



THE SEAL OF GOD

QUEST LESSON E-4

The Problem: Since the Bible teaches that the second coming of Jesus is very near, it must also contain instructions in regard to how we should prepare for that great event. What special spiritual preparation, if any, is necessary? At every stage in history salvation is by God's grace, not man's works (Ephesians 2:8-10). Does that mean that we just relax and do nothing, expecting God to do everything for us? Or is there something we can do to demonstrate our faith in Christ's saving grace?

As we shall see, the Bible speaks of God's seal being placed upon His faithful people just before Jesus comes? What is that seal, and what kind of people receive it? Is it received by all professed Christians, or is it only given to those who have special spiritual qualifications? Is God's seal given only because of people's relationship with Christ, or are there some things God expects people to do as well? We know that obedience to His law does not save us, but He expects it as evidence that we love Him and have faith in Him (John 14:15). Perhaps there are aspects of His will for man that have been forgotten over the centuries. Could it be that God wants these truths to be revived in the last days, so that His living people can enter fully into His way of life for them before Jesus comes?

What does the Sabbath have to do with the seal of God? Why does God ask His believing people to keep a Sabbath day holy? Does the observance of the Sabbath have any bearing on our spiritual lives, or is it merely an optional kind of thing that God suggests because He knows that people would become over tired if they worked seven days a week?

There are some Christians who are convinced that God's last-day seal is given to those who have entered into a special spiritual relationship with Christ, involving obedience to all His divine requirements, including Sabbath observance.

For centuries, most Christians have kept Sunday as their day of worship because Jesus Christ rose from the dead on that day of the week. Many have kept Sunday in the strict way commanded for Sabbath observance in the fourth commandment. Others have argued that the Sabbath was abolished at the Cross, and that God only wants us to observe Sunday as a reminder of Christ's resurrection and His free gift of salvation to those who believe. Hence, they observe Sunday as a day for both worship and recreation. It is not like the old Jewish Sabbath, but is a day of worship, rest, and fun.

What does the Bible have to say about Sabbath observance? As Christians we would want to do just what Jesus would ask of us. The only way to know that is to allow the Holy Spirit to guide our minds as we search the Scriptures. Does the New Testament have anything significant to say about the Sabbath day? Does God require His people to keep a day holy? Or is it true that, since Jesus has died on the cross, the observance of the Sabbath is no longer required for Christian believers?

We have raised two main questions. (1) What is God's last-day seal that is placed upon those whom He plans to take to heaven at the second advent? (2) What does the Sabbath have to do with that seal? Is there some special relationship spelled out in Scripture between the keeping of the Sabbath and the reception of God's seal?

Objectives

First, we consider the last-day seal of God discussed in the book of Revelation.

Second, we study the relationship between Sabbath observance and the reception of God's seal.

Third, we ask, which day is the true Sabbath according to the Bible?

Fourth, we shall look at the teaching and practice of Jesus' apostles on the question of Sabbath observance.

Fifth, we ask the question, is it necessary for every believing Christian to keep the Sabbath-day holy?

I. What is God's Last-Day Seal?

The teaching of the book of Revelation is that, as the end of all things approaches, and Jesus is about to come, God places a seal upon those who are ready to meet Him.

The Word

1. What seal has been given to all believing Christians at every stage of history? 2 Corinthians 1:22; Ephesians 1:13; 4:30.
2. What does the book of Revelation have to say about the last-day seal of God? Revelation 7:1-3.
3. How many are said to be sealed in the last days? Is this number symbolic or literal? Revelation 7:4-8; 14:1.
4. What are the special characteristics of those who are sealed? Revelation 14:2-5.

Explanation: All genuinely believing Christians receive the gift of the Holy Spirit as the seal of God upon them. The presence of the Spirit in the heart is what makes a person a Christian (Romans 8:9-10; Ephesians 3:16-17). In fact, unless the Holy Spirit dwells in a person's heart he cannot be said to be a Christian at all.

The last-day seal of God is given to those believers who will not die but will be alive when Jesus comes. We can list the significant points in regard to the seal of God as follows:

1. The last-day seal is given just before the close of probation, which occurs a short time before the second coming of Jesus. How do we know this?
 - a. The angels who are holding back the winds of strife in our world will let them go only when all the true believers are sealed (Revelation 7:3). The letting go of the winds of strife is the point beyond which no one else will be sealed. Unless people are sealed by then, they will be lost. Therefore, when the winds of strife and calamity are let loose, by heaven's restraints being removed, probation closes. Then it is that the proclamation of Revelation 22:11 is made: "He that is unjust, let him be unjust still: and he which is filthy, let him be filthy still: and he that is righteous, let him be righteous still: and he that is holy, let him be holy still."
 - b. God's work of giving the seal to believers is recorded after the story of the second coming of Jesus (Revelation 6:12-17). But the seal of God is not given after the second coming of Jesus. The reason for the arrangement of the material here in Revelation is simply that Revelation 6:17 asks an important question: "Who shall be able to stand?" The answer to that question is that those who have been sealed before the advent will be able to stand without fear when Jesus comes. Revelation 7:1-8 answers the question of Revelation 6:17.
 - c. Revelation 6:9-11 describes how the people who died believing in Jesus are judged in the pre-advent, investigative judgment. White robes were given to every one of them (Revelation 6:11), that is a symbolic way of saying that the faithful dead were judged worthy of eternal life. The next phrase speaks about the living. Despite the English translations, the Greek reads very simply and is translated literally: "... and it was said to them [the dead saints] that they should rest a little time, until their fellow servants and their brethren, who are about to be killed as they were, might be made complete [full, perfect]." [The word "number" does not occur in the Greek text, nor is it, in most instances, germane to the verb that is used]. The passage is referring to the sealing of God's faithful living believers just before the close of probation. The heavenly judgment of the dead has taken place, and now the living believers are purified and made spiritually complete so that God can place His eternal seal upon them. Then the winds of strife are let loose. There will be a time of unprecedented trouble (Daniel 12:1; Matthew 24:21). But God's faithful sealed people will be sheltered. They will be spiritually ready to meet Jesus when He

comes. They will not cry out for the rocks and the mountains to fall on them as others are doing (Revelation 6:15-16). They will be able to stand confidently because they know the Lord is protecting them, and they will look up and welcome Jesus with great expressions of love and joy.

2. Revelation 7:4-8 refer to 144,000 sealed "of all the tribes of the children of Israel." The number 144,000 is not a literal number. It is symbolic of the total number of those sealed around the world. How do we know? The book of Revelation is a highly symbolic book. It abounds in symbols. To know what these symbols mean we must compare Scripture with Scripture. For example, in Revelation 7:1 the "four angels" obviously represent all the angelic hosts who are "ministering spirits, sent forth to minister for them who shall be heirs of salvation?" (Hebrews 1:14).

The use of the phrase, "the four corners of the earth," does not mean to suggest that the world is square, or flat, as some medieval writers thought. In Scripture "four corners" are simply a symbol of universality. The phrase means "the whole earth." "The four winds" are clearly a reference to the destruction and strife that will result when the angels cease holding earthly and demonic forces in check. In verse 2, the "east" is a symbol of heaven from whence the sealing angel comes. The kings from the east (Revelation 16:12) are Christ and His angels who will come to destroy the wicked of earth (Revelation 17:14; 19:11-21). The seal in the foreheads of God's people (Revelation 7:4) is obviously not a literal mark that can be seen by examining people's foreheads. As we shall see, it symbolizes the spiritual preparedness of the people to whom it is given.

The point is that the passage we are examining (Revelation 7:1-8) is full of symbolism. Just so the number 144,000 is a symbol of the holy character of the individuals who receive the seal of God. 144,000 is made up of multiples of 12. It is 12 times 12 times 1,000. The number 12 in Scripture is sometimes used as a symbol of completeness and perfection. For example, the number 12 occurs often in the description of the Holy City, the New Jerusalem, in Revelation 21:12-17. The point is that it will be a perfect city inhabited by perfect people. The 12 tribes of Israel mentioned in Revelation 7:4-8 do not exist today. Jews today do not know from what tribe they are descended. The tribes of Israel spoken of by John are a symbol of the true Israel of God, the faithful believers who make up the Christian Church around the world. (See Galatians 3:28; Romans 9:6-8; 2:28-29). What a remarkable coincidence it would be if exactly 12,000 were saved from each of 12 literal tribes of Israel. Christ does not save in such an arbitrary way. He says, "Him that cometh to me I will in no wise cast out" (John 6:37). "And I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all men unto me" (John 12:32). Jesus instructed His disciples to make disciples of all nations (Matthew 28:19). The sealing message of Revelation 7 is not just for Jews!

3. What is the last-day seal of God? The ancient Israelite High Priest wore a turban, on the front of which was a gold plate on which the words were inscribed, "Holy to the Lord." (Exodus 28:36-38; Leviticus 8:9). This is the Old Testament background to the imagery used in Revelation 7 and 14, God's last-day people are to wear the crown of spiritual victory (Revelation 3:11; 6:2). They wear the crown in two senses: (i) they have the gift of eternal life now (1 John 5:12-13); (ii) they have victory over sin through the power of the indwelling Christ (1 John 5:4; Romans 6:14; Titus 2:11-14).

The seal of God is "his name and his Father's name written on their foreheads" (Revelation 14:1). The one who overcomes sin through Christ's grace has Christ's name and the Father's name written upon him (Revelation 2:17; 3:12; 22:4). The Old Testament also predicted that God's people would be called by a new name (Isaiah 62:2; 65:15). In the Old Testament, the Hebrew word for "name" (shem) is sometimes used to mean character (Jeremiah 14:7, 21; Psalm 18:49). Many names in the Old Testament were intended to indicate the characters of those who had them. "Jacob" meant "supplanter." "Israel" means "he prevails with God" (Genesis 32:28). The seal of God in the forehead (Revelation 7:1-3), which is God's name in the forehead (Revelation 14:1), symbolizes the fact that His last-day people have received the gift of His character. Their minds have been made holy. They have received Christ's righteousness by the Holy Spirit (Romans 8:9-10). They are allowing Christ to live out His life through them (Galatians 2:20). And they are enjoying habitual victory over sin because they are depending upon the Lord and appropriating His power. They are enjoying the experience of true holiness spoken of in 2 Corinthians 7:1 and 1 Peter 1:15-16). These sealed believers are the "wife" of Christ, to whom He has granted the white robes of His righteousness (Revelation 19:7-8). They are spiritually "without fault" before God (Revelation 14:5). And they will be the righteous living on the earth when Jesus comes. This is what John meant when he wrote: "These were redeemed from among men..." (Revelation 14:4). The saved of all ages are

redeemed from a world of sin. Only the 144,000 are redeemed from among men, in the sense that they are taken to heaven without seeing death. They are redeemed as living believers from among living humanity.

Relevance: Are you planning to be one of Christ's sealed believers in these last days? He longs to dwell within each of our hearts, and He wants to seal us finally and irrevocably so that we will be His for eternity. The decision to follow Jesus in everything must be ours. The work of sealing our decision is Christ's. After God's people receive this blessing they will still be tempted, and they will undoubtedly suffer persecution of one form or another. But they will be kept by divine power and will be the righteous living on the earth when Jesus comes.

II. The Sabbath And The Seal Of God

The Bible teaches that those who receive the gift of Christ's character will observe His Sabbath as a sign or seal of their spiritual experience. Thus, the people who receive the last-day seal of God will be Sabbath-keepers.

The Word

5. In Scripture, what is the relationship between a "sign" and a "seal"? Romans 4:11.
6. When was circumcision done away with as a religious symbol? Romans 2:25-29; 1 Corinthians 7:19; Galatians
7. What has God always regarded as a "sign" or "seal" of His sanctifying work in the hearts of His people? Exodus 31:13, 17; Ezekiel 20:12, 20.
8. What law, including the Sabbath command, is written upon the hearts of Christians in the new covenant experience? Hebrews 8:10; (compare Jeremiah 31:31-33); Romans 3:31; James 2:10-12.
9. How were the name, authority, and dominion of an ancient king attached to decrees that he sent out? 1 Kings 21:8; Esther 3:12; 8:8, 10.
10. Which of the ten commandments contains the name, authority, and dominion of the divine Lawgiver? Exodus 20:8-11.

Explanation: Romans 4:11 proves that the words "sign" and "seal" are sometimes used synonymously in Scripture. The sign or seal of God's sanctifying work in the hearts of His people is the Sabbath (Exodus 31:13, 17; Ezekiel 20:12, 20). Sanctification is holiness. At every stage of history since creation, the Lord has asked mankind to keep holy His Sabbath day as a sign of His creatorship and His gift of holiness (Genesis 2:1-3).

The same "new covenant" is spoken of in the New Testament as in the Old Testament. Under this covenant which Christians are to have with God, His law is to be written on their hearts (Hebrews 8:10). The writer of Hebrews quoted Jeremiah 31:31-33). The law written on the hearts of both Old and New Testament believers is the ten commandment law proclaimed by God from Mount Sinai in the time of Moses. This is the law that Paul extols as established in our hearts by faith (Romans 3:31; 7:7, 12, 14; 8:3-4). James agrees heartily, teaching that breaking one of the ten commandments makes a person guilty of breaking the whole ten (James 2:10-12). The result is the same, eternal rejection and ruin. The fourth of the ten commandments is the Sabbath commandment. So the Sabbath commandment, along with all of the other nine, is to be written on our hearts in the new covenant experience. There is nothing in the New Testament to indicate that the ten commandments, including the Sabbath commandment, have ever been abolished as the standard of righteousness. The means of keeping this law is faith (1 John 5:1-4). But the law remains as the standard, even though faith has always been the source of power to obey it.

The Sabbath commandment (Exodus 20:8-11) contains the three facts about God that were included in seals placed by ancient kings upon their documents: (i) His name is "Lord" (Yahweh); (ii) His authority is that He is the Creator ("the Lord made"); (iii) the extent of His dominion is the universe ("heaven and earth").

Relevance: Those who are sealed at the end of time are those who have received the gift of the character of Christ by the Holy Spirit. They are faithful Sabbath keepers who recognize God's day as the heaven appointed sign of their relationship with Him.

III. The True Bible Sabbath

Which day is the true Sabbath according to the Bible? At this point it is important to put one's preconceived ideas aside for just a short time and search the Scriptures for the answer.

The Word

11. 11) On what day did John say he was having a vision on the island of Patmos? Revelation 1:10.
12. What day did Jesus say is the "Lord's day"? Mark 2:28.
13. Which day of the week is the Sabbath day? Genesis 2:1-3; Exodus 20:8-11.
14. How can we know that the seventh day is Saturday? Luke 23:54 - 24:1, 7; compare Mark 16:9.

Explanation: The Lord has a day (Revelation 1:10). That day is the Sabbath day (Mark 2:28). The Sabbath day is the seventh day (Exodus 20:8-11). The seventh day Sabbath observed by Jesus' disciples after His death was the day after the "preparation" day on which Jesus was crucified. We know that this was Friday because Jesus "rose again the third day" (1 Corinthians 15:4; compare Luke 24:7), and he rose on Sunday. The word "preparation" used in Luke 23:54 is a translation of the word that in modern Greek means the sixth day, or Friday. Arndt and Gingrich's Greek lexicon says that the word for "preparation" means "Friday, on which day everything had to be prepared for the Sabbath, when no work was permitted..." (p. 627). It was also the preparation day for the Passover, whenever that occurred. But the Passover preparation day and the preparation day for the weekly Sabbath were the same day in the year in which Jesus was crucified. The next day, after crucifixion Friday, Jesus' followers "rested the sabbath day according to the commandment" (Luke 23:56). Following that, Jesus rose early on the first day of the week (Luke 24:1-3). Mark records: "Now when Jesus was risen early the first day of the week..." (Mark 16:9).

So the Sabbath day is the day after Friday and the day before Sunday. It was in Jesus's day and has been ever since. No calendar changes have ever changed the weekly cycle. Friday has always followed Thursday, Saturday has always followed Friday, and Sunday has always followed Saturday. Saturday has always been the seventh day of the week. The seventh-day Sabbath in the 20th century is the same day of the week as the seventh-day Sabbath in Jesus' day. Luke wrote his Gospel years after the death and resurrection of Jesus. If the Sabbath had been changed, why didn't Luke add a statement to that effect, after he had written that the followers of Jesus rested on the Sabbath, the day after the sixth day on which Jesus was crucified? There is nothing anywhere in the New Testament to say that either Jesus or His apostles changed the Sabbath to the first day of the week, or to any other day.

Relevance: Since those who receive God's last-day seal are those who keep His Sabbath day holy, the instruction of Scripture is that we observe the seventh day (Saturday) as the day of rest and worship.

IV. Did The Apostles Observe The Sabbath After Jesus' Ascension To Heaven?

There is not the slightest hint in the New Testament that the Sabbath was changed or abolished. The book of Acts records that the apostles kept the Sabbath very regularly.

The Word

15. How many Sabbaths did Paul observe in Antioch in Pisidia? Acts 13:14-15, 44.
16. Where did Paul conduct a religious service on the Sabbath day in Philippi? Acts 16:12-15.
17. How many Sabbaths did Paul observe in Thessalonica? Acts 17:1-2.
18. How many Sabbaths did Paul observe in Corinth? Acts 18:1, 4, 11.

Explanation: In these references in Acts are recorded 84 Sabbath meetings held by Paul over a period of 10 years, from A.D. 45-55. Why would Luke record all these Sabbath meetings of the apostles and not say one word about any change of the Sabbath, if there were any inspired counsel to worship on another day, or not to observe any day? In a future study, we shall show that the passages of Scripture that are supposed to do away with the seventh-day Sabbath do not do that. The apostles, like Jesus, observed the Sabbath day as a holy day of worship and rest from secular labor.

Relevance: The Christian Church is built on the "foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the chief corner stone (Ephesians 2:20). That being so, Christian practice in regard to Sabbath observance should follow the example of Jesus and the apostles. Only those last-day believers who keep God's day of rest holy will receive the seal spoken of in Revelation 7.

V. Is It Necessary For Every Believing Christian To Keep The Sabbath Day Holy?

What did Jesus command His followers to do in regard to Sabbath observance? Does His instruction have any special relevance for us in these last days?

The Word

19. What did Jesus customarily do on the Sabbath day? Luke 4:16.
20. What did Jesus instruct His followers to do just before the destruction of Jerusalem (A.D. 70) and immediately prior to His second advent? Matthew 24:20.

Explanation: Jesus customarily went to church to worship on the Sabbath day. And when He was predicting both the fall of Jerusalem and His own second advent, using the former as a type or example of the latter, He urged that those of His followers, who would be living just prior to those events should pray that they would not be obliged to flee from their enemies in the wintertime or on a Sabbath day. The reason is obvious. Fleeing from the enemy in the wintertime would be a cold and uncomfortable procedure. Fleeing from the enemy on the Sabbath day would make it impossible to rest and worship in peace as God wants His people to do. Matthew 24:20 is speaking as much about circumstances immediately before the second advent, as it is of conditions just before the destruction of Jerusalem.

Relevance: What Jesus instructed is what Christian believers always wish to do. He instructed that we observe the Sabbath right up until his second coming. He said, "If ye love me, keep my commandments" (John 14:15). How could anyone who claims to love Jesus refuse to keep His commandments? John wrote: "For this is the love of God, that we keep his commandments: and his commandments are not grievous" (1 John 5:3), We do not keep His commandments to be saved. We keep them because we are enjoying present salvation in Christ. We are saved by faith (Ephesians 2:8-10), but saving faith is "faith that worketh by love" (Galatians 5:6). True faith results in the law of God being established in our lives (Romans 3:31). When we have true faith in Christ, we will not argue about whether or not it is convenient to keep holy His Sabbath day. We will do it because Jesus asked us to, as a result and an evidence of our faith in Him. We will observe the Sabbath day as a memorial of creation and a sign of Christ's work of sanctification in our hearts. Sabbath keeping will not only be a sign of Christ's work for us, but an observance that strengthens our relationship with Him. It will be a vital part of our Christian walk, and a tremendous blessing to us as we prepare for the seal of God and an eternity with our Lord.

It wasn't convenient for Jesus to be born in a manger in Bethlehem, but He did it because He loved us so much. It wasn't convenient for Him to live for 30 years in a degraded place like Nazareth. But He did it out of love for us. It wasn't convenient for Him to submit to the insults of the trial before the Jewish Sanhedrin, Herod, and Pilate. But He did it because He wanted us to be saved. It wasn't convenient for Him to endure the infinite agony of the cross. But He submitted to it so that He could bear the punishment for all our sins.

Why should we talk of convenience when Jesus has done so much for us? He craves to save us from all sin, to fill us with His Holy Spirit, and place His end-time seal upon us. Why not give Him that privilege? He loves you with an infinite love and will not stop pleading until you surrender all to Him and agree to follow Him all the way. And that includes keeping His seventh-day Sabbath holy. Will you open your heart to Jesus just now and allow Him to transform your life?

Review Questions

1. True or False
 - a. The seal of God spoken of in Revelation 7 was for everyone in history?
 - b. The ten commandments were abolished at the cross.

- c. The law of God is written on the heart of the true believer.
 - d. Sabbath observance is an important qualification for reception of God's seal.
- 2. Discuss: What does the Sabbath command (Exodus 20:8-11) mean when it says that we are not to do any work on the Sabbath day. Did Jesus work on the Sabbath? (See Matthew 12:1-14).