

THINK ABOUT IT THIS WAY...

Seals were very important in ancient cultures, but they're also important today as well. Envelopes, court documents, and diplomas have seals. When we are pleased with something we give it our "seal of approval." Think about the Holy Spirit's sealing in this way:

- We use seals to stop leaks (plumbing, auto, industrial, etc.). The indwelling Holy Spirit prevents Christ from "leaking" out of our lives.
- Products have labels—seals that identify the product, contents or ingredients, etc. Truly we are a product of the Holy Spirit's transforming work and are identified as belonging to God. The fruits of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22-25) are what label us as belonging to Christ.
- Legal documents have seals: a signature, notary, a raised embossed logo, or even a rubber stamp. These verify an agreement made, a covenant, a legal action, an authentication. The Holy Spirit in us indicates a covenant, life-long, spousal relationship with Christ.

"As the wax takes the impression of the seal, so the soul is to take the impression of the Spirit of God and retain the moral image of Christ."

Ellen G. White, *The Review and Herald*, Nov. 1, 1892

THE SEALING OF THE 144,000

Chapter seven of Revelation begins with a scenario of impending harm upon earth, destructive forces which are held in check by four angels:

"After this I saw four angels standing at the four corners of the earth, holding back the four winds of the earth, so that no wind would blow on the earth or on the sea or on any tree" (v. 1).

The "four corners of the earth" was conventional speech to indicate the four directions of the heavens (N, S, E, W). In Jewish apocalyptic works God controls the winds and delegates them to angels, using them for blessing or judgment. Next, an angel who rises from the east provides a temporary reprieve from destruction until the sealing of the righteous is completed:

"And I saw another angel ascending from the rising of the sun, having the seal of the living God; and he cried out with a loud voice to the four angels to whom it was granted to harm the earth and the sea, saying, "Do not harm the earth or the sea or the trees until we have sealed the bond-servants of our God on their foreheads" (v. 2-3).

This is an allusion to Ezekiel 9:4-11 where the mark was the last letter of the Hebrew alphabet *tav*, which rabbis compared with the Greek letter *chi*—similar to our English *x*. In this vision, it is those who mourn sins that are marked for safety. Revelation 7 picks up on this motif, providing protection for God's people from impending doom. What follows is global ravage (though not total destruction) upon the earth

and over *unsealed* people, (symbolized by trumpets and bowls, Rev. 8, 9, 15:5-16:21).

SYMBOLISM

The 144,000 is not to be taken as literal Israel. The 12 tribes listed in 7:4-8 are not the order of Old Testament Israel. Here in Revelation, Judah is named first (Reuben was first, Judah the fourth) Simeon is seventh (he was actually second), etc. See Gen. 29:32-35. Dan is omitted with no explanation, and Joseph is mentioned instead of Ephraim. The 12 tribes no longer existed as separate entities in the first century. And the exact number of 12,000 from each tribe is an indication of symbolism—symbolic numbers were standard fare in Jewish views of the future. Furthermore, a literal reading would require that the 144,000 would be only Jewish, celibate males (see Rev. 14:1, 4 describing this same group). The 144,000 are thus symbolic of God's sealed people, whether Jewish or Gentile (non-Jew) of those who follow the Lamb, Jesus Christ.

The seal itself must be symbolic and not a literal mark. Rev. 14:1 states that the name of the Lamb and of His Father are written on their foreheads. This contrasts with the mark of the Beast, also on the forehead (13:16), the dangerous counterpart that does not protect from God's judgments. The seal of God or the mark of the Beast will distinguish people in the last hour, whether they are on God's side or Satan's. Revelation 14 describes the 144,000 as following the Lamb, keeping chaste (i.e., moral and ritual purity before God), and no lying (no false doctrines or deceptive practices). This seal does not convert but *confirms* certain people as God's very own, those who "keep the commandments of God and their faith in Jesus (14:12).

It is only by the Holy Spirit that we can abide in Christ (1 John 4:13), and in doing so, we can have confidence in the day of judgment because as Christ is, so are we in this world (1 John 4:17).

Those who "follow the Lamb wherever He goes" (Rev. 14:4) equates loving Christ by living by His Word (John 14:23), living in obedience. And the *only way* to belong to Christ is through the Holy Spirit (Rom. 8:9). Those "who are being led by the Spirit of God, these are sons of God" (v. 14). It is through God's Spirit that the faithful followers of the Lamb will be sealed, protected from God's judgments, and clearly distinguished from those who receive the mark of the Beast.

The Last Messages to the World

Revelation 14:6-11 portrays the final proclamation of the good news of God's kingdom (including both salvation and vindication/judgment) preceding the end, as well as dire warnings about the fallenness of Babylon and worshiping the Beast. Three angels are flying in "midheaven" to all peoples but the New Testament reveals that only humans are given this mandate by Christ; thus angels are symbolic of God's human messengers ("angel" in Greek means messenger). Before God ushers in the end of the world, who can share these three messages? It is only those who have been sealed by God to finish this final stage of warning the world. This last, global promulgation must be given with power and force. It is this power that we understand to be the latter rain downpour of the Holy Spirit to prepare for the end.