

THE MERCIES OF GOD: Sealing

“In Him [Christ], 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, who is given as a pledge of our inheritance, with a view to the redemption of God’s own possession, to the praise of His glory.” ~ Ephesians 1:13-14

Introduction

The salvation of sinners has always been the plan of the triune God. His wisdom, power, and majesty are displayed in redemption’s unbroken arc from eternity past to eternity future, and in the unique ways the persons of the trinity participate in this plan. True, we must be careful about creating too strict a distinction between the members of the Godhead as if to suggest three separate gods doing distinctly different activities related to the salvation of sinners. That would be serious error. All three persons of the Godhead are involved inseparably in the work of salvation from beginning to end (this truth is called the doctrine of “inseparable operations”). At the same time, God’s Word does indicate that each of the three persons of the trinity are uniquely revealed in the different stages and purposes of redemption:

- God the Father – the *arrangement* of redemption in *eternity past*.
- God the Son – the *accomplishment* of redemption in a moment in *human history*.
- God the Spirit – the *application* of redemption to individual sinners, from the *moment of their conversion* to their life in *eternity future*.

This is seen, for example, in the Apostle Paul’s powerful summation of redemption—his long sentence of 202 Greek words found in Ephesians 1:3-14—which ascribes certain works to each of the persons of the Godhead:

- Ephesians 1:3-6 – the work of *God the Father*
- Ephesians 1:7-12 – the work of *God the Son*
- Ephesians 1:13-14 – the work of *God the Spirit*

MacArthur and Mayhue summarize this well:

God’s plan of redemption began in eternity past, as God the Father set his electing love on undeserving sinners, determining to rescue them from the fall and the deserved consequences of their disobedience. He appointed the Lord Jesus Christ, God the Son, to accomplish redemption on behalf of the elected by becoming man, by rendering perfect obedience to God as a man, and by dying as the substitute in the place of his people to pay the penalty for their sin. The Father and the Son have sent God the Holy Spirit to apply to the elect all the saving benefits that the Son purchased for his people. (*Biblical Doctrine*, 486)

Thus, in studying all the components of salvation from the moment of regeneration onward, we are looking at divine acts which involve the Holy Spirit in unique ways. As Geerhardus Vos states, the Holy Spirit

is the person who by His working leads things to their destined goal and development. . . . Likewise, in the kingdom of grace the Holy Spirit is the one who leads the elect sinner to his destined goal and development by creating and maintaining new life in him. (*Reformed Dogmatics*, 4.11)

This work of the Spirit in the plan of redemption is particularly evident in His work of “sealing.”

A. Key Terms and Definitions

The Apostle Paul uses two word-pictures to describe a component of the Holy Spirit’s activity in salvation: (1) His act of “sealing,” and (2) His role as “pledge.”

1. **“Sealing.”** There are three texts which specifically refer to the Holy Spirit’s ministry of “sealing”: **2 Corinthians 1:21-22; Ephesians 1:13-14; and Ephesians 4:30.** To understand the meaning of this activity, one must consider the backdrop from which it was taken.

The Greek word translated as “seal” (σφραγίς, *sphragis*) referred either to the object used to make an impression in clay or wax (e.g., a signet ring), or to the impression itself. The impression contained unique markings and functioned like signatures do today. It provided identification, indicated ownership, and conveyed authority. (Think of the seal or the signature of the President of the United States.) In the Greco-Roman world of Paul’s time, a seal “denoted ownership and authenticity” and thereby “guaranteed the protection of the owner” (Fee, *God’s Empowering Presence*, 292).

The Greek verb translated “to seal” (σφραγίζω, *sphragizō*) is used numerous times in the New Testament with the following meanings:

- “to provide a seal as a security measure,” thus emphasizing *security* (e.g., Matt 27:66; Rev 20:3);
- “to close something up tight,” thus emphasizing *protection* (e.g., Rev 10:4; 22:10);
- “to certify that something is so,” thus emphasizing *authority* (John 3:32-34; 6:27);
- “to seal something up for delivery,” thus emphasizing *guarantee* (Rom 15:28); and
- “to mark with a seal as a means of identification,” thus emphasizing *ownership* (Rev 7:3).

Therefore, the key ideas of “sealing” in the regular sense are *ownership, guarantee, authority, protection, and security*. For this reason, God moved Paul to use the term and what it conveyed to describe the Holy Spirit’s special work in salvation (2 Cor 1:21-22; Eph 1:13-14; 4:30). **The “sealing of the Spirit” can thus be defined as follows:**

- “From the three passages where the term ‘seal’ is expressly used, we gather that believers are God’s inviolable property, and known to be so by the Spirit dwelling in them” (Smeaton, *The Doctrine of the Holy Spirit*, 79).
- “The sealing ministry of the Spirit is to identify believers as God’s own and thus give them the security that they belong to him” (Hoehner, *Ephesians*, 240).

Key idea:
The act of identifying the believer as belonging to God, thus guaranteeing and protecting the believer’s final redemption.

A good, comprehensive definition is provided by Eldon Woodcock:

Sealing with the Holy Spirit certifies God’s ownership and protection of His people. It happens at conversion when the Holy Spirit begins His indwelling. As a result of this action initiated by God, grounded on Christ’s redemptive work, and accomplished by the Holy Spirit, the salvation of believers is secured. Since believers are God’s inviolable property, He will protect them. As a result, believers can enjoy complete security in their relationship with Him. (Woodcock, “The Seal of the Holy Spirit,” 150)

“When God gives us His Holy Spirit, it is as if He stamps us with a seal that reads, ‘This person belongs to Me and is an authentic citizen of My divine kingdom and member of My divine family.’” —MacArthur, *Ephesians*, 35

2. **“Pledge.”** There are also three texts which specifically refer to the Holy Spirit’s function as “a pledge”: **2 Corinthians 1:21-22; 5:4-5; Ephesians 1:13-14**. Since two of these references to a “pledge” are also found in references to the Spirit’s work of “sealing,” it is safe to conclude that these are two different word-pictures expressing the same spiritual reality.

Once again, in order to understand this concept one must look to the backdrop from which it was taken. The Greek term translated as “pledge” (ἀρραβών, *arrabōn*) refers to something given as a deposit towards the full acquisition of a particular object.

- Usually this would be a monetary deposit—a down-payment often consisting in half the value—that would be forfeited if the remaining price was not paid according to the terms of the agreement.
- Sometimes this would be some other object (non-monetary) which would be temporarily given to the seller until the buyer provided the full sum for the object desired.

Therefore, the key idea of a “pledge” is that of *a guarantee of a full, final payment*. Consequently, in order to help believers understand what has been done to and for them, God used this word-picture (see 2 Cor 1:21-22;

4:4-5; Eph 1:13-14) to emphasize both **the secure nature of the believer's salvation** (the down-payment is as secure as God's commitment to fulfill His word), and **the anticipatory nature of the believer's salvation** (the full and final payment is still coming). **The Spirit's role as pledge can thus be defined as follows:**

Key idea:
God's commitment to bring the believer to final redemption by giving to him the Holy Spirit.

- The Spirit's role as a *pledge* is to demonstrate that the One who has ransomed the sinner has just begun His work in him, and that He will not fail to bring that work to final completion.

Woodcock ("The Seal of the Holy Spirit," 153), again provides a very helpful, comprehensive definition:

The believer's ἀρραβών [*arrabōn*, "pledge"] is an unsolicited and gracious gift by the perfectly holy and completely faithful God, who always fulfills His promises. Since His integrity and faithfulness are beyond question, this ἀρραβών was of course unnecessary as a device to discourage God from changing His mind or not taking His obligations seriously. God graciously led Paul to use imagery that would assure believers of the reality of His guarantee. This ἀρραβών is God's assurance of His guarantee that He will certainly achieve His redemptive purpose.

B. Essential Characteristics

1. Sealing is grounded in the atonement of Christ. The work of the Spirit's *sealing*, and His function as a *pledge*, is only possible because of what Jesus Christ accomplished through His atonement—His perfect life, His substitutionary death, and victorious resurrection.

- Ephesians 1:13-14 – “you were sealed in Him”—that is, “in Christ.”

2. Sealing occurs at the moment of conversion. The Holy Spirit's act of sealing occurs—according to *chronology*—simultaneous with the components of regeneration, repentance, faith, justification, and adoption. It does not occur at a later time in the believer's life. However, it is reasonable to conclude that the Spirit's act of sealing occurs—according to *causation*—after faith.

- Ephesians 1:13-14 – “having also believed, you were sealed.”

3. Sealing is instantaneous in nature. The Holy Spirit's work of “sealing” is not a process. It is not something the believer seeks or feels. It is not precipitated by any good works or spiritual discipline. It is a declarative fact. It is something done *to us* as an act of unmerited grace. This is particularly emphasized by the fact that Paul *always* speaks of it as a finished work with reference to believers (the *aorist* verb tense in the Greek language).

- 2 Corinthians 1:21-22; Ephesians 1:13; 4:30 – “who *sealed* us”; “you *were sealed*.”

As Graham Cole states, “Paul is stating a fact, not describing a conscious Christian experience. Our response to Paul's statement ought to believe it rather than attempt to find it in experience” (*He Who Gives Life*, 271).

4. Sealing is accomplished by the Holy Spirit. This work is particularly connected to the Holy Spirit. He is the *means* or the *instrument* by which the impression is made on the believer—showing he is possessed by God.

- Ephesians 1:13; 4:30 – “sealed . . . with the Holy Spirit”; “by whom you were sealed.”

As Harold Hoehner states, “God is the One who seals, Christ is the sphere in which the seal is done, and the Holy Spirit is the instrument of the seal” (“Ephesians,” 619). But not only is the Holy Spirit the *instrument* used to make the spiritual seal on the believer, He is the seal itself. His indwelling presence is the “pledge” to the believer of the believer's belonging to God, and God's commitment to him to bring him to final redemption.

- Ephesians 1:13-14 – “you were sealed . . . with the Holy Spirit of promise, who is given as a pledge.”
- 2 Corinthians 5:5 – “. . . who gave to us the Spirit as a pledge.”

5. Sealing guarantees final redemption. There is nothing that God could do to make His intent clearer: *those whom He has sealed He will one day bring to final redemption*. To prove this, He has sent His Spirit to indwell the believer as His commitment to honor His promise.

- Ephesians 1:13-14 – “. . . the Holy Spirit of promise, who is given as a pledge of our inheritance, with a view to the redemption of God’s own possession.”
- Ephesians 4:30 – “. . . by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption.”

As Wayne Grudem states, “All who have the Holy Spirit within them, all who are truly born again, have God’s unchanging promise and guarantee that the inheritance of eternal life in heaven will certainly be theirs. God’s own faithfulness is pledged to bring this about” (*Systematic Theology*, 791).

6. Sealing serves multiple purposes. The Holy Spirit’s work of sealing accomplishes several purposes both in this life and the life to come:

- Sealing provides *assurance* (Rom 8:15-16; Gal 4:6).
- Sealing motivates *holiness* (Eph 4:30; 1 Cor 6:19-20).
- Sealing glorifies *God* (Eph 1:13-14, “to the praise of His glory”).

7. Sealing is essential for salvation. There can be no salvation apart from this work of the Holy Spirit. To lack the seal of the Spirit is to lack the ownership of God. To lack the seal of the Spirit is to lack His indwelling presence. To lack the seal of the Spirit is to be without hope.

- Romans 8:9 – “if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Him.”

But Paul himself points to the solution: “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). To receive the mark that one is owned and protected by God requires faith in Jesus Christ. Cling to Him.

D. Practical Implications

Homework (see below).

For Further Reflection

Scripture Memory: Ephesians 1:13-14

Recommended Reading:

- John MacArthur and Richard Mayhue, *Biblical Doctrine*, pages 358-59.
- Eldon Woodcock, “The Seal of the Holy Spirit,” in *Bibliotheca Sacra* vol. 155, no. 618 (April 1998), pages 139-163.

Homework:

- In your own words, define the Holy Spirit’s work of “sealing,” and His function as “a pledge.” Be able to identify which three New Testament passages are associated with each of these word-pictures.
- Review the “Essential Characteristics” listed above and the Scriptures referenced under each point. For each of the seven characteristics, provide at least one “practical implication” that this teaching has for the Christian life.
- Some Christians argue that just like any natural seal can be broken, the seal of the Spirit can also be broken and a Christian can lose his salvation. Respond to this argument, using the appropriate texts of Scripture.
- Some believe that the sealing of the Spirit is something that the Christian must seek. They even equate the sealing of the Spirit with Spirit or water baptism. Respond to this idea, using the appropriate Scriptures.
- Is the sealing of the Spirit something the believer *feels* at conversion? Why or why not?
- Explain the relationship between the sealing of the Spirit and the pursuit of holiness (see especially Ephesians 4:30). Should holiness be motivated by fear or by privilege and joy? What is the difference?

Hymns: “Come Praise and Glorify” (*Hymns of Grace* #44)

This Week’s Audio: gracechurch.org/motw

Next Meeting: March 18 – Sanctification, Pt. 1