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**The Sealing Work of the Holy Spirit**

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Paul, under the inspiration of God, used the imagery of the ancient practice of sealing to describe the Holy Spirit's work in the believer. To understand this important teaching we must first consider the historical-cultural context.

**Seals in the Biblical World**

Seals were common in the ancient world from the third millennium BC. In fact, Herodotus (ca. 484–425 BC) mentioned that every man in Mesopotamia possessed both a staff and a seal.<sup>1</sup> Seals in the ancient world were made in the shape of either a roll, cylinder, scarab, or signet ring. Gottlieb Fitzer explains that the material on which the seal was rolled or impressed was usually damp loam or clay. This was then dried off in the air or baked in an oven. We thus have many clay tablets with seals impressed, or vessels on which the handles esp. bear the seal of the potter or the owner. When a document was sealed some clay was put on it and the seal could then be impressed on this. We do not have any examples of wax seals from antiquity. Scrolls, books and letters were sealed by sealing the tie which held them together.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Herodotus, *Hist.* 1.195. See Gen 38:18.

<sup>2</sup> Gottlieb Fitzer, “*sphragis, sphragiz*←, *katasphragiz*←,” *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (hereafter referred to as *TDNT*), ed. [Footnote continued on next page ... ]

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Seals served as legal protection of property, proof of identity, authority, and accreditation.<sup>3</sup> Reinier Schippers notes that the real importance of the seal is a legal one: the owner puts his mark on his possessions, his beasts (cf. Virgil, *Georgics* 3, 157 ff.; *BGU* I, 87, 12 f.; P. Teb. 419), his slaves (cf. Pliny, *Nat. Hist.* 25, 13, 173; *BGU* I, 15, etc.) and thereby guards his property against theft. To that extent one can call it a protecting sign or a guarantee. When used with documents (wills, deeds of sale, etc.) the seal served as a signature to authorize what was written there (cf. *TDNT* VII 941). Things sealed were at the disposal of the possessor of the seal. This applied not only to private persons, but also particularly to the authorities of a city and to kings. The seal symbolized their authority.<sup>4</sup>

The Scriptures attest to these uses of seals.

## SEALS IN THE BIBLE

### OWNERSHIP

When the bridegroom in the Song of Solomon expresses to his beloved his desire that she give her love to him alone, he uses the figure of a seal of ownership. He asks that she put him “like a seal over your heart, Like a seal on your arm” (Song 8:6 NASB<sup>5</sup>). He mentions love and jealousy as the reason for his request. She is to be sealed exclusively to him. Thus, sealing serves the purpose of confirming ownership.

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Gerhard Friedrich, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley, 10 vols. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1971) 7: 939–40.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid. 7:941. See also Reinier Schippers, “Seal,” *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology* (hereafter referred to as *NIDNTT*), ed. Collin Brown, 4 vols. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1986) 3:497–501; J. H. Moulton, G. Milligan, *Vocabulary of the Greek Testament* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1930; reprinted, Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1997) 617–18.

<sup>4</sup> *NIDNTT* 3:497.

<sup>5</sup> Gen. ed. Leland Ryken, James C. Wilhoit, Tremper Longman III, “Seal,” *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery* (hereafter referred to as *DBI*) (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1998) 766.

## PROTECTION

Sealing also refers to the protection of property in the Scriptures. Sealing protects items from tampering (Matt 27:66 [cf. Dan 6:18]; Rom 15:28; Rev 20:3).<sup>6</sup> In Revelation 5:1–8:1 the scroll of God’s judgment is sealed with seven seals and cannot be opened until the Lamb opens it (Rev 5:5). Schippers notes that “the number seven recalls the Roman custom of sealing wills with 7 seals....”<sup>7</sup> Fitzer elaborates that “wills and testamentary dispositions were sealed both by the testator and also the witnesses.... Acc[ording] to Roman law 6 witnesses had to sign and the will could be opened only when each of the 6 broke his own seal.”<sup>8</sup> In a similar manner, in Jeremiah 32:44, deeds are signed and sealed to protect them from tampering. Sealing also protects from disclosure (Isa 29:11; Rev 10:4; see also Dan 12:4, 9; Rev 22:10;).<sup>9</sup> Finally, sealing protects God’s people from judgment (Ezek 9:4; Rev 7:2–8; 9:4). Thus, one purpose of sealing is protection.

## AUTHENTICATION

Fitzer notes that “the seal also serves as proof of identity. It is put with a signature or in place of it in letters, agreements and private or public instructions.”<sup>10</sup> As such, circumcision, as a seal, authenticates the inward faith that Abraham possessed (Rom 4:11). The image of sealing also refers to God’s approval (John 3:33; 6:27; 1 Cor. 9:2). Schippers explains that when Paul in 1 Cor. 9:2 calls the Corinthian community the seal of his apostleship, he means that the existence of this community in the world confirms the legitimacy of his apostolic authority and that they are at the same time his letters of recommendation (cf. 2 Cor. 3:1-3).<sup>11</sup>

In a similar manner 2 Timothy 2:19 refers to God’s personal attestation to the truth. Thus, another purpose of sealing is authentication.

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<sup>6</sup> *DBI* 766.

<sup>7</sup> *NIDNTT* 3:500.

<sup>8</sup> *TDNT* 7:941. See also Suetonius, *Caes.* 6.17.

<sup>9</sup> *NIDNTT* 3:500.

<sup>10</sup> *TDNT* 7:941. See also *DBI* 766.

<sup>11</sup> *NIDNTT* 3:499.

## AUTHORIZATION

Since seals served as proof of identity, they also convey the authorization of the seal owner.<sup>12</sup> This custom is well attested in Scripture (Gen 41:42; 1 Kgs 21:8; Neh 9:38; Esth 3:10,12; 8:2, 8, 10; Jer 22:24; 32:10, 14; 10:1; Dan 6:17; Hag 2:23) and the Apocrypha (1 Macc 6:15; 2 Esd 10:23). Flavius Josephus recounts the incident where queen Helena in establishing one “Monobazus, the eldest son, to be king ... put the diadem upon his head, *and gave him his father’s ring, with its signet; ... and exhorted him to administer the affairs of the kingdom*” (emphasis mine).<sup>13</sup> Therefore, sealing also conveys the authority of the owner of the seal. Against this background, let us now consider the passages concerning the sealing ministry of the Holy Spirit.

## THE SEALING OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

### 2 Corinthians 1:21–22

In the Greek, 2 Corinthians 1:21–22 is one sentence. Paul writes, “Now He who establishes us with you in Christ and anointed us is God, ...” (2 Cor 1:21 NASB). There is a play on words in Greek between “Christ” (*christos*, “the anointed one” from *chriō*, “to anoint”) and “anointed” (*chrisas*, the aorist active participle of *chriō*). Since the anointing is in the aorist tense, it should be seen as a definitive past action. This occurred at the point that the Holy Spirit placed the believer into union with Christ by means of the baptism of the Spirit (1 Cor 12:13). As we are in the Anointed One, we are ourselves anointed ones.

Grammatically, “He who establishes ... and anointed (*ho ... bebaiōn ... kai chrisas*)” is a Granville Sharp construction.<sup>14</sup> The Greek indicates that “He who establishes” and “[He who] anointed us” are the same person, namely God. “He who establishes” (*bebaiōn*) is the present active participle of *bebaioō* (“to establish”).

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<sup>12</sup> TDNT 7:941–42. See also DBI 766.

<sup>13</sup> Josephus, *J. A.* 20.2.2.

<sup>14</sup> Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1996) 270–75.

Although we have been anointed as a definitive past action, we are continuously established.

Many lexicographers take *bebaioō* (“to establish”) to mean “strengthen” when it is used of individuals.<sup>15</sup> However, Psalms 40:13 LXX has, “You set me in Your presence forever (*ebebaiōsas me enōpion sou eis ton aiōna*).” The construction *bebaioō* with *eis* seems to mean, “to establish in a position.” G. Adolf Deissmann sees *bebaioō* as a legal guarantee of security.<sup>16</sup> Thus, God’s establishing of believers is an objective work.

Paul continues, “who also sealed us and gave *us* the Spirit in our hearts as a pledge” (2 Cor 1:22). “Who ... sealed ... and gave (*ho ... sphragisamenos ... kai dous*)” is also a Granville Sharp construction. Grammatically, the sealer and the giver are the same person, again God (2 Cor 1:22). “Who ... sealed (*ho ... sphragisamenos*)” is the aorist active participle of *sphragizō* (“to mark with a seal as a means of identification, mark, seal”<sup>17</sup>). Fredrick Danker notes that “the mark denoting ownership also carries w[ith] it the protection of the owner.”<sup>18</sup> Timothy and Barbra Friberg comment that *sphragizō* is used “metaphorically, as a commercial technical term indicating a safely accomplished transaction *sphragizein tini ton karpon* literally *seal to someone this fruit*, i.e. *safely turn over to*

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<sup>15</sup> Fredrick William Danker, “*bebaioō*,” *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and other Early Christian Literature* (hereafter referred to as *BDAG*), 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000) 172–73; Joseph Henry Thayer, “*bebaioō*,” *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* (reprinted, Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1962) 99–100; Timothy Friberg, Barbra Friberg, Neva F. Miller, “*bebaioō*,” *Analytical Lexicon of the Greek New Testament* (hereafter referred to as *ALGNT*) (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2000) 89.

<sup>16</sup> G. Adolf Deissmann, *Bible Studies: Contributions Chiefly from Papyri and Inscriptions to the History of the Language, the Literature, and the Religion of Hellenistic Judaism and Primitive Christianity*, trans. Alexander Grieve (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1901; reprinted, Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1988) 104–9.

<sup>17</sup> *BDAG* 980.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

someone this kind provision (RO 15.28).”<sup>19</sup> This is similar to the usage in Revelation 7:3–8. Cleon L. Rogers, Jr. and Cleon L. Rogers III comment that “goods were sealed as a guarantee indicating not only ownership but also the correctness of the contents.”<sup>20</sup> Fitzer explains that

in sealing believers — the apostle and the church in Corinth — God has made them His own inviolable possession; the pledge of this is the Spirit of God in the heart, cf. R. 5:5. There is a variation on 2 C. 1:22 in Eph. 1:13 f. and 4:30. The Holy Spirit as the pledge of the inheritance is now the seal with which the believer is marked, appointed and kept for the redemption. It shows that he is God’s possession to the day of redemption.<sup>21</sup>

Craig S. Keener notes that

documents and jars of merchandise were sealed to show that no one had tampered with their contents. The stamp of the person witnessing a document would be pressed into the hot wax, which then dried over the string tied around the rolled-up document. Paul means that God attested the contents of the ministry of himself and his colleagues (cf. 3:2–3).<sup>22</sup>

Deissmann comments, “Our conjecture is that the sealing of the sacks of fruit was to guarantee the correctness of the contents. If the *fruit* is *sealed*, then everything is in order: the sealing is the last thing that must be done prior to delivery.”<sup>23</sup> Thus, the Holy Spirit’s sealing ministry not only marks the believer as God’s own possession, but also guarantees the believer’s safe delivery to the day of redemption. No tampering with the contents will be tolerated under the authority of God Himself!

The Spirit in our hearts is a pledge. God “gave *us* the Spirit in our hearts as a pledge (*ton arrabōna tou pneumatos en tais kardias*

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<sup>19</sup> ALGNT 371.

<sup>20</sup> Cleon L. Rogers, Jr., Cleon L. Rogers III, *The New Linguistic and Exegetical Key to the Greek New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1998) 394.

<sup>21</sup> TDNT 7:949.

<sup>22</sup> Craig S. Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary : New Testament* (hereafter referred to as *BBCNT*) (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1993) 495.

<sup>23</sup> Deissmann, *Bible Studies* 238–39.

*hēmōn*)” (2 Cor 1:22). Henry Alford explains that “the Spirit (*tou pneumatos*)” is a genitive of apposition. It should be translated, “the pledge, which is the Spirit.”<sup>24</sup> Keener notes that

Judaism generally associated the Spirit with the end of the age (e.g., Ezek 39:28–29; Joel 2:28); Paul says that they had the Spirit in the present as a “down payment” (“pledge”—NASB; “deposit”—NIV; “first installment”—NRSV), the first taste of the life of the world to come.<sup>25</sup>

Lawrence O. Richards explains that

God’s Spirit is an *arrabon*. The word is drawn from the world of commerce, and means a deposit made on goods, which serves as a guarantee that full payment will be made and the goods will be collected by the buyer.

God has purchased us in Christ to be His own precious possession. The Holy Spirit is with us as a *arrabon*, assuring us that at history’s end God will surely collect us as His own.<sup>26</sup>

Therefore, not only are believers sealed so as to be safely delivered to the day of redemption, they have received the deposit of the Holy Spirit that guarantees that the redemption will certainly be received.

### **Ephesians 1:13–14**

Here again the Greek for at least Ephesians 1:13–14, and perhaps Ephesians 1:3–14, is one sentence. Paul writes of the believer’s position in Christ, “In Him, you also, after listening to the message of truth, the gospel of your salvation—having also believed, you were sealed in Him with the Holy Spirit of promise” (Eph 1:13 NASB). This gives us an important clue about the timing of the sealing ministry of the Holy Spirit. The passage has two aorist active participles: “after listening” (*akousantes*, from *akouō*, “to hear”) and “having also believed” (*pisteusantes*, from *pisteuō*, “to trust, believe”). Daniel B. Wallace notes that

the *aorist* participle is normally, though by no means always, *antecedent* in time to the action of the main verb. But when the aorist participle is

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<sup>24</sup> Henry Alford, *Alford's Greek Testament: An Exegetical and Critical Commentary*, 5 vols. (reprinted, Grand Rapids, MI: Guardian, 1976) 2:635.

<sup>25</sup> Keener, *BBCNT* 495.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

related to an *aorist* main verb, the participle will often be contemporaneous (or simultaneous) to the action of the main verb.<sup>27</sup>

Since the main verb “you were sealed” (*esphragisthēte*) is the aorist passive of *sphragizō* (“to seal”), we should understand that the sealing is simultaneous with the hearing and believing. Wallace comments that

Although it is certainly possible to translate this last text as “after hearing ... after believing you were sealed,” both the grammatical possibility of contemporaneity and the overall context lead me to believe that the aorist participle is contemporaneous here. Contextually, the threefold praise to the Godhead is in the first two instances due to God's *prior* action (election, redemption). To be consistent, it should be this way for the third leg (in the least, sealing should not follow believing). Further, in the following context (2:1–10), this theme of God's saving grace is given greater articulation. The metaphor of death in that passage as the state from which the elect were delivered gives no confidence that conversion precedes regeneration.<sup>28</sup>

Both the ESV and the NRSV translate this “when” not “after.” Therefore, the sealing of the believer by the Holy Spirit occurs simultaneously with hearing the gospel and believing.

Here also the believer is described as “sealed.” However, the believer is not merely sealed, but sealed “in Him [i.e., Christ]”. It is our relationship with Christ that will be preserved intact. Richards explains that

in the Hellenistic world, a man's seal, a carved insignia pressed in wax, had legal significance. Stamped on possessions the seal indicated ownership and served as a ward against theft. On a document, the seal authenticated the message it contained, and symbolized the full authority of the person who sent it. Further, a sealed document could be opened only by the one to whom it was addressed.

Paul here portrays the Holy Spirit as God's seal, stamped on the heart of the believer. The Spirit marks us as God's own, and places us under His

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<sup>27</sup> Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics* 624.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.* 625.



protection, guaranteeing that we can be delivered to God, the One who in Christ has destined us as His own.<sup>29</sup>

This sealing is accomplished “with the Holy Spirit (*tō pneumati*) of promise” (Eph 1:13 NASB). A. T. Robertson sees this as an instrumental dative.<sup>30</sup> Wallace further defines this as a dative of means.<sup>31</sup> That is, the sealing is accomplished by means of the Holy Spirit. Clinton E. Arnold comments:

In some cases, people declared themselves the possession of a deity by the imprint of a seal. The one true God has also marked his possession by means of a seal, yet his seal does not leave a physical impression. He has given his people the gift of the Holy Spirit as a sign of their belonging to him.<sup>32</sup>

The Holy Spirit is called “the Holy Spirit of promise (*tō pneumati tēs epangelias*)” (Eph 1:13 NASB). The phrase “of promise” (*pneumati tēs epangelias*) is an attributive genitive and means “the promised Holy Spirit” (Eph 1:13 NET).<sup>33</sup> Therefore, simultaneous with hearing and believing the gospel, believers are sealed in their relationship in Christ by means of the promised Holy Spirit.

The Holy Spirit is again (cf. 2 Cor 1:22) referred to as He “who is given as a pledge of our inheritance” (Eph 1:14 NASB). Keener comments:

A wax seal would have a mark of ownership or identification stamped in it, identifying who was attesting what was inside the container that had been sealed. Because it was commonly understood that the Spirit would be made especially available in the time of the end, Paul here speaks of

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<sup>29</sup> Lawrence O. Richards, *The Victor Bible Background Commentary: New Testament* (Colorado Springs, CO: Cook, 1994) 465.

<sup>30</sup> Archibald Thomas Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament*, 6 vols. (Nashville, TN: Broadman, 1931) 4:519.

<sup>31</sup> Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics* 166.

<sup>32</sup> Clinton E. Arnold, “Ephesians,” *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary*, gen. ed. Clinton E. Arnold, 4 vols. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002) 3:308. See also J. H. Bernard, “The Second Epistle to the Corinthians,” *The Expositor's Greek Testament*, ed. W. Robertson Nicoll, 5 vols. (reprinted, Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1990) 3:46; Herodotus, *Hist.* 2:113; 3 Macc 2:29–30.

<sup>33</sup> Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics* 86–88.

the Spirit as a “deposit” (NIV)—a term used in ancient business documents to mean a “down payment.” Those who had tasted the Spirit had begun to taste the life of the future world that God had promised his people.<sup>34</sup>

Because the Holy Spirit has been given to believers, they can have absolute assurance that they will receive their inheritance.

### **Ephesians 4:30**

Our final reference to the Holy Spirit’s sealing work is interesting in that it occurs in a context of admonition. Paul writes that we should “not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption” (Eph 4:30 NASB). Paul has just admonished the Ephesians to avoid several sins and will continue admonishing them concerning others (Eph 4:25–31). Against this backdrop, Paul reminds the Ephesians of the very real danger of grieving the Holy Spirit. Nevertheless, Paul does not question that they were “sealed for the day of redemption” (Eph 4:30 NASB). Indeed, Paul based his admonition on that fact!

“You were sealed” (*esphragisthēte*) is the aorist passive of *sphragizō* (“to seal”). This is a definitive past action in which the believer is the passive recipient. This sealing is “for the day of redemption (*eis hēmeran apolutrōseōs*)” (Eph 4:30 NASB). The preposition *eis* may be temporal (“unto”) or reference (“for”). Either translation indicates that the believer will be delivered intact to the eschatological day of redemption (cf. Rom 8:23). As Robert Glenn Gromacki comments:

A believer is sealed “unto the day of redemption” (Eph 4:30). The Spirit is the seal. A seal is a sign of ownership and authority. God has stamped or branded us with the Holy Spirit. His indwelling presence is the sign that we belong to Him and that we are under His authority.<sup>35</sup>

Thus, although believers may sin and grieve God’s Holy Spirit, that same Holy Spirit nonetheless seals them unto the day of redemption.

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<sup>34</sup> Keener, *BBCNT* 542.

<sup>35</sup> Robert Glenn Gromacki, *Salvation is Forever* (Chicago: Moody, 1973) 57.

## **CONCLUSION**

It appears that “the image of God’s sealing his people combines all these meanings—authenticity, ownership, mystery, worthiness, preservation...”<sup>36</sup> The Holy Spirit’s sealing ministry not only marks the believer as God’s own possession, but also legally guarantees under God’s own authority the believer’s safe delivery to the day of redemption. Because God has given the deposit of the Holy Spirit to believers, they can have absolute legal assurance that they will receive their inheritance. Simultaneous with hearing and believing the gospel, believers are sealed in their relationship in Christ by means of the promised Holy Spirit. Believers may sin and grieve God’s Holy Spirit. Nonetheless, they remain sealed unto the day of redemption. Thus, the sealing ministry of the Holy Spirit establishes a firm foundation for the security of the believer.

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<sup>36</sup> *DBI* 766.