

Jirí Moskala, ThD, is professor of Old Testament exegesis and theology and dean of the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary, Andrews University, Berrien Springs, Michigan, United States.



God's two seals: The seal of the gospel and the apocalyptic seal

The Bible speaks about two seals of God. Ephesians informs us of the first one, and the book of Revelation speaks of the second. While the second is familiar to Seventh-day Adventists as part of their understanding of end-time events leading to the second coming of Christ, the first may not be as familiar.

Given at different times, these two seals are different, but complementary. Only those who receive the first seal will receive the second one. The first seal indicates our redemptive surety now: it is received at the beginning of our spiritual journey when we accept Jesus as our Lord and Savior. The second one is our eschatological assurance: it plays its role at the very end of time just before the close of probation. Both are important, and a study of both will bring to our Christian walk a new dimension, fresh insight, renewed commitment, and deep joy.

The first seal: The seal of the gospel

Ephesians speaks of the first seal twice. The first mention is Ephesians 1:13, 14: "And you also were included in Christ when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation. Having believed, you were marked in him with a seal [Greek: *esphragisthēte*],¹ the promised Holy Spirit, who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the

redemption of those who are God's possession—to the praise of His glory."² Paul states that at the moment one surrenders oneself to Jesus and accepts Him as Savior, the Holy Spirit seals that believer in Christ for the day of redemption. Thus, the Spirit of God marks Christ's followers with the seal of salvation when they first believe. I call this "the seal of the gospel."

The thought sequence in the Ephesians passage needs to be noted: (1) we heard the Word of truth, the gospel of salvation; (2) we believed in Jesus Christ; (3) we have been sealed by the Holy Spirit; and (4) the Holy Spirit is given to us as a deposit (Greek: *arrabon*, Eph. 1:14; 2 Cor. 1:22) or as a firstfruit (Greek: *aparchē*, Rom. 8:23, 24). The "seal" here refers to that divine act whereby the Holy Spirit becomes the pledge and Guarantor of our salvation-redemption. Thus, the Holy Spirit guarantees our inheritance. He guarantees our redemption as long as we remain faithful to our calling until the end of time, when we will be God's possession in our entirety, and we will have a perfect relationship with God face-to-face.³

The gift of the Spirit is like a down payment of the inheritance we have in God. This first recompense guarantees complete future payment. The Spirit is the initial installment in our salvation; He is also our assurance that the full future inheritance and salvation will be

delivered. Salvation does not depend on our achievements, performance, or actions; for this is thoroughly and uniquely God's work. The Greek word *arrabōn* means "deposit, pledge, guarantee of what is to come." The word is used also in 2 Corinthians 1:22, where sealing and guaranteeing are put together, and in 2 Corinthians 5:5, where that entire activity is traced to God, who "has given us the Spirit as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come."

This leads us to the second passage on God's first seal. Here Paul cautions believers on their relationship to the Holy Spirit: "And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with whom you were sealed [Greek: *esphragisthēte*] for the day of redemption" (Eph. 4:30).⁴ The Greek expression occurs only twice in the New Testament, here and in Ephesians 1:13—and always in relation to believing in Christ. Note that in the life of a believer, Paul's affirmation of the sealing by the Holy Spirit, in both texts, is a past event: "you were sealed." Believers in Christ are sealed by the Holy Spirit for the eschatological event of total redemption.

Paul exhorts Christians to maintain proper ethical behavior in as much as an obedient life is a natural flow from a living faith. Sealing is God's gift: His response to our response to His love and surrender to Him. Believers already have the Holy Spirit, and for that reason

they should not disappoint and sadden Him by wrong actions and conduct: "Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice." Not only that, "but among you there must not be even a hint of sexual immorality, or of any kind of impurity, or of greed, because these are improper for God's holy people" (Eph. 4:31; 5:3). They should be "imitators of God," following His example "as dearly loved children," and walk in love (Eph. 5:1, 2).

Paul's admonition to the believers not to "grieve the Holy Spirit of God" (Eph. 4:30) is a direct plea: Do not act like God's people in the past (see Isaiah's almost identical appeal in Isaiah 63:10). We have the Holy Spirit and need to stay in a right relationship with Him, fulfilling the will of God. Why live contrary to Him whose ownership seal we wear? Why place our eternal destiny in jeopardy?

Sealing has several meanings, three of which are to be noted: (1) a sign or proof of authenticity; (2) a sign of ownership; and (3) a sign of approval. By sealing, God proclaims that we belong to Him; we are His own; He approves and accepts our faith in order that we may grow in Him; and He will help us live authentic lives of love, faith, and hope (2 Cor. 13:14; 2 Pet. 3:18). All these nuances are relevant for God's sealing of those who believe in Him. As a sign of ownership, sealing indicates belonging to, as well as an approval of, a product. This gives a sense of validity and genuineness: "Now it is God who makes both us and you stand firm in Christ. He anointed us, set his seal of ownership on us, and put his Spirit in our hearts as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come" (2 Cor. 1:21, 22). "Now it is God who has made us for this very purpose and has given us the Spirit as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come" (2 Cor. 5:5). The possession is seen as God's possession of His people, not their possession of salvation (Eph. 1:14; see also Mal. 3:17).

The "you" in Ephesians 1:13 and 2:11 refers to believers in Christ. Through their union with Christ, they

belong to Him, and the Holy Spirit puts His seal on them in order to assert the new relationship. There is no uncertainty of salvation because the Holy Spirit is the Guarantor of that experience (cf. John 5:24 and Eph. 2:4-10). Having believed, they are sealed by the Spirit for the day of redemption. It is significant that sealing by the Spirit is mentioned in both parts of Ephesians. In the first part (chapters 1-3), which is more doctrinal, Paul presents the indicative of the gospel, or root of our salvation, and reminds us of our calling and the riches of God's grace. In the second part (chapters 4-6), Paul delineates the consequences and demands of a saved life, namely the imperative of the gospel and ethical behavior, exhorting Christ's followers to live in a manner appropriate to their calling.

None of us can put a seal on ourselves. Sealing is God's action for us in which there is no "but" or "perhaps." By staying in Christ, we have this assurance of salvation.

The second seal: The apocalyptic seal

The second seal of God is described in the book of Revelation. This seal is not in contradiction to the first but is a seal placed on God's redeemed people as a sign of their belonging to God. They live in the end time just before probation closes. The purpose of this second seal does not focus on salvation or redemption but expresses ultimate redemptive vindication and protection. If the first one is the seal of the gospel, the second one may be called the eschatological, or apocalyptic, seal.

This apocalyptic seal (Greek: *sphragis*) is mentioned in Revelation, where God's faithful followers receive it toward the end of time in order to be able to go through the final events and be protected from the seven last plagues (Rev. 7:2, 3; 9:4; 14:9). This seal of God is in contrast to the mark (Greek: *charagma*) of the beast. The world is warned against receiving the mark of the beast (Rev. 13:16, 17; 14:9, 11; 16:2; 19:20; 20:4), because the mark is a symbol placed on those who have

rejected the saving grace of Christ and have cast their allegiance on the side of Satan.

In the book of Revelation, those who have the seal of God on their forehead are protected from the outpouring of the wrath of God, and they will be able to stand on that great day (Rev. 6:17; 7:3). The seal of God shields God's people at the time of the outpouring of the divine judgment of condemnation. Therefore, it is not by chance that the three angels' messages conclude with the Spirit's assurance to God's people: "They will rest from their labor, for their deeds will follow them" (Rev. 14:13b). These faithful are God's inheritance, resting in the Lord until the day of redemption. Salvation was never an anthropocentric but a theocentric endeavor. We cannot take it into our hands. We do not possess salvation; it comes to us as God's prepared gift that we can only accept or reject. God possesses us—we belong to Him. One needs to stay "in Christ," as Paul would say.⁵ Christ is the Guarantor of our sealing, because He received a seal of approval on His work of salvation on our behalf when He lived on earth. "On him [Christ] God the Father has placed His seal of approval" (John 6:27).

Two seals compared

To summarize, in both the seal of the gospel and the apocalyptic seal, the sealing work is done by the Holy Spirit. The first one, the seal of the gospel, is placed on all those who accept Jesus as their Savior, and it is placed at the time they accept Him (2 Cor. 1:22; Eph. 1:13; 4:30; 2 Tim. 2:19). The second one, the apocalyptic seal, is placed on those who have received the first seal and are alive and faithful to their calling during the apocalyptic days that come just before Jesus returns the second time (Rev. 7:3, 4, 14-17). The first is a seal of salvation, declaring that a person is saved by Christ and is part of God's family, with that status remaining so long as the person remains faithful to Christ. The second is a seal of protection that guards the faithful ones during the time of persecution that comes in the apocalyptic period. One is a seal

of acceptance, and the other is a seal of final confirmation. The first seal is initial declaration that a person belongs to Christ and is placed at the time that person accepts Jesus. The second confirms faithfulness in following the Lamb and God's leadership in their lives, doing His will, keeping His commandments, and living according to His revealed Word during earth's final hours (Rev. 7:14–17; 12:17; 13:10; 14:4, 5, 12; 17:14; 19:10). The first seal is placed at the time of acceptance of Christ as Savior, and the redeemed retain it as long as they remain faithful to their calling. The second seal is placed on those who have received the first seal and live during the apocalyptic days, faithful to their calling. Although the seal of the gospel can be broken by falling away from faith, the apocalyptic seal is permanent.

Time of receiving the apocalyptic seal

As the history of the world draws to a close, at that end time, there will be such pressing circumstances that people will have to decide on which side they stand—with God or with the forces of evil represented in the book of Revelation as the dragon, the sea beast, the earth beast, the image of the beast, and the false prophet (see Rev. 13–18). The book of Revelation mentions that during this time of the end, God will place His apocalyptic seal on His people (Rev. 7:1–4).

On the basis of biblical teaching, supported by the writings of Ellen G. White, one may assert that the apocalyptic seal is given only to God's faithful followers after the final global crisis, immediately prior to the close of probation. At that time, the image of the beast also rises with its forceful demands. Ellen White says, "The image of the beast will be formed before probation closes; for it is to be the great test for the people of God, by which their eternal destiny will be decided. . . .

"This is the test that the people of God must have *before they are sealed*. All who prove their loyalty to God by observing His law, and refusing to accept a spurious sabbath, will rank under the

banner of the Lord God Jehovah, and will *receive the seal of the living God*. Those who yield the truth of heavenly origin and accept the Sunday sabbath, will receive the mark of the beast."⁶ She further states when the mark of the beast will be received: "No one has yet received the mark of the beast. The testing time has not yet come. There are true Christians in every church, not excepting the Roman Catholic communion. None are condemned until they have had the light and have seen the obligation of the fourth commandment. But when the decree shall go forth enforcing the counterfeit sabbath, and the loud cry of the third angel shall warn men against the worship of the beast and his image, the line will be clearly drawn between the false and the true. Then those who still continue in transgression will receive the mark of the beast.

"With rapid steps we are approaching this period. When Protestant churches shall unite with the secular power to sustain a false religion, for opposing which their ancestors endured the fiercest persecution, then will the papal sabbath be enforced by the combined authority of church and state. There will be a national apostasy, which will end only in national ruin."⁷

Ellen White further states: "Sunday keeping is not yet the mark of the beast, and will not be until the decree goes forth causing men to worship this idol sabbath. The time will come when this day will be the test, but that time has not come yet."⁸

Again, when will the eschatological sealing take place? On the basis of the writings of Ellen White, we can state the following: (1) The sealing will take place only after apostate Protestantism unites with Catholicism to enforce the keeping of Sunday; (2) the Sunday law will come in to force and act as a catalyst to cause people to choose between God's law or human demands, to make their final decision for or against God, His law, and His people; and (3) only then the time for the seal of God and the mark of the beast will begin.

The apocalyptic sealing, then, will begin only after the Sunday law has

been issued. The final Sabbath-Sunday controversy will distinguish those who are loyal from those who choose to cast their lot with Satan. Ellen White is right: "The Sabbath will be the great test of loyalty. . . . When the final test shall be brought to bear upon men, then the line of distinction will be drawn between those who serve God and those who serve Him not. While the observance of the false sabbath in compliance with the law of the state, contrary to the fourth commandment, will be an avowal of allegiance to a power that is in opposition to God, the keeping of the true Sabbath, in obedience to God's law, is an evidence of loyalty to the Creator. While one class, by accepting the sign of submission to earthly powers, receive the mark of the beast, the other choosing the token of allegiance to divine authority, receive the seal of God."⁹ ❧

1 *Esphragisthēte* is a verb indicative aorist passive second person plural, which means, "you were sealed" or "marked" (from Greek verb *sphragizō*, "to seal, secure with a seal, mark with a seal, set apart by a seal, affix to be true, acknowledged, proved") and is speaking about a community of faith, believers in Christ Jesus.

2 Unless otherwise stated, all biblical passages are from the New International Version, 1984.

3 The presence of the Holy Spirit in the lives of believers is not only evidence of their present salvation in Christ but also a pledge and guarantor of their future inheritance and down payment of that inheritance. Paul speaks also about having the firstfruits of the Spirit: "Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies. For in this hope we were saved. But hope that is seen is no hope at all. Who hopes for what he already has?" (Rom. 8:23, 24).

4 Ephesians 4:30 is among a series of exhortations. The reference to "the day of redemption" is Paul's unique emphasis in Ephesians, and its context points to the second coming of Christ (see 1:14).

5 "In Christ" with its 164 occurrences, 36 of which are in Ephesians, is much more likely the central motif, or at least a central motif, in Paul. Klyne Snodgrass, *The NIV Application Commentary: Ephesians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1996), 57; emphasis in original.

6 Ellen G. White, *Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary*, ed. Francis D. Nichol, vol. 7 (Washington, DC: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 1957), 976, emphasis added.

7 Ellen G. White, *Evangelism* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 1946), 234, 235.

8 Ellen G. White, *The Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary*, vol. 7, 977.

9 Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 1911), 605.