



Learn Your Bible

Resources to help you learn and understand the Bible

Short Study 018 Biblical Symbols 2: Oil

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Read Exodus 30:22-32

One of the most prolific crops in Israel in biblical times was the olive. The fruit was crushed to produce olive oil; used in food, medicine, cosmetics, lighting and religious ritual. The symbolism of oil is seen mostly in its religious use.

1. What does it symbolise? Read 1 Sam 16:13. The prophet Samuel *anointed* Saul with oil (probably by pouring some on his head). Notice what came upon Saul following his anointing. Whenever you read in the Bible about people being anointed with oil or oil being poured on something, think of how this might signify something of the presence or work of the Holy Spirit.

2. Anointing. The passage in Exodus you read at the start of this study describes a special formula of olive oil and fragrant spices, reserved exclusively for holy use in anointing priests, the tabernacle and its furniture. Read Psalm 133:2. How much oil do you think must have been used to produce this effect? Would it take a mere dab? Later, kings and prophets were likewise anointed; as we shall go on to see. In every act of anointing, the person or thing receiving the holy oil was consecrated - set apart to be used in the service of God (*holy* means "separated").

3. The Oil of the Holy Spirit. Look up the following instances of anointing (either physically or spiritually) and see what person or group or persons was anointed in each case. Why do you think each of these would need the Holy Spirit for the task to which they were set apart? Exodus 30:30; 1 Kings 19:16a; 1 Kings 19:16b; Acts 10:38; 1 John 2:20,27.

4. Other references to oil. There are many (which you will find by searching with the aid of a concordance). Here are just a few:

The oil of joy (Isaiah 61:3).

Divine favour (Psalm 23:5; 92:10).

Anointing for healing (Mark 6:13; James 5:14).

To think about:

1. Oil is a source of power (in biblical times it was used in lamps). What does that tell us about the Holy Spirit? (Read Acts 1:8)
2. The ingredients of the sacred oil would have spread a delightful fragrance. Read 2 Cor 2:15-16. In which ways can we who have the Holy Spirit be a fragrance to those around us?

To dig deeper:

1. Read Isaiah 61:1-2 and Luke 4:14-21. Consider in what ways Isaiah's prophecy was fulfilled by Jesus.
2. Using a concordance, look up some references to oil in both the Old and New Testaments. Think about or consult commentaries to perceive the significance of using oil.