

“Marked with the Seal of the Promised Holy Spirit”

Ephesians 1:11-23

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Today we rejoice and celebrate in the hope we have in Christ Jesus: the promise of resurrection, eternal life, the fact that death is *not* the end of our existence. These saints whom we have remembered today are not just *gone*. They have *transitioned* ... to God’s eternal realm.

That message is hammered home in a variety of different ways in the New Testament. Today we’re going to explore one particular way that message is conveyed.

The first chapter of Paul’s letter to the Ephesians is rich and magnificent, full of phrases and images that drive home just how incredibly fortunate and blessed we are to be the recipients of salvation through Jesus Christ. Paul illustrates at some length just how *grand* is our inheritance in Christ. In the midst of that discussion Paul says this: “In him you also, when you had heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and had believed in him, were marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit.” (Ephesians 1:13) Let those words sink in. He’s talking about *you*. “In him” – in Christ – “you also, when you had heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation” – that is, when you heard the good news of the gospel of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ – “and had believed in him” – when you had placed your trust in him, when you had come to recognize him as your Savior and call him your Lord – you “were marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit.” Somebody *did* something to you when you heard the gospel message and believed in its truth. *God* did something to you. God did something *in* you, something *for* you. God *marked you with a seal*, the seal of the promised Holy Spirit.

What does it mean to be *marked with a seal*?

In the ancient world, people needed a way of securing important documents. Let’s say you were a governor, and you needed to send an important message to another governor. You, or your scribe, would write the message in the form of a letter. You probably wouldn’t deliver it yourself; you would send it by courier. You want to make sure, first of all, that nobody reads the message before it reaches its intended destination. So you need to seal it up in some way. Typically, what would happen is that your message would be rolled up, like a scroll, and then a seal would be put on it to close it tight – a wad of wax or clay, pressed over the flap, and then heated so that it would stay shut and wouldn’t open until someone broke the seal. If a letter arrived with the seal broken, then the recipient would know somebody had read the message, and the courier would pay the consequences for that.

Now if you were sending an important letter like that, you might also want to make sure that the recipient knew it was an *authentic* message, from *you*. You want to make sure there is no doubt that this message originated from *your* desk, *your* pen, *your* mind. So you would use your signet ring. A special ring, with a unique symbol engraved into a flat surface. That's *your* special sign. Nobody else would have one like it. Anybody who had official business with you would recognize your symbol. So you would write your letter, and you would be sealing it up with wax or clay, and *before the seal dried*, you would take your signet ring and press your symbol into the seal. Once the seal dried, your symbol would be permanently embossed in it. The courier would deliver the letter; the recipient would recognize the symbol before breaking the seal and reading the letter. They would know it was *from you*.

So when Paul says that we have been “marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit,” what he is saying is that we have been similarly marked. Just as an important official would use a seal to stamp an important document as their own, so too does God use a seal to stamp *us* as his own. It's an invisible seal; don't bother trying to look for it on your body; it's not something you can *see* with your eyes. It's not like a tattoo or a brand – though it has the same purpose as a brand that a livestock owner would use to mark which horses and cattle are his own. It indicates *ownership*. God has marked us with a seal; God has branded us as his own. Every single one of us who places our faith and trust in Christ has the same seal, the same brand, the same mark of ownership that says, “I belong to God.” We can't see it. We don't *need* to see it. *God* knows who has been marked with the brand, and who hasn't.

This imagery shows up in other places in the New Testament. In 1 Corinthians Paul says that God “anointed us, by putting his seal on us and giving us his Spirit in our hearts.” (1 Corinthians 1:22) In the book of Revelation John sees a vision of angels putting a seal on the foreheads of twelve thousand people from each of the twelve tribes of Israel, marking them as God's own. (Revelation 7:2-8) Even the angels are marked with “the seal of the living God.” (Revelation 7:2) You have to imagine how we look in the spiritual realm; our foreheads are marked with the seal of Almighty God. It's like Ash Wednesday, when some of us wander around with crosses on our foreheads, except these seals are invisible to ordinary people, and they don't wash off with soap and water. They're more permanent than that.

So what *difference* does it make that we have this seal; what *benefit* do we get from this brand? Well, *lots*. Paul lists some of them here. A glorious inheritance. The special blessing of redemption. *Salvation*. An eternal destiny. A *home*, after we die, a home with *God*. Just as God's power raised Jesus from the dead, so too will God's power raise *us* from the dead, those of us who are imprinted with God's special seal. And let's not forget – the gift of the *promised Holy Spirit*. God's Spirit, working in and through us, enabling us to do things in God and for God that we could not do on our own.

Last week about twenty people in this congregation were given results from an assessment they had taken, an assessment designed to help them identify the unique spiritual gifts that God has given them. In some cases, the results were predictable; in other cases, there were surprises. Some people were learning that God might have given them gifts that they never imagined they had. Some Christians – some of *you* - may have a special gift for prayer. Some of you may have a special gift for healing. Some of you may have a special gift for performing miracles. That is to say, *God might want to work through you to accomplish things that seem extraordinary*. These are *spiritual* gifts; they come from the

Holy Spirit; they are manifestations of God's power, working through the Holy Spirit that dwells in you.

See, when we are marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit, that doesn't just change our eternal destiny; it also changes our life here and now. It identifies who we belong to, certainly; and thus it can serve as a reminder to *us*, when we need to remember that our lives were bought with a price, and that we are not our own. But even more than that, this seal that we wear – invisible to the human eye – *is doing something in us*. It allows us to access the mighty power of God through the Holy Spirit.

When we read the New Testament we hear remarkable stories. People given the gift of healing, curing people of terrible diseases and conditions, the way Jesus himself did. People given the ability to work wonders through prayer. People able to cast out demons, perform exorcisms. Are these just *stories*? Some people think that they *are* just stories, that things didn't *really* happen, not like that. But how do they *know* that? What if those people really *did* do those things? What if God *really does* equip people with the ability to do wondrous things, through the gift of the promised Holy Spirit?

Now if this were a Pentecostal church, or a charismatic church, or even a Roman Catholic church, we probably wouldn't need to talk about this. In many of those churches, these gifts of the Holy Spirit are just a *given*. This is what the Holy Spirit does! But we Presbyterians like things to be *rational*. We like it when things have *natural* explanations. I could tell you stories, reports I have heard from other Christians I trust – healings, for example, that have occurred in ways that completely mystify the medical community. I don't know if stories like that would persuade the skeptics. Sometimes we get these notions in our head, that people like us can't *possibly* do the kinds of things that Jesus did. Not healings. Not exorcisms. Not miracles. But where do those ideas *come* from? Who put those notions in our mind? Did *God*? Did those thoughts come from the *Holy Spirit*? I doubt it. Why would the Holy Spirit give us special gifts, and then try to make us think we don't actually have those gifts?

Friends, we're *never* going to make much headway with the gifts that the Holy Spirit has given us if we don't believe that the Spirit actually *gives* us gifts like that. Luke tells us that Jesus sent 70 disciples out, two by two, to do the very same things that he himself had been doing. They came back, *amazed*. God had granted them powers and abilities *they had never used before*. This is what the Holy Spirit does! It gives us gifts, abilities, that God actually expects us to *use*, here in *this* life, to better the world, to help other people, to help usher in the kingdom of light.

Each one of us has been marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit. That ensures us of a place in God's eternal realm. But it also *empowers* us for *this* life, *now*. God wants us to bring *his* light, *his* love, *his* healing hand, to *this* world, in the name of Jesus Christ, through the power of the Holy Spirit. But we can't do that if we're *skeptical* that God has given us these gifts. So I would encourage you: give it a shot. Lift up those prayers like you really *expect* that something will happen. Use your Spirit-inspired words to truly *help* that person who is suffering. Not just make them *feel* better. Actually *change their condition*. Take a risk to consider the possibility that maybe, just maybe, God could actually work through you. That you – yes, *you* – can help the blind to see and the lame to walk. Lift up your prayers in faith and trust. Let God work through you. Let the Holy Spirit *surprise* you.

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