



Truth

On Tough Texts

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The Sealing of the Holy Spirit (1)

Ephesians 1:13–14

EPHESIANS 1:13–14 USHER US INTO THE third “stanza” of Paul’s “Song of Praise” (vs. 3–14, which is actually one long and amazing sentence in the Greek):

In whom ye also trusted, after that ye heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation: in whom also after that ye believed, ye were sealed with that holy Spirit of promise,

Which is the earnest of our inheritance until the redemption of the purchased possession, unto the praise of his glory.

To understand the subject of this two-part study, it is essential to note first the basic organization of the surrounding context. While verses 4–6 focus on the *Father* and speak of *past* ELECTION, and verses 7–12 focus on the *Son* and speak of *present* REDEMPTION, verses 13–14 focus on God the *Holy Spirit* and speak of *future* INHERITANCE. In that passage, we see the whole picture: salvation was *planned* by the Father, *provided* by the Son, and *powered* by the Holy Spirit.

Before continuing, we should make one general observation about this “stanza”: *this stanza on the Holy Spirit is the shortest of the three*. Is there a reason for this? We are inclined to think there is. We should make it clear that the reason is not because the Holy Spirit is less *important*, but rather He has less *emphasis*. We point this out because the Word of God clearly declares that the Holy Spirit came to glorify Christ (Jn. 16:13-14), not be elevated above Him. Many today want to glorify the Spirit to such an extent that Christ (His person and work) is obscured. Many elevate the spiritual

gifts and other “manifestations of the Spirit” so high that they become the test of spirituality. That type of thinking, therefore, makes the Holy Spirit the ultimate reality instead of the objective Truth of Christ being the ultimate reality. This is serious error, however. Any time a teaching elevates the Holy Spirit over Christ, there is a serious problem with its foundational Theology.

Even here in Ephesians 1 we see the Holy Spirit’s subservient position. As Christ is the emphasis of verses 8–12, so He is here. If I may I say again, *we are in no way belittling the Holy Spirit*. On the contrary, we are showing exactly why the Spirit came; we are presenting the purpose for which He was sent.

This is further underscored by the fact that verse 13 contains a reference *first* to the **word of truth** (that is, Christ) and *then* to the **Holy Spirit**. One expositor says it well:

Some groups and individuals emphasize the Spirit and ignore the Word. They say, “We don’t need the Word. All we need is the Spirit within. All we need is to trust our feelings—the indwelling Spirit will lead us.” This is almost invariably a prescription for error and heresy as people drift away from the revealed truth of the Bible and into all sorts of confused, mystical, cultic views and practices, all in the guise of “following the spirit within.”¹

That is an excellent statement. There are countless Christians running around today saying, “Well, I am lead by the Spirit to do this thing,” but we can without hesitation respond, “Wait just a minute. It doesn’t matter what you *think* the Spirit is telling you to do; what matters is

what Christ says in His Word.” The issue is *always* the Word of God. The Holy Spirit is here to illumine us to the Truth of God’s Word, never to give new Truth or lead us to do anything that contradicts God’s Word. Truth is found only in the Word of God, not science, philosophy, religion, or anything else.

We should also recognize, however, the opposite danger—that is, the **word** without the **spirit**. The **word** is foundational and must be our guide, but we can become so mechanical that our vitality dies and we just wallow in empty orthodoxy. This is simply duty without love, agreement without fellowship, and depth without warmth. To put it succinctly: The **spirit** without the **word** is *heresy*, but the **word** without the **spirit** is *sterility*.

With those introductory thoughts in mind, we can now study the riches that we do, indeed, have in the **Holy Spirit**. Again, these riches are *centered* in Christ but *provided* through the Spirit.

The key to understanding our riches from the Spirit is to understand the doctrine of the “sealing” of the Holy Spirit.

It is truly tragic (and somewhat inexplicable) that most Theology books deal only briefly with the doctrine of *sealing*, and some actually do not mention it at all. Even in Louis Sperry Chafer’s mammoth eight-volume *Systematic Theology*, there is only a scant 2-1/2 pages of coverage (III, 338–39 and VI, p. 136–37). This is true also of Charles Ryrie’s *Basic Theology*. Even the old standbys, Augustus Strong’s and Charles Hodge’s *Systematic Theology*, mention it not at all. Neither do several modern works, such as *Foundations of the Christian Faith* (James Boice), *Christian Theology* (Millard Erickson), and Wayne Grudem’s *Systematic Theology* (only quotes Eph. 1:13 in the NIV). Disappointing also is even Francis Turretin’s massive and usually thorough three-volume *Institutes of Elenctic Theology* (17th Century), which contains less than a page on the subject.

Neither is there much preaching on this extremely important and crucial doctrine. This surely is one of the reasons for much of the misunderstanding and false teaching on this subject and the subject of the Holy Spirit in general. How tragic it is that so many Christians do not understand the sealing of the Holy Spirit!

The reason I find this so tragic is that this doctrine is actually a key doctrine in understanding the Holy Spirit. Further, it is a key doctrine in understanding salvation. As we’ll see in this study, the sealing of the Holy Spirit at our conversion is one of the most (if not *the* most) comforting and irrefutable doctrines in Scripture when it comes to our security in Christ. *No other doctrine makes the believer’s security so vivid and undeniable.*

Let us, therefore, take the time to study the sealing of the Holy Spirit by looking at two divisions: the *reality* of sealing (v. 13) and the *result* of sealing (v. 14).

I. The Reality of Sealing (v. 13)

We need to study several things, so we will break our study down into four basic thoughts, the first of which we will examine here in Part 1.

The Meaning Of Sealing

Besides our text here in Ephesians 1, there are two other references to the sealing of the Spirit in the New Testament:

Now He Who establisheth us with you in Christ, and hath anointed us, is God, Who hath also sealed us, and given the earnest of the Spirit in our hearts (II Cor. 1:21-22).

And grieve not the Holy Spirit of God, by whom ye are sealed unto the day of redemption (Eph. 4:30).

While most theologians and expositors get it right when they do mention it, there are others who muddy the water so badly that the concept of sealing is totally misunderstood. This is puzzling because the concept of sealing is actually quite ancient and *very* simple. In fact, this concept can be traced back centuries before Christ. Herodotus, the first of the great Greek historians (5th and 6th centuries BC), wrote in his book, *History*, that ancient man possessed not only his staff but his seal.

The Greek for **sealed** is the verb *sphragizō*, which means “to set a seal” or “to “mark with a seal.” This comes from the noun *sphragis*, which refers to a signet ring that possessed a distinctive mark. There are many illustrations of a seal, both from ancient and modern times. We can see many of these by showing the four pictures sealing gives.

First, sealing pictures *Acquisition*. By this we mean that sealing pictures a finished transaction. First and foremost, sealing paints a legal picture; it shows the completion of a *legal transaction*. The Ephesian believers understood this since Ephesus was a seaport and supported a large lumber trade. We should interject that this was also true in Corinth, which explains why Paul mentioned sealing to the Corinthians as well as the Ephesians. A raft of logs would be brought from the Black Sea and notice sent to the various lumber firms that the raft had arrived. A lumber merchant would come, purchase his timber, and than stamp it with his seal. Usually he would leave his purchase in the harbor, sometimes for several weeks, and would send a trustworthy agent later to identify the master’s seal and take away the purchased property.

This is actually true in more modern times. Harry Ironside recounts an incident in his own experience here in America around 1930:

I was standing on a high bridge at St. Cloud Minn., watching a lumber jam, and as I saw the men working I said to my friend, "Do all these logs belong to one firm?" "Oh, no," he said; "there are representatives from many different firms working here in the Minnesota woods." "Well," I asked, "how on earth can they distinguish between the logs?" He showed me from the bridge how they were marked, so that when they reached their destination down the river, the various firms would be able to select their own logs.²

Another modern illustration of a seal, is a "notary public." A notary signs and seals a document, thereby finishing the transaction and sealing the agreement.

The spiritual parallel is that we have been "bought with a price" (I Cor. 6:19-20), and we have been redeemed by Christ (Eph. 1:7). The indwelling Holy Spirit is now proof of that finished transaction. Again, as Ironside put it, "Though you and I are still tossing about on the waters of this poor scene we have been sealed by the Holy Spirit of promise." This leads us right to another picture.

Second, sealing pictures Absolute Ownership. The ancients would put their seal on animals and even slaves to prove ownership. In fact, the branding of animals is thought to have been practiced as early as 2,000 BC. Of course, branding cattle and horses is still done today. A brand is registered with the particular state in which the owner lives and that brand shows legal ownership. The same is true today of a patent or a copyright. In many books today, for example, one will find (along with the copyright symbol, date, and copyright holder) the words, "All rights reserved." This means only the copyright holder and the publisher are entitled to the benefits of the sale of the book.

This carries over into the spiritual parallel. The indwelling Holy Spirit shows that we belong to Christ. "All rights are reserved" to Him; only He is entitled to the benefits of ownership. As II Timothy 2:19 declares, "The foundation of God standeth sure, having this seal, The Lord knoweth them that are His." We do not belong to ourselves. Man today wants to "pull his own strings," "be his own boss," and "do his own thing." But the believer belongs to the Lord, for He purchased us with His own blood.

Third, sealing pictures Authenticity. A seal attests to the authenticity of a signature; likewise, a signature proves the genuineness of a letter.

Graphology, the scientific study of handwriting, is a fascinating subject. While some argue about whether handwriting reveals personality traits, "forensic graphol-

ogy," the technical study of handwriting, is considered to be reliable. It is often used, in fact, in judicial proceedings to determine the authenticity of a signature or document. Though someone might be able to copy your signature accurately, it's highly improbable that they can copy the lines exactly or press on the paper with the same amount of pressure as you do.

The spiritual parallel is obvious. The indwelling Holy Spirit proves that the believer is genuine. Think of it! The Spirit's presence within us is "God's signature." There are arguments today about such things as "Lordship Salvation," what a Christian can and can't do, legalism verses antinomianism, grace and law, but doesn't this truth about sealing make it all obvious? The Holy Spirit within us is God's signature. With God's signature upon us, our life will be different. It, indeed, declares that we are "new creatures" and that old things have passed away" and "all things have become new" (II Cor. 5:17). Romans 8:9 is so very clear: "Now if any man have not the Spirit of Christ, he is none of His." The words "Spirit of Christ" refer without question to the Holy Spirit Whom Christ sent (Jn. 14:26; 15:26; 16:7). This is the **Holy Spirit of promise** spoken of in our text. If the Spirit is not present, if God has not "signed the document," that person does not belong to God. How many professing Christians today are merely a "close copy" instead of the "genuine article?" If they are genuine, people will be able to see the seal, God's signature. They will be able to see the "fruit of the Spirit" (Gal. 5:22-23).

Fourth, sealing pictures Assurance. By "assurance" we mean that sealing pictures absolute security. Matthew 27:62-66 tells us of the Roman seal that was placed on Jesus' tomb. No one in that day would have dared to break that seal as that would have resulted in certain death, specifically, being crucified upside down, a hideous death where the internal organs would end up in the victim's throat. So, that seal protected the contents; it made the contents secure by order of Rome. The same was true of the seals of King Darius and his nobles that they put on the stone placed over the entrance to the lion's den into which they threw Daniel (Dan. 6:17).

Today there is what is called a "registered letter." The addressee and the sender of the letter are recorded in a book. On the back of the letter is what is called a "return receipt" which is removed, signed by the addressee, and returned to the sender. The letter is also hand delivered and signed for by the addressee. All this protects and secures the contents of the letter.

The spiritual application is clear: *we are sealed eternally in Christ by the Holy Spirit's sealing.* One of the most important aspects of sealing is this one concerning assurance. All three New Testament references to sealing are aorist tense, a once-for-all past action. As Ephesians 4:30 indicates, we are "sealed [once for all] unto

the day of redemption.” We shall examine this in more depth when we get to the “Result of Sealing.”

We should point out, however, that sealing is not the “baptism” of the Holy Spirit. These two are similar but also quite distinct. The word “baptism” is from the Greek *baptizō*, which literally means “immerse; place into.” Originally the word was used of dyeing a garment, that is, placing a garment *into* the dye. This is why immersion is obviously and unarguably the only biblical method of baptism. To argue for sprinkling or pouring is simply foolish and pointless. No one dyes a garment by sprinkling or pouring the dye onto it.

The Baptism of the Holy Spirit, therefore, does two things. First, it places us into Christ. At one time we were in Adam, but now we are in Christ (see Col. 2:12 and Rom. 6:3-4). Second, it places us into the Body of Christ, the Church. First Corinthians 12:13 is clear: “For by one Spirit were we all baptized [placed into] one Body [the Body of Christ].” The word “baptized” is in the aorist tense showing that this is a once-for-all act which has been accomplished by God. Also, right here in Ephesians speaks of the fact that there is “one Spirit” and “one baptism” (4: 4-5). The context of that passage shows this to be Spirit baptism (see TOTT #35). The Scriptures are clear; all believers have been baptized by the Spirit. There is not one single exhortation or command in Scripture to “seek the baptism” as some teach today. Why? Because it is aorist tense. God alone accomplished this work in the past. Paul is here writing to the Corinthians, whom he calls carnal, fleshly infants, but still assures them that they, even in their immaturity, have been baptized, place into, the Body of Christ.

Putting all this together, we observe:

- *Baptism* of the Spirit places us into Christ and into His Body;
- *Sealing* of the Spirit shows God’s ownership of us.

While similar, they are still distinct. And, as we will see later, both of these occur at the moment of salvation.

A wonderful example of this picture of assurance appears in Esther 8:8-12. While Haman had already been hanged for his evil plot against Mordecai, Queen Esther was still distressed. Because of Haman’s treachery, he had persuaded King Ahasuerus to decree that anyone in his kingdom was allowed to attack and destroy the Jews. The key here is since *even the King himself could not reverse a decree that he had marked with his seal*, he had to issue and seal *another decree* that declared that the Jews could arm and defend themselves from attack-

ers. This vividly pictures that a sealed decree was authoritative, binding, and *irreversible*. That is the picture in our sealing. God will not break His own decree that He sealed with His Spirit.

Before God called him to preach, pastor and author John Phillips was in the business world and worked for a large multinational British bank. Recalling those days, he writes:

... when contracting parties entered into a legal agreement, the documents were “signed, sealed, and delivered.” On numerous occasions the bank manager called for the sealing wax. Both contracting parties would sign the documents and the bank manager would sign as a witness. Then he would affix the heated sealing wax to the documents. After being signed and sealed, the documents were “delivered” to the contracting parties. The agreement, ratified by the seal, was then in force and was binding on all parties . . .

In my banking days, the manager would usually deliver the original contract to a bank officer who would place it in the vault for safekeeping. Everything that could be done was done to ensure that the contract was preserved and its terms were put into effect. We can rest assured that God has taken every precaution against His promise ever being broken. As far as we are concerned, God has sealed us with that Holy Spirit of promise. Our salvation is as certain as God’s character and throne can make it.³

How wonderful that last statement is—“Our salvation is as certain as God’s character and throne can make it.” Mark it down: *To say that we can lose our salvation is an attack on the very character of God.* It is saying that God isn’t powerful enough to save us *and* keep us. It is saying that even with God’s signature upon us, we are not guaranteed. We will return to this theme as we conclude our study in Part 2.

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NOTES

¹ Ray Stedman, *Our Riches in Christ* (Discovery House Publishers, 1998), p. 50.

² Harry Ironside, *In The Heavens: Practical Expository Addresses on the Epistle to the Ephesians* (Loizeaux Brothers, 1977), p. 79.

³ John Phillips, *Exploring Ephesians* (Loizeaux Brothers, 1993), electronic edition, comment on 1:13b.

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This monthly publication is intended to address Scriptures that have historically been debated, are particularly difficult to understand, or have generated questions among Believers. We hope it will be an encouragement and challenge to God's people to carefully examine and discern Truth. While the positions presented here are based on years of careful Biblical research, we recognize that other respected men of God differ.

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