

SALT OF THE EARTH IN MATTHEW 5:13

VERSES

“Blessed are those who have been persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when *men* cast insults at you, and persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you falsely, on account of Me. Rejoice, and be glad, for your reward in heaven is great, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you. You are the salt of the earth (metonymy for the people living on the earth); but if the salt has become tasteless (*moraino*), how will it be made salty *again* (*alizo*)? It is good for nothing anymore, except to be thrown out and trampled under foot by men” (Matt 5:10–13). “Salt is good; but if the salt becomes unsalty (*analos*), with what will you make it salty *again* (*artuo*)? Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another” (Mark 9:50). *Analos* means “pertaining to a lack of salt — ‘without salt, saltless’” (Louw & Nida) and *artuo* means “to add condiments to food — ‘to season’” (Louw & Nida). Therefore, salt is good; but if even salt has become tasteless (*moraino*), with what will it be seasoned (*artuo*)? It is useless either for the soil or for the manure pile; it is thrown out. He who has ears to hear, let him hear” (Luke 14:34–35).

PRECEDING CONTEXT

Followers of Jesus who are unjustly persecuted in this life will receive great rewards in the next life (5:10–12). But those who become useless (lose their saltiness) will be justly persecuted in this life (trampled by men) and, by implication, forfeit or lose a great reward in the next life. Unjust persecution, suffering, and great reward (5:10–12), then, is contrasted with just persecution, suffering, and divine discipline (5:13).

SIMILARITIES AND CONTRASTS

Note the following parallels between verses 10–12 and verse 13: (1) disciples || disciples, (2) persecution (“insults . . . say all kinds of evil against you falsely”) || persecution (“trampled under foot by men”), (3) useful || useless (“good for nothing anymore”), (4) troubled || troublesome, (5) valuable || worthless (“thrown out”), (6) undeserved suffering (“for the sake of righteousness” and “on account of Me”) || deserved suffering, (7) blessing (“blessed . . . blessed . . . rejoice and be glad”) || cursing (“trampled under foot by men”), (8) hated by men || blessing to all men, (9) great reward in heaven (“your reward in heaven is great”) || no reward in heaven from God (but “trampled under foot by men” on earth now).

BLESSINGS PROVIDED BY SALT: PRESERVATIVE AND TASTE ENHANCEMENT (PRESERVES FOOD AND ENHANCES TASTE)

Salt is a preservative *and* taste enhancer (Job 6:6). The emphasis of this verse is not on preserving food but on the taste enhancement property of salt. *Moraino* means “to become insipid or tasteless . . . ‘to lose taste’” (Louw & Nida). Or “make tasteless pass. *become tasteless, insipid*, of salt” (BAGD). Salt produces more taste in foods, that is, it increases the blessings food provides for men—not just nutrition but a great taste sensation (from bland to rich flavor). Salt makes food more enjoyable; and, by analogy, useful believers make life on earth more enjoyable for everyone because the earth is blessed more by God. In other words, worthy believers preserve *and* increase the blessings God pours out on the world.

CURSING OF USELESS SALT

If salt fails to provide blessings and enjoyment, it will not be valued or blessed, but trampled on by men. Trampled under foot by men is the opposite of the future great reward promised to worthy saints by God (5:12).

PERMANENT DAMAGE

Disciples who lose their saltiness are useless, worthless, won’t become salty again (return to God) apart from a miracle, are thrown out (not used as servants by God), and are trampled under foot by men (agents of divine discipline). *Alizo* is “(a causative derivative of ἅλς ‘salt; . . .) to cause something to taste salty — ‘to apply salt to something, to restore the flavor to salt’” (Louw & Nida). “There is no salt for salt” (Maundrell, about A.D. 1690). And there are no salt-substitutes!

ANCIENT CUSTOMS IN THE HOLY LAND

To prohibit growth (Judg 9:45; Psa 107:33–34; Jer 17:5–7), rub babies (for antiseptic reasons, Ezek 16:4), season food (Job 6:6; Col 4:6), season offerings (Lev 2:13; Ezra 6:9; Ezek 43:24), ratify covenants (to last a long time, Num 18:19; 2 Chr 13:5), and evaporate in salt pits (Zeph 2:9). “. . . pure salt cannot lose its taste. In the ancient world, however, what was often sold as salt was highly adulterated and the sodium chloride could leach out in humid weather, in which case the residue (normally a form of lime) would be useless” (Louw & Nida). “I have often seen just such salt, and the identical disposition of it that our Lord has mentioned. A merchant of Sidon, having farmed of the Government the revenue from the importation of salt, brought over an immense quantity from the marshes of Cyprus—enough, in fact, to supply the whole province for at least twenty years. This he had transferred to the mountains, to cheat the Government out of some small percentage. Sixty-five houses in June. . . were rented and filled with salt. These houses have merely earthen floors, and the salt next the ground in a few years entirely spoiled. I saw large quantities of it literally thrown into the street, to be trodden under foot of men and beasts. It was “good for nothing.” . . the salt used in this country is not manufactured by boiling clean salt-water, nor quarried from mines, but is obtained from marshes along the sea-shore, as in Cyprus, or from salt lakes in the interior, which dry up in summer, as the one in the desert north of Palmyra, and the great Lake of Jebbul, south-east of Aleppo. The salt of our Sidon merchant was from the vast marshes near Larnaca. I have seen these marshes covered with a thick crust of salt, and have also visited them when it had been gathered into heaps like hay-cocks in a meadow. The large winter lake south-east of Aleppo I have found dried up by the last of August, and the entire basin, further than the eye could reach, was white as snow with an incrustation of coarse salt. Hundreds of people were out gathering and carrying it to Jebbul, where the Government stores were kept. Maundrell, who visited the lake at Jebbul, tells us that he found salt there which had entirely “lost its savour,” and the same abounds among the *debris* at Usdum, and in other localities of rock-salt at the south end of the Dead Sea. Indeed, it is a well-known fact that the salt of *this country*, when in contact with the ground, or exposed to rain and sun, does become insipid and useless. From the manner in which it is gathered, much earth and other impurities are necessarily collected with it. . . . It is not only good for nothing itself, but it actually destroys all fertility wherever it is thrown; and this is the reason why it is cast into the street. . . . so troublesome is this corrupted salt, that it is carefully swept up, carried forth, and thrown into the street. There is no place about the house, yard, or garden where it can be tolerated. No man will allow it to be thrown on to his field, and the only place for it is the street; and there it is cast, to be trodden under foot of men” (William M. Thomson, *The Land and the Book*, 381–382). “About two miles to the south of the date groves are a number of shallow ponds into which the sea flows at high tide; here the salt is made which supplies all the peninsula, as well as the fishermen for curing their fish; the openings of the ponds being closed with sand, the water is left to evaporate, when a thick crust of salt is left, which is collected by the Bedouins” (J. L. Burckhardt, *Travels in Syria and the Holy Land*, chapter 7).

LESSON FOR LIVING

Salt and disciples have many uses, such as preserving (from judgment), enhancing taste (providing more enjoyment), healing (spiritual wounds), and causing a thirst (for God). But prolonged contact with the earth (sun, rain, moisture in the ground) leaches the salt, leaving only worthless impurities. Note: the saltiness of salt is destroyed by the earth! As salt becomes earthly and insipid, so believers may become worldly and useless—and cease being a blessing to the earth. But those who obey and serve God are the salt of the earth: in the same way salt preserves food and enhances its flavor, making it last longer, more enjoyable, and a greater blessing for all, so believers preserve this present earth from judgment and increase its blessings, making life on earth more enjoyable for everyone. I believe the loss of personal, national, and worldwide blessings today (droughts, floods, crop failures, forest fires, tornados, hurricanes, earthquakes, tsunamis, financial crises, terrorist attacks, wars) is a result of lost savor among this generation of Christians. *Principle*: present blessings and eternal rewards are proportional to obeying and serving God—for individuals, Israel, nations, and the world.