

BY JERRY M. WINDSOR

“SEALED”

A Word Study



THE FIRST TIME I met the girl I would later marry, I told my college roommate that one day I wanted to marry “a girl like that.” Five years later, that impression became a reality, but that early encounter was the beginning of our life together.

We shared phone calls, letters, dates, and special events. One day I saw for sale in a stationery store a special wax seal and all of the needed attachments to seal letters. I bought those items and was then able not only to write the one I loved but also to seal my notes and letters to her with a special personal mark and insignia.

Impressions and Seals

The custom of using seals and impressments was an ancient rite that aided in identifying objects with a mark, letter, sign, or words. The earliest seal instruments and concepts probably had their start in the religious world and then spread to secular culture. Common images such as fish,

doves, swords, bows, and ships were used in early seals.¹

Researchers have identified many types of seals, but the oldest physical seal forms were probably the Babylonian roll seals and seal cylinders that date back to as early as 3000 B.C. Artisans cut figures, signs, and marks into the surface of the cylinder, and the user then rolled the cylinder on damp clay. By 1300 B.C., the Egyptians were also using a seal ring.

In the Biblical Era—Archaeologists have not identified any royal seals that they can link to a specific Old Testament king. Yet sealing documents was both known and practiced in

LESSON REFERENCE

FBS: Ephesians 1:13; 4:30



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the story of Jesus with the principles for successful Christian living. This moral, ethical, and holy behavior all pours forth from being “sealed” by the Holy Spirit.

In Ephesians 1:13, Paul said that unbelievers become followers of Christ as they hear the Word of God, believe the Word of God, and then are sealed by the Holy Spirit. The sealing is part of the work of the Holy Spirit, who enlightens, guides, and transforms the believer.

Ephesians 4:30 goes further by informing believers about the permanency of the sealing by the Spirit. There Paul affirmed the Holy Spirit seals us until “the day of redemption.” Echoing Jesus’ concept of believers being held firmly in the Father’s hand (John 10:29), Paul emphasized the enduring security of the believer’s status in Christ. As a wax seal confirmed the security of a letter’s contents until that letter was delivered to the recipient, so the Holy Spirit confirms the believer’s security until he or she is to be delivered to the Father.

This sealing is the gift of the Spirit and is different from gifts of
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that era. Personal signet rings, property markings, legal insignias, religious inscriptions, and special stone cuttings go back before 2000 B.C.²

The New Testament uses the word for “seal” 32 times in its noun and verb forms. John used the word twice in his general writings (John 3:33; 6:27) and 22 times in the Book of Revelation. Matthew used the word once (27:66)—and Paul 7 times in his epistles. Our emphasis will be Paul’s use of the word “sealed” in Ephesians 1:13 and 4:30.³

In the Book of Ephesians—Paul expressed the crown and climax of his theology in the Book of Ephesians. The theology of this book is as grand as salvation itself and is wedded with moral and ethical demands for holy living. In Ephesians, Paul blended

Above: Baptistry in the shape of a cross in the ruins of a Christian church in Bulla Regia, Tunisia in northern Africa. Augustine (A.D. 354–430) visited and preached at the church in Bulla Regia. Baptism symbolizes that a believer has been “sealed” in Christ.

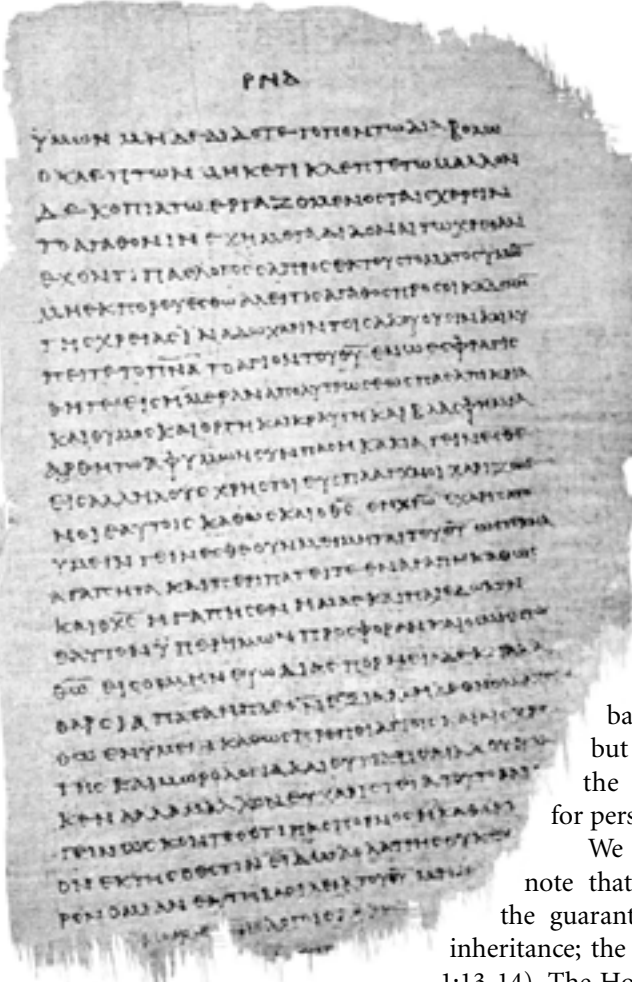
Left: Hittite cylinder seal and impression.

Right: Coptic tombstone. At the top, columns and arches uphold a church roof. Beneath the nook is a dove, the symbol of the Holy Spirit in Coptic iconography.



ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO DAVID ROGERS/MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS/BOSTON (332-09)

ILLUSTRATION PHOTOGRAPHED BY DAVID ROGERS/HATCHER LIBRARY OF FAIR PLAY BOOKS/UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN (391-27)



Left: Chester Beatty biblical papyri shows Ephesians 4:26–5:6.

Spirit. The prophets predicted the Spirit (Joel 2:28), and Jesus reaffirmed the coming and work of the Spirit (John 16). Salvation is attributed to the work of Christ as persons respond in faith. The sealing is the Holy Spirit’s act of approval, confirmation, and support.

Interpretations of “Sealed”

Some individuals have argued that the Holy Spirit does the sealing but the seal itself is the act of baptism. Some individuals who uphold this thought have gone on to say baptism is the seal and therefore has sacramental or saving powers. Still others have tried to link Paul’s teachings about baptism with circumcision. As circumcision was the external mark of a follower of God under the old covenant, so baptism is the outward mark (or external “seal”) for the new covenant believer. Careful study of this argument shows that it leads to a salvation-by-works theology. The New Testament, though, teaches believers are baptized because

we should be careful to note that the sealing is not the guarantee of our spiritual inheritance; the Holy Spirit is (Eph. 1:13-14). The Holy Spirit’s seal is the end of the salvation experience, but it is the front end.

Implications for the “Sealed”

If sealing is the Holy Spirit’s presence, then some specific teachings about being sealed cannot be ignored. Four biblical truths can help enlarge our thinking on being sealed.

First, the sealing of the Holy Spirit has a specific beginning. Before the Holy Spirit came to seal the believer, the individual first heard and believed the Word of God (v. 13). These events occurred before the lost person was incorporated into God’s family.

Second, the seal of the Holy Spirit is continuous. God designed this action as part of the believer’s salvation. Mullins pointed out that the Holy Spirit attended the preaching, hearing, and believing of the Word. When we are under conviction because of sin in our lives, the Holy Spirit leads us to confession and repentance. After we hear and respond in sincere faith, the Spirit

of the remission of sins and not to gain the remission of sins.

E. Y. Mullins offered an explanation by saying the Spirit’s sealing is not an outward sign but more of “a spiritual bestowment.” He said “the seal is the Holy Spirit.” Mullins pointed out that things receive “an outward mark, or badge, or impression, but the Holy Spirit is the appropriate seal for persons.”⁴

takes up residence in the believers and is a continuous sign of divine presence within us.⁵

Third, the seal of the Holy Spirit empowers us. Marcus Barth in his commentary on Ephesians stated that the Holy Spirit enables us to do things we could not do on our own. The Holy Spirit’s presence provides believers more than assurance of salvation and personal peace of mind. The Holy Spirit gives believers a mission.⁶

Fourth, the seal of the Holy Spirit has ethical implications. Many first-century Christians in places such as Ephesus were Gentile converts. They had religious backgrounds, but were steeped in pagan culture and lifestyles. Some had yet to align their morals and behavior with their Christian confession. Paul reminded them that hearing and believing the gospel also brought the Holy Spirit requirement of the highest morality in personal and social interactions.⁷

We grieve the Spirit when we sin. But as believers we are sealed with a view to the final deliverance from all sin on that day of redemption. Then we will be in a state of completed redemption and in perfect conformity to the will of God and the image of our Lord Christ.⁸ That state of eternal bliss is reserved for those persons who bear the mark, the stamp, the seal of the Holy Spirit in their lives. **B**

1. *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, Gerhard Friedrich, ed., Geoffrey W. Bromiley, trans., vol. 7 (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1971), 939-940.
 2. *Ibid.*, 940-946.
 3. *New Testament Theology*, Colin Brown, ed., vol. 3 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1978), 499-501.
 4. E. Y. Mullins, *Studies in Ephesians* (Nashville: The Sunday School Board of the Southern Baptist Convention, 1935), 37-38. E. Y. Mullins was president of The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky 1899-1928 and was president of the Southern Baptist Convention 1921-1924.
 5. *Ibid.*
 6. Marcus Barth, *Ephesians* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1974), 135-143.
 7. Ralph P. Martin, “Ephesians” in *The Broadman Bible Commentary*, vol. 11 (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1971), 125-127.
 8. Mullins, 107-108.

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