

Salt: how much should men possess?

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SALT IS SO ubiquitous that it is neither regarded nor prized by society today. It is a common condiment at meal times, it is inexpensive and a readily available commodity used for swimming pool maintenance and to de-ice roads, and it is well known in Australia as the culprit that creates havoc and distress for soil conservation and land management.

Salt is a remarkable mineral with the power to preserve and to destroy. The Scriptural narrative sprinkles salt with savour to stimulate our spiritual thought, so that we might arrest our corruption and preserve the covenant relationship with our God: "Can that which is unsavoury be eaten without salt?" (Job 6:6).

The word 'salt' is *sal* in Latin, *hals* or *halas* in Greek, and in Hebrew *melach*, also translated 'to season', 'to temper together', 'to vanish away'. Sea water is the richest source of salt (3.3%), and, interestingly, the salt content of water in the Dead Sea is about five times that of ordinary sea water.

The chemical composition of salt

Salt is a compound formed from two elements, sodium (39.34%) and chlorine (60.66%). Sodium and chlorine do not occur on their own in nature, but only in compounds with other elements. Sodium is a bluish-white metal which reacts vigorously with water, liberating hydrogen. Chlorine is a yellowish-green poisonous gas with a suffocating odour, used as a poison gas in the First World War. Yet when these two elements are combined to form salt, chemically known as sodium chloride (NaCl), the cube-shaped crystals of salt are colourless to white, very stable and not poisonous.

Salt is crystalline, the crystals having a cubic or six-sided structure which contains the sodium and chlorine atoms in the form of ions. In salt, the smaller positive ions of sodium are each surrounded by six larger negative ions of chlorine. The chlorine ions are similarly each surrounded by six ions of sodium.

Salt in history

Men have fought and died for salt. During the Carthaginian Wars, the Carthaginians battled with the Romans and the Greeks to win control

over salt-producing centres on the Mediterranean and Adriatic coasts and to secure the vital salt trade routes. The Romans won, and used salt as a weapon of war, ploughing salt into the land of the Carthaginians to destroy its productivity, the soil becoming so saline that it was unable to produce food crops or sustain trees.

Salt was an important commodity, and helped establish various trade routes. Many roads linking countries in the Middle East and Far East were said to have their origins in the salt trade, when salt, transported by camels, would be bartered for spices, silk and jewellery. One of the oldest roads is the Via Salaria (Salt Route), over which Roman salt from Ostia was carried into other parts of the empire. One of the reasons for the Roman invasion of Britain was that Julius Caesar had heard that the country was rich in salt. Roman soldiers used to receive part of their wages in salt, called a *salarium*, from which we get the word 'salary'. Salt bars were also used as currency in Ethiopia, Tibet and Borneo, whilst some governments have imposed salt taxes.

Salt for our bodies

Salt is vital for the correct functioning of our bodies. Our bodies cannot store salt, and need some every day to replenish what is lost in perspiration and urine. It is thus like the Word of truth, which needs to be consumed daily for our spiritual minds to be replenished. Each person's body contains about fifty grams of salt, and we need four to six grams of salt per day to maintain the correct balance of salt in the body.* Salt is required to help maintain the normal volume of blood and plasma in the blood vessel system. It also maintains the correct balance of water in and around the tissues of the body. This is important, since any major changes in the balance of salt and water can destroy the cells and lead to serious illness.

* Many nutritionists consider that a daily intake of one to three grams is adequate; excessive intake of salt is thought to be a contributory factor in the high incidence of hypertension (high blood pressure) in Western countries. (Source: BMA *Family Health Encyclopaedia*, p. 927.)—D.J.B.

The level of sodium in the blood is controlled by the kidneys, and plays an important role in the digestion of food and in making the heart beat correctly. It is also necessary for the formation and proper functioning of nerve fibres that carry impulses to and from the brain.

Salt to flavour, disinfect and preserve

Salt improves the flavour of food, and has long been used as a disinfectant and food preservative. Before refrigerators were invented, many people kept a barrel of salt in their kitchens and spread salt liberally on meat, fish and vegetables to preserve them and stop the growth of bacteria and other microorganisms that cause food to rot. Salt absorbs the water in which these microorganisms live, causing them to dry out and die, thus preserving the food.

Where is salt found?

As stated above, sea water contains about 3.3% salt. Enclosed seas, such as the Mediterranean and Red Seas, contain higher levels of salt. Natural brines (brine is water containing a high concentration of salt) of commercial importance are found in the Dead Sea, Austria, France, Germany, India and the United States. The Dead Sea, with an area of 1,020 square kilometres, contains 12,650 million tons of salt. The concentration of salt in the Dead Sea varies from 270 to 300 parts per thousand to a depth of about forty metres, and it contains other elements, such as potassium and bromine.

Salt also occurs as rock salt, crystalline sodium chloride, which occurs widely in the form of rock masses and beds produced, it is thought, by the evaporation of sea water. Another source is salt domes, which occur when pressures in the earth's crust force up plugs of rock salt measuring up to a mile across. Much commercial salt is manufactured from rock salt, sea water or artificial brines.

Different types of salt

It has been estimated that there are about 15,000 uses for salt and its derivatives. Salts of different shapes and crystal sizes are produced to meet particular requirements. Other substances may be added to give the salt other properties. Baker's salt, for example, is very fine and looks almost like flour, whilst very fine salt is also required in hospitals for producing saline drips. Coarse salt is used for de-icing roads, treating hides and preserving fish.

Salt in Scripture

Salt was of profound importance to the children of Israel because it was to accompany every offering. For an offering to be accepted, and ascend as a sweet-smelling savour to Yahweh, it had to contain salt, irrespective of the type of offering. This was a perpetual covenant: "every oblation of thy meat offering shalt thou season with salt; neither shalt thou suffer the salt of the covenant of thy God to be lacking from thy meat offering: with all thine offerings thou shalt offer salt" (Lev. 2:13). The salt of common life was the symbol of the covenant.

Salt was emblematic in that it abated spiritual corruption, purified, seasoned, and perpetuated antiseptic qualities. The power of salt to strengthen and preserve, and arrest putrefaction and corruption, reminds us daily of our state of corruption and our need for atonement and redemption through Christ. If no salt was offered there was no sweet-smelling savour to Yahweh, and the offering was no better than that of Cain (Gen. 4:5-7; Prov. 15:8; 1 Jno. 3:12). Salt became representative of the covenant between Yahweh and His people (Num. 18:19). The inheritance of the kingdom of Israel by King David and his sons was also sealed by a covenant of salt (2 Chron. 13:5).

Three times in the New Testament narrative Christ refers to salt (Mt. 5:13; Mk. 9:49,50; Lk. 14:34,35). The local fishing communities around the Sea of Galilee would know the importance of salt in preserving their food and fishing harvest from deterioration and corruption in the hot climate.

Jesus, in saying, "Ye are the salt of the earth" (Mt. 5:13), uses salt as a figure to show that the disciples of Jesus are the preserving element of society, preventing by their influence the spread of fleshly corruption in their community. Men are "salt" if they have the qualities of the Truth spoken of in the preceding verses (qualities such as meekness, mercy, purity of heart, desire for righteousness), and are likened to "the light of the world" (v. 14).

The savour and wholesomeness of salt existed in God's covenant by obedience and sacrifice, but for salt to *lose* savour would imply that the Truth was compromised: "For every one shall be salted with fire, and every sacrifice shall be salted with salt. Salt is good: but if the salt have lost his saltness, wherewith will ye season it? Have salt in yourselves, and have peace one with another" (Mk. 9:49,50). The principle of salt was to deny

and crucify self. Salt has to permeate to arrest corruption—a painful process.

Types of salt in the Bible

Various types of salt are referred to in the Word:

Salt full of savour. Salt is used as a metaphor for spiritual status in terms of a person's true character, condition, virtue and vigour for the Truth, as in the verses from Matthew 5 and Mark 9 quoted above, and also in Colossians 4:6: "Let your speech be always with grace, seasoned with salt". Having salt implies wisdom in speech, being purified with the perpetuating and antiseptic qualities of God's Word, so counteracting the corruption of the world.

Inferior salt. There were inferior types of salt which were applied as manure to the soil, or to hasten the decomposition of dung. So we read in Matthew 5:13: "but if the salt have lost his savour, wherewith shall it be salted? it is thenceforth good for nothing, but to be cast out, and to be trodden under foot of men"; and in Luke 14:34,35: "Salt is good: but if the salt have lost his savour, wherewith shall it be seasoned? It is neither fit for the land, nor yet for the dunghill; but men cast it out. He that hath ears to hear, let him hear".

Excessive salt. Too much salt can produce sterility and salinity. Australia is a land familiar with the problem of salinity because of massive land clearance coupled with poor agricultural and farming practices since colonisation.

Salt the deliberate destroyer. Sowing salt was used as a weapon of destruction against the foundations of a city to ensure its irretrievable ruin. Thus in Judges 9:45 we read: "Abimelech fought against the city all that day; and he took the city, and slew the people that was therein, and beat down the city, and sowed it with salt". Furthermore, Jesus exhorts his disciples, "Remember Lot's wife" (Lk. 17:32), referring to Genesis 19:26: "But his wife looked back from behind him, and she became a pillar of salt". Lot's wife turned her heart and mind back to Sodom, and the result was that she became inanimate in the things of the Truth. The sudden explosion of burning salt and sulphur consumed her, and she became like the Jebel Usdum, or Mountain of Sodom, a great salt mass.

Conclusion

The significance of salt merits our careful consideration. As the Apostle Paul instructs us: "Let your speech be always with grace, seasoned with salt, that ye may know how ye ought to answer every man" (Col. 4:6).

References

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