

Welcome

I worked at QuikTrip in high school - it was actually one of my favorite jobs I ever had. That means I was *juuust* old enough to remember when we had to compare signatures to the backs of credit cards to verify identity.

Signatures are something we don't think much about - especially since they're falling out of use, but for a period of several hundred years, they were an important statement - a person's signature inscribed on a document marked as belonging to that person. If I signed my name to a check, or to a receipt, I affirmed that I was authorizing a monetary transaction. Signing it on a legal contract indicated I'm staking my reputation and resources to that particular agreement.

Writing your name to verify a document has pretty ancient roots - we find it as far back as the Romans, who would sign their names at the bottom of legal documents. (In fact, the word 'signature' itself comes from the Latin word that means "about to be sealed".)

But, as hard as it is to believe, signatures weren't required by law until 1677, when the English Parliament passed the State of Frauds act. And from 1677 until very recently, signatures were considered one of the best ways to prevent fraud - someone stealing your identity or your money.

But that's all changed recently. Do you remember the first time you realized the signature you put on the card machine in a checkout lane didn't match your real signature?

And I don't know if you've had to deal with identity theft or credit card theft, but do you know what they ask you? "Can you confirm these charges?", not, "Can we compare signatures?"

Signatures on credit cards have become security theater - they make us feel more secure, but they're not. They're so insecure that banks and credit institutions don't even bother to check them.

So what's a signature worth, these days? How can you prove you're really *you*? And if you want to guarantee something, how do you go about it?

We're going to talk about guarantees today - specifically about how God guarantees our salvation. We're going to consider the Holy Spirit as God's signature on our lives, marking us as God's and announcing to the world whose we are.

Today is Pentecost. In many ways, it's the birthday of the Church, and the day we celebrate the Holy Spirit's presence and activity in our lives. So let's celebrate together!

Message

The last two months, we've been celebrating the implications of the first Easter. Easter night ended with Jesus appearing to the disciples when they were hiding in a room, afraid to go outside. Jesus breathed on them, giving them the Holy Spirit. This is a powerful image - in both Greek and Hebrew, the word

"Spirit" can also mean 'wind' or 'breath'. John imagines the Holy Spirit as the very breath of Jesus, filling us with Jesus' own life and power.

So during this season following Easter, we're going to explore what a life lived in the power of the Holy Spirit looks like. Where does a life whose sails are filled with God's divine wind take us? What does it mean to have the Holy Spirit's divine power transforming us?

First, we saw that the Holy Spirit is our ADVOCATE, God teaching us how to know God, speaking for us, praying with us. Making us look more like Jesus.

Then we spent a couple of weeks exploring how the Spirit helps us to face our sin and repent so that the Spirit can transform us. For the last couple of weeks, we've looked at the nature of that transformation - both in terms of the fruit the Spirit produces in all of us and the gifts the Spirit gives us individually to enrich our collective faith.

Last week, we saw how the Spirit empowers us to have real victory in our lives over the things that poison us.

And so today, we celebrate. As I mentioned earlier, today is Pentecost, which was originally a holiday that celebrated when God's people received the Torah - you might remember when we talked about the Spirit as the new Torah, and Pentecost as the new Sinai.

So we're going to look at one more way the Spirit invites us into a life of faith today, and that's by functioning as God's *seal* on us.

[Scripture Slide 1] Turn with me to Ephesians 1. This is a letter from Paul to the Church in Ephesus. The church in Ephesus is a blended congregation - both Jew and Gentile. And the whole first chapter of Ephesians is a beautiful meditation on how God has, in Jesus, rescued us and how the Holy Spirit continues that work by making us one people. There's a little bit in here that I want to focus on:

When you believed in Christ, he identified you as his own by giving you the Holy Spirit, whom he promised long ago. The Spirit is God's guarantee that he will give us the inheritance he promised and that he has purchased us to be his own people. He did this so we would praise and glorify him. -- Ephesians 1:13-14

Now again, this is a spot where the translation we use has been helpful in making an ancient metaphor more relatable, but I want to back up and look at in a more literal translation:

When you believed in Christ, he put his seal on you by giving you the Holy Spirit...

God gave us the Holy Spirit as God's *seal*.

Now, that doesn't mean a whole lot to us today, but for ancient readers, they would've understood this as, essentially, God's signature.

Kings used seals to mark something as theirs. The seals could be sticks with the king's official emblem carved into the bottom. More often, they were rings that would be passed down from monarch to monarch over generations.

When the king needed to make something official, hot wax would be dripped over a document to seal it closed and then the king would impress his seal into the cooling wax, leaving a unique emblem.

This was proof that the king himself had authorized the law or sent the letter or whatever. The king's seal was evidence of the king's authority, and even proof of the king's presence - an ambassador would be sent with the king's seal as proof he spoke in the king's name.

So I want to reflect on what it means to say that the Holy Spirit has sealed us, and use this lens of ancient seals. First, as you can imagine, a king needed to be very sure his seal wasn't copied. A forged or stolen seal could be used to imitate the king, pass false laws, undermine his rule. And a forged or stolen seal sent a message: the king whose seal this is isn't very powerful. His word isn't trustworthy or reliable.

In this sense, the Spirit first affirms God's rule by raising Jesus from the dead. After all, Jesus was executed because he followed God's way. To look at him dying on the cross, you'd think, "Whoever *that* guy follows is an obvious fraud. Look at where following him gets you!"

It's not wise to love your enemies, to consider others better than yourself, to work for the outsider and the vulnerable, to make a place at the table for all, not just the elite. Look what it gets you.

Except God did not allow Jesus to remain dead. God refused to let Rome have the last word. By the power of the Holy Spirit, God raised Jesus from the dead. This was, for the early church, proof positive of God's authority and power. As Paul said when he spoke of the resurrection to the Athenians:

God has set a day for judging the world with justice by the man he has appointed, and he proved to everyone who this is by raising him from the dead." -- Acts 17:31

God is the judge of everyone. And God proved it by raising Jesus from the dead. So that's the first thing: the Spirit proves God has the authority to rule, to judge, to rescue.

[**Scripture Slide 2**] Turn with me to Romans 8. This whole chapter of Romans is about life in the Spirit - that's a big part of the reason we've been there several times during this series. There are two specific verses I want to call your attention to as regards the Spirit as our seal.

Seals were symbols of the king's right and ability to rule, but they were also a marker of authenticity. When you received a sealed letter or scroll, you could be sure that the person who sealed it had

authorized the contents. In this regard, seals are very much like our modern day signatures - in our word signature is related to the word signet, which is what seals set on rings were called - signet rings.

So when Paul describes the Holy Spirit as God's seal on us, he's also affirming that the Holy Spirit is God's affirmation that we are God's children, that we belong to God. In verse 16, he says:

God's Spirit joins with our spirit to affirm that we are God's children. -- Romans 8:16

Friends, can we acknowledge that a life of faith is messy and complicated? As much as we'd all love to be sure about everything, faith is a lot more grey than black and white. Wouldn't it be nice if once you accepted Jesus, all your problems and illnesses and questions and doubts were just gone in a puff of smoke?

Yeah, but... Jesus himself was crucified. And anyone who follows Jesus for very long at all can tell you that's not how faith works. Faith doesn't take our problems away; faith transforms how we face our problems. Faith doesn't fix our relationships; faith changes *us* so we are different.

And in everyone's journey of faith, there comes what theologians and mystics call the dark night of the soul - those moments, days, months when we wonder if God is even real or if we just made it all up.

Do we really belong to God? How can we know?

We know because of the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives. The Spirit joins with our spirit to affirm we belong to God. God has adopted us into God's spiritual family.

The Holy Spirit's presence in our lives is God's marker of authenticity, a seal from our king that we in fact belong, that we are home.

There's one more thing a seal did in the ancient world. When a King put his seal on a document, he was promising to fulfill it. When a king sealed a law, he was promising to uphold and enforce that law. When he sealed a treaty, he was promising to fulfill his end of it.

And again, the seal was only worth as much as the king's power - a king who couldn't enforce his will wasn't much of a king, and his seal wasn't worth much.

This is why the resurrection matters so much for Christians. Jesus followed God's Way perfectly, completely. His life was wholly and consistently self-giving love. And what did it get him?

Crucified.

Yikes... not the most ringing endorsement of God's power - God can't even keep his most favored servant, his very own son, alive? Is that sort of God even worth following?

But then three days later, God raised Jesus from the dead. It's that proof of his authority Paul talked about in Athens. And now, in Romans 8, Paul reminds us we have that same Spirit:

The Spirit of God, who raised Jesus from the dead, lives in you. And just as God raised Christ Jesus from the dead, he will give life to your mortal bodies by this same Spirit living within you. -- Romans 8:11

The Holy Spirit is God's guarantee that all God promises will be true for us. We are being made new. We are part of God's new world. We are a force grace, peace, hope and love in the world. God is bringing all this about, inviting us into it and the Holy Spirit - one person of the Holy Trinity, who lives in us, is our very guarantee that God is as good as God's Word.

So friends, on this Pentecost Sunday, I want to invite you to celebrate with me. The Holy Spirit is God, our seal. The Holy Spirit proves our faith is genuine. The Holy Spirit marks us as God's own beloved children. And the Holy Spirit guarantees we are in the right hands.

So let's celebrate together!

Communion + Examen

[Communion Slide] As God's beloved children, we all get a seat at the table!

1. How over the last couple of months have you seen the Spirit working in your life?
2. When in this season have you felt distant from God?
3. As we move into the summer, when do you think you might experience distance from God?
4. How can you rest in the assurance of the Holy Spirit this summer?

Assignment + Blessing

Celebration! Spiritual practices