



asbury at HOME

Why Oil?

Life Through The Lens of Faith



Dear Friends,

There is something wonderfully different about oil in the Bible! God actually left a recipe for it. In Exodus 30, God tells Moses to gather myrrh, cinnamon, fragrant cane, cassia, and olive oil. He gives him the measurements, and He tells him how the ingredients are to be blended. He even calls for the work of a perfumer.

And then, almost as soon as He gives the recipe, God says something totally unexpected: Do not make this for ordinary use. "This shall be my holy anointing oil throughout your generations." Exodus 30:31

This is fascinating to me. Why give us a recipe and then tell us not to reproduce it for ourselves? Why oil? I don't know that Scripture ever gives us one simple answer. But the more I follow oil through the Bible, the more I think there is something here worth paying attention to.

I know something about oil because I work with it almost every day. Many of you know me through my work here at Asbury. What you may not know is that I spend part of my week as a massage therapist and sound practitioner. Over the years I have worked with countless bottles of oil.

Without oil, my hands can still touch the body. I can still apply pressure. I can still work. But oil changes the interaction! It allows my hands to move differently. It reduces resistance. It lets me work deeper without forcing my way there. What would otherwise pull against the skin begins to glide. Movement becomes easier, lighter, more fluid. And oil doesn't simply sit on the surface, it spreads, penetrates, and carries other things with it. It changes the way my hands encounter the body and, for a little while, the way the body moves through the world.

Maybe this is the reason that oil became such an extraordinary language in Scripture. When you begin following oil through the Bible, it seems to keep appearing at significant moments. Oil is poured over priests and over kings. Oil was used in worship. Oil burned in lamps. Oil was placed on wounds. Oil was associated with hospitality, abundance, gladness, healing, preparation, burial, and the presence of God. And perhaps most importantly oil marked something as being set apart. When Samuel takes a horn of oil and pours it over David, Scripture tells us: "From that day on, the Spirit of the Lord came powerfully over David." 1 Samuel 16:13.

The oil wasn't the Holy Spirit but something visible was happening on the outside while something invisible was happening within David's life; he was being anointed, chosen, set apart.

The Hebrew word *mashiach* – Messiah – means "anointed one." Suddenly oil isn't a small detail anymore. The story of oil is moving through Scripture towards a person. There is mystery in the recipe!

Go back to Exodus and notice what God tells Moses to do with the sacred oil. The tabernacle is anointed, the ark is anointed, the table is anointed, the lampstand is anointed, the altars and utensils are anointed. Then Aaron and his sons are anointed.

Wood, metal, fabric, bowls, tables, and people! Ordinary physical things are touched with and declared holy – set apart for God's purposes. The oil didn't make the wood better, or make the metal better, and it certainly wasn't magic! It marked a change in purpose and belonging. This belonged to God now.

Perhaps that helps explain the strange prohibition surrounding the recipe. God gives Israel the formula but tells them not to reproduce it for ordinary use. They weren't

being handed an ancient perfume recipe. They were being entrusted with something sacred. This fragrance wasn't meant to become common. The anointing wasn't something to imitate because you liked the smell of holiness, and the holiness wasn't hidden in the chemistry of the myrrh, cinnamon, cassia and olive oil. The holiness of it came from God saying "This is mine. Set it apart for me."

That idea travels much farther than Exodus, because this is what God does continually throughout Scripture. He takes ordinary things and gives them a holy purpose. Bread becomes more than bread; water becomes more than water. A shepherd becomes a king and fishermen become apostles. A cross – an instrument of execution – becomes a place where death itself is defeated. And oil becomes more than oil.

And then there is Mary. A hundred years later, in a house in Bethany, Jesus is at a table. Mary walks in carrying something extraordinarily valuable. John tells us that it was about a pound of pure nard – an expensive perfume. Then Mary does something some would call almost reckless with it. She pours it onto Jesus. Judas immediately calculates the waste. "Why wasn't this perfume sold, and the money given to the poor? It was a years' worth of wages!"

Three hundred denarii, this would have been an enormous amount. But Mary isn't calculating the cost as she pours the oil over Jesus. Then John gives us one tiny detail that to me may be the most beautiful sentence in this entire story: "And the house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume" (John 12:3).

The fragrance filled the house. I can pause here because it is the oil that does this! You can pour it in one place and its fragrance reaches people who were never touched by the oil itself. And here is Jesus - the Messiah, the Anointed One – and Mary is pouring out something extraordinarily costly on Him.

Jesus tells the others not to stop her. He connects what she is doing with His coming burial. Mary may not have understood what she was doing or what was about to happen, but Jesus did. The cross was coming, the tomb was coming, and somehow, just before it all, here is oil again. Fragrance. Anointing. Preparation. Extravagant love. Something precious being poured out with no intention of taking it back. That gives us one more clue about why oil matters so much in Scripture.

Oil is difficult to pour without losing control of it, once it is poured out it spreads. You cannot gather it back into the bottle. Is that why Mary's act feels so extravagant? She wasn't measuring out the minimum, appropriate amount; she broke open what was priceless and poured. The fragrance became evidence of what had happened.

Soon, Jesus Himself would do something remarkably similar, but not with oil; with His life. "This is my body, given for you." The Anointed One would become the one poured out. And suddenly the thread we've followed through Scripture becomes breathtaking. Oil poured over priests, oil poured over kings, oil poured over sacred things, oil burning to produce light, oil soothing wounds, oil preparing bodies, and then finally, costly perfume poured over Jesus as He moves toward the cross.

So why oil? I still don't think Scripture gives us one neat answer. Maybe that is part of its beauty. But I do know what oil does. It penetrates without violence. It softens without weakening. It allows movement without force. It carries fragrance beyond the place it was poured. It fuels a flame that gives light. It leaves evidence that it has been there. And once poured out, it cannot simply be gathered back up.

This could possibly be why oil became such a powerful biblical image for anointing. There is nothing magical about it, but there is something extraordinary about what happens when God touches something ordinary and says: "This is mine."

And possibly Mary's house gives us one final image to carry with us. One person poured something precious at the feet of Jesus, but the whole house smelled different because of it. A life set apart to God is something like that. The anointing is never meant to make the person carrying it seem special; it is meant to change the atmosphere around them. What God pours into one life can become a fragrance experienced by an entire room.

Come be part of the conversation. If this message met you in a meaningful way, or if you have been reflecting, praying, or simply sitting with these words, we invite you to reach out.

You can call the church office # (316) 942-1491 or send me an email anytime – kate.green@asburychurch.org. Your thoughts and experiences are a gift to us.

With Love,

Kate Green, the Asbury Staff, and your Asbury Church Family