

Stay Salty

Mark 9:49-50

49 Everyone will be salted with fire. 50 "Salt is good, but if it loses its saltiness, how can you make it salty again? Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with each other."

This is a very difficult passage to interpret—trying to figure out what Jesus means by salt, and what on earth this has to do with the context. There are a lot of theories. Let's see if we can work our way through it.

Everyone Gets Salted

49 Everyone will be salted with fire.

Two big questions here: 1) what does the fire represent? And 2) What does it mean to be salted? The NIV doesn't translate it, but the first word in the sentence is "for," so Jesus connects this with what he just said, which was a description of hell. **48 where their worm does not die and the fire is not quenched, for, everyone will be salted with fire.** So the fire of v.49 is connected to the fire of v.48, which refers to torment in hell. Obviously he's not saying everyone will go to hell, so I take this to mean everyone will experience torment and suffering. So the fire refers to suffering.

What about salt? If you read the commentaries, they will go on and on about all the different uses of salt in that day—seasoning, preservative, fertilizer, etc. But it's not hard to figure out what Jesus has in mind because he uses the words "salted," and "saltiness." Both those words *always* refer to seasoning, not fertilizer or preservative or anything like that. They are words that describe putting salt on food in order to give it flavor. So what he is saying is we will all be seasoned, flavored, made to be tasty; and it will happen by means of suffering—fiery trials. So what does it mean to be flavored with salt? Is that a good thing or bad thing? **50 Salt is good** So, suffering makes you salty, and it's good to be salty. In fact, being salty is so good and so important that the whole point of this passage and other passages is to warn us not to lose it.

49 Everyone will be salted with fire. 50 "Salt is good, but if it loses its saltiness, how can you make it salty again? Have salt in yourselves

With all the difficulties of this passage, one thing that's crystal clear is this: Jesus wants us to be salty. So saltiness is being the way Jesus wants you to be. It's living in a Christ-honoring, God-pleasing way—a way that's palatable to God. So, what Jesus is saying here is that suffering will improve your character, and you must take care not to lose that. That's my feeble effort at interpreting this difficult passage. It could be wrong, but I'm fairly confident that it's right because it stays consistent with the word meanings in the immediate context... , and the overall point you end up with lines up perfectly with the broader context of the last couple chapters... , where following Jesus in suffering has been a major theme. And it's certainly in line with the context of Scripture as a whole, where being refined and sanctified through suffering is a dominant theme.

Sacrifice?

Many scholars see the imagery of sacrifice here, because that's the only other context in Scripture where you see salt and fire together. The grammar does not require that the fire accomplishes the salting. It could be translated "salted with fire" or "salted in fire" or "salted in connection with fire."¹

Ezekiel 43:24 ... the priests are to sprinkle salt on them and sacrifice them as a burnt offering to the LORD.

So did Jesus intend a reference to sacrifice here? It's possible, but I'm not convinced. First, salting sacrifices was not connected specifically to fire, because grain offerings as also salted (Leviticus 2:13).

Second, Luke is writing to Gentile Christians, so the procedures of the sacrificial processes were not a part of their daily life at all. It's true that Mark does assume his readers have a thorough knowledge of famous OT passages related to the Messiah, which isn't all that surprising. But being aware of one obscure verse that connects salt with burnt offerings seems less likely to me.

And third, the following statements about not losing their saltiness and having salt in themselves don't have clear meaning in the context of salting a sacrifice. So I'm not convinced that Jesus intended a sacrificial reference.

Stay Salty

So, Jesus says that we will all be made salty—sanctified, purified, refined, conformed to Christ's image, and it will happen by means of suffering. That's v.49. Then he goes on to his main point which is, Don't lose it. Have salt in yourselves and don't lose it. Because if you lose it, what good are you? Your task is to be salt; so if you lose that, you lose your reason for being. That's the point of the question:

50 ... if it loses its saltiness, how can you make it salty again?

If you grab the salt shaker on your table and the salt in there is tasteless, what are you going to do with that salt, salt it? No. If the salt in there somehow lost its taste, where would it go? Garbage can, right? It's worthless. And that's the implication here. In fact, he stated that explicitly on other occasions.

Matthew 5:13 "You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled by men.

Luke 12:34 "Salt is good, but if it loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? 35 It is fit neither for the soil nor for the manure heap; it is thrown out.

Nothing is more worthless than tasteless seasoning. It's like dry water.

Jesus wants to remind us—we have a purpose in this world. You're here for a reason. He saved you for a purpose—a purpose that's a lot bigger than just you going to heaven. God saved you, not just to give you something; but because he wanted something. He wanted salt in this world. It reminds me of Titus 2:14.

Titus 2:14 He gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good.

He wanted a special people for himself. He wanted, for himself, a people eager to do what is good in his eyes. In other words, he wanted a bunch of salty people, and he wanted that so much, he suffered and died to make it happen. Jesus died to make you that, so what could be worse than losing your saltiness?

¹ There is no preposition—only the dative case, which can convey any of those meanings (dative of means, dative of sphere, or dative of association or reference respectively). Πᾶς γὰρ πυρὶ ἀλισθήσεται.

Loss is a Possibility

And it's a real possibility. Jesus warned us about losing our saltiness on at least three different occasions. And if you're wondering how serious this is, just remember the context is all about not falling away and going to hell. Every indication is that he's still making the same point here, which means losing your saltiness is the same thing as turning away.

So really these last two verses are just a big exclamation point on the previous paragraph. If you lose your saltiness, you're worthless, so stay salty. And how do you stay salty? By amputating those parts of you that lead you in the direction of turning away and flinging them from you like a poisonous spider.

And if your Calvinism chokes on that, maybe it will help if I quote John Calvin's commentary on this passage: "Those who lose their faith, by which they were consecrated to God, and become without savor, are in a desperate condition: for the good savor cannot be acquired by any other seasoning. Besides, those who have become corrupted, by making void the grace of God, are worse than unbelievers, as salt spoils the land and the dunghill." I realize John Calvin wasn't nearly as Calvinistic as a lot of people today, but that's a word-for-word quotation.

Be at Peace

Okay—one last phrase.

50 ... Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with each other."

Remember, this whole discussion started with the disciples in an argument about which of them was the greatest. Now Jesus comes full circle and concludes by saying, "**Live at peace with each other.**" Almost all our personal conflicts arise from our quest for greatness. And the solution is saltiness—the Christ-pleasing character that comes through suffering.

Whenever you suffer, ask yourself, "Am I allowing this suffering to make me salty? Am I responding in a way that makes me more at peace with other people or less at peace? If my response to suffering makes me less at peace with them, it's probably because of my quest for earthly greatness. And I need to fling that away lest I lose my saltiness and end up in hell.

Notes on the Doctrine of Hell

Eternal

Woody Allen: Eternity is really long—especially toward the end. The doctrine of hell embarrasses a lot of Christians, and enrages a lot of critics, mainly because of the idea of it being eternal. People say it's too much it's too much punishment. When people object to the idea of hell, my question for them is this: "Is there anybody who deserves any punishment?" And, "Have you ever done anything that deserves any punishment?" If they answers are yes, then we're really on the same page—we're just negotiating the amount. They agree with the concept of punishment; they just think the way hell is described, it's too much.

And that makes sense, right? Because of course we would know better than God the right amount of punishment. Think about that. Who are we to weigh in on something like that? God sees the big picture, he knows everything, he sees the heart, he knows every sin, he is the only being in the universe who knows what perfect holiness is, and only he knows exactly what hell is really like. And we think we have some kind of valid input? If I were in a room with a bunch of NASA scientists planning a mission to Mars, I would not offer my opinions about how much rocket fuel they should put in the tank. If I met Tiger Woods, I wouldn't weigh in with my opinions about how you should begin your downswing. Even if we were just innocent bystanders, our opinion would be irrelevant, but we're the offenders who deserve the punishment. And we think we know better than God what is just?

Annihilationism

The most common adjustment to the biblical doctrine of hell is annihilationism—the idea that people just go out of existence rather than suffering torment forever. So in passages like this they say the fire goes forever even though the person is burned up and gone. If that's what it means, what's the point of calling it eternal fire instead of just fire? If I'm going to be burned to death, what do I care how long the fire keeps going after I die?

Also, the eternality of the fire is the same as the eternality of the life we receive in heaven. Matt 25:46 says that those who don't know Christ will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life. If the punishment is only temporary then eternal life would also be temporary. So eternal really does mean eternal.

Jesus' Emphasis on Hell

Another thing I mentioned in the message was how much Jesus emphasized this doctrine. Just to give you an idea of what I'm talking about, if you look just at the book of Matthew, Jesus warned about hell 3 different times in ch.5. Then again in ch.8. Again in ch.10. Twice in ch.13. Again in ch.18, in ch.22, twice in ch.23. Again in ch.24, and again in ch.25.

Go to the gospel of Luke and you'll see it in ch.12 and 13 and a whole discourse on it in Lk.16. I counted 30 different passages in the NT that speak about God's wrath against sinners. How can we possibly justify downplaying that?

If Jesus says one time that God loves the world than God loves the world, and that's an important doctrine. But if we want to learn from God's example of what should be emphasized, the warnings about wrath and punishment and hell stand out as something God is very concerned that people understand.

The Wrath of God

Some people say, "It's not really torment; it's just separation from God." It will be separation from God's favor, but it won't be separation from God's wrath. God will be there. Revelation 14:10 says that

those in hell will be tormented with burning sulfur in the presence of the holy angels and of the Lamb. Jesus will be there personally punishing people.

And the fact that hell is an expression of the wrath of God is what makes it a good thing and not a bad thing. God would not be a good God if He didn't have wrath over sin. He would be evil. If someone sees evil and it doesn't bother them, that person is evil. I read about some Muslim terrorists took over the school in Russia and were holding hundreds of children hostage. There was a standoff that went several days, during which time it was over 100 degrees in the building, no AC, and they wouldn't give the children any water. On top of that the terrorists were raping many of the older children. Then they set off a bomb in the gym and collapsed it on all the children that were in there. When that happened it scared all the rest of the children, and so they started running toward all the exits. There were hundreds of children and only 27 terrorists, and so at that point the terrorists just started shooting these terrified children in the back as they ran in panic, and just gunned down as many as they could. Inside the school they found a pile of 100 dead bodies. Hundreds were killed, and the day it ended there were about 100 kids in critical condition in the hospital. A good person will hate that. A good person hates evil, and the better the person, the more he hates it. And so since God is infinitely good, He must have an infinite hatred of evil. And that infinite hatred is expressed by infinite wrath.

In a world where there is evil, you can't have love without also having hate. You can't love the good without also hating evil. If I love you, I will hate those things that harm you. A God of Hate? So in order for God to be a God of love, He must also be a God of hate – He must have a perfect, infinite hatred of evil. And He does. His hatred of evil is as extreme as his love for good. A lot of people think "hate" is a dirty word, and they try to never use it – like it's a swear word. And if you are one of those people it probably makes you cringe when you hear me say God is a God of hate. But hate is not a dirty word, and God certainly isn't reluctant to use that word.

Dt.12:31 the LORD hates (false religion).

Dt.16:21 Do not set up any (idol) for these the LORD your God hates.

Pr.6:16 There are six things the LORD hates, seven that are detestable to him:

Isa.61:8 "For I, the LORD, love justice; I hate robbery and iniquity.

Zech.8:17 do not plot evil against your neighbor, and do not love to swear falsely. I hate all this," declares the LORD.

Mal.2:16 "I hate divorce," says the LORD God of Israel, "and I hate a man's covering himself with violence

And not only does God hate all these sins, but to the degree a person identifies himself with that sin, God hates that person.

Ps.5:5,6 you hate all who do wrong. 6 You destroy those who tell lies; bloodthirsty and deceitful men the LORD abhors.

Ps.11:5 The LORD examines the righteous, but the wicked and those who love violence his soul hates.

Wrath

So God is a God who hates evil, and loves justice, which means something has to be done about evildoers. There has to be punishment.

Rom 2:7-8 To those who by persistence in doing good seek glory, honor and immortality, he will give eternal life. 8 But for those who are self-seeking and who reject the truth and follow evil, there will be wrath and anger.

When we use the word *salvation*—being *saved*, what are we talking about? Saved from what? God. The blood of Christ saves us from God's wrath.

Romans 5:9 Since we have now been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God's wrath through him!

1 Thessalonians 1:10 speaks of Jesus, who rescues us from the coming wrath.

Two Complaints

It's ironic that people hate the doctrine of hell so much because their other big complaint against God is that he allows evil. "How could there be a loving, powerful God if there is so much evil in the world? Why would he just allow evil to continue to exist?" Then when God promises that someday he will judge and punish all evil they say, "Oh, that's just barbaric. How could a loving God do that?"

Hell is a terrifying truth, it is a solemn reality, it is heart-breaking; but it is not bad. It is good, because it reflects something God does in carrying out perfect justice and making all things right. We don't have to second-guess God on anything. He knows what he's doing.