ayin” and literally means “man watches.” Will you be able to watch and stand firm, encouraging them as trials and tribulations arise? Will you retain your strength in Him not to interfere while He is working through these trials in their lives? It is only under His wing and covering that anyone could do so!

Next: how does salt “ripen” and relate to oil and lamps?

⁵ Bereshyth Study; Bradford Scott; www.Wildbranch.org.