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### Seal and Deposit in the Family

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The good news is that God wants us in his family. There may not be a simpler way to state the good news. And “want” does not mean only a passing preference. This “want” caused God to sacrifice a Son. When I look at myself, or at the believers around me, I don’t understand why God would “want” us in his family so badly. But it is true, nevertheless, that God very much wants us in his family. “I will be a Father to you, and you will be my sons and daughters, says the Lord Almighty (2 Cor. 2:16 - all translations from the NIV).” And that is not a gender-friendly translation - “sons and daughters” is what it says in Greek.

My daughter Elyn (pronounced “Ellen”) does not always move as fast as I’d like her to move. To hurry her up, I sometimes say to her, not altogether kindly, “Let’s move it, sister!” Elyn enjoys correcting people, so without going any faster she responds, “I’m not your sister.” I wasn’t planning to preach, but I see a chance and enjoy preaching, so I say, “Yes, you are. God is your Father in heaven, and God is my Father in heaven. If we have the same Dad in heaven, then I am your brother, and you are my sister.” This usually ends the conversation, and I don’t get to end a conversation very often.

It is most certainly true that Elyn and I are brother and sister. And we must not get the idea that such a family is not a real family. The family my Dad was born into is almost completely gone, parents gone, only 2 of 10 children alive. I am one of several children of my Mom and Dad. My parents are alive but not young, and that family will eventually fade away. My wife Marilyn and I have four children. But eventually this family, also, will fade away. The families my parents grew up in will be gone, the family I grew up in will be gone, and the family I started with Marilyn will be gone.

Will any family be left? Yes, the family where Elyn and I are brother and sister will still be there; in fact, that family will go on forever. In that family, I am a brother to my Dad, and a brother to my Mom. In that family, my wife Marilyn is my sister, and my daughters are my sisters, and my sons are my brothers. And that family -- the family where Almighty God, Maker of Heaven and Earth, is the Dad -- that family will last forever; it will never fade away.

This is why the Paul in the New Testament uses “adoption” language sometimes (Rom. 8:15, 23; Gal 4:5; Eph 1:5) to describe what happens to people when they put their trust in Jesus. God wants us in his family, and so because of Christ, he adopts us. Adopted children are not born into a family. They come in later, but they are completely in the family. One of my brothers has two adopted children, and one of Marilyn’s

brothers has four adopted children. They are our nieces and nephews; they are family in every way.

Family is also the truth that carries along the teaching of “new birth,” or of being “born again.” We may understand new birth or born again as Scriptural ways of describing a new start, a new beginning, of describing new life coming to us. That is all true. But the real truth that carries the new birth teaching is that God the Father wants us to be his children: “His own did not receive him. Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God -- children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband’s will, but born of God (John 1:11-12).”

Romans 8 supports this by talking about our big brother. It says in 8:28, in a passage that speaks much about the troubles of believers in the world, that in all things God works for the good of his people. We may wonder what exactly God considers good for us. Some of the things God can make work for our good sure don’t seem good to us. But the first half of 8:29 explains how God decides what is good for us. God wants us to be made like his Son. So when God says he makes everything work for the good of his people, what he means is that he uses it to make us more like his Son Jesus.

We could stop there, but we should not, because the Scriptures give a further step of explanation, in the last part of 8:29: God wants to shape us like his Son *so that he (Jesus, the Son) would be the firstborn of many brothers and sisters*. Firstborn of many brothers and sisters: doesn’t that sound to you like a big brother? What God is trying to do is to make us all more like his Son, *so that* his Son would be the oldest brother to many brothers and sisters!

As a boy I spent quite a bit of time with a friend named Gary. I was the oldest in my family, but Gary had three older brothers, all big strong boys. When I went to school, I wished I had older brothers like Gary did. I was never very good at defending myself, but there was no one else. Gary always had older brothers to protect him, or to show him what to do next. In God’s family, there is a great Oldest Brother, none other than Jesus, the Lord from heaven, Eternal Son. Our Father in heaven is shaping us into a family where we all resemble the Son, and he is the oldest brother of all of us, someone to protect us and defend us, and show us what to do next. The family of God is a very good family to be in.

By the way, we need to be careful to tell these things to our children. I am saying this because I watch how I treat my own children. I am prone to tell them only the things God does not want them to do, and the things that God wants them to do. Being in the family of God is a lot more than doing good and not doing bad, but do we teach our children that? It sometimes seems like the goal is to get our children from 13 to 20 years old without them getting drunk, or taking drugs, or sexual intimacy; and if we can get them from 13 to 20 without getting into trouble in these sins, then we’ve been good Christian parents. These are things that God cares about, and we are wise to lead our children away from them. But our relationship with God is not about staying away from

these sins. There is no life in a list of don'ts, no hope, no comfort, no love. A list of do's and don'ts is not the center of our faith, even if we do add on forgiveness when we sin.

Moms and Dads who want to pursue God can be come relentless moralists and moralizers with their children. I am like that too much. What I am teaching is good, but it is not the good news! Our children have a right to see and hear the good news lived and taught in their homes, from believing parents. Let's make sure that what we give our children about God is actually good news, not a picture that will make them tired of God and of us by the time they are 16. Remember that in the real family, they are not your children, they are your brothers and sisters, children of God as you are.

Now we are ready to talk about the Seal and the Deposit. Understanding the work of God among us as God bringing us into his family is the starting point to the seal and the deposit. A seal in the ancient world was the way someone marked something as their own. It says in 2 Cor 1:21, "Now it is God who makes both us and you stand firm in Christ. He anointed us, and set his seal of ownership on us." Us being sealed means God put his mark of ownership on us.

When I was about 8 years old, my parents bought two new lawn chairs. They had metal frames and plastic handles, as lawn chairs do now. When we'd had them only a day or two, I took a little folding knife out of my pocket and carved the family name "NEUFELD" into one of the armrests in deep and neat capital letters. I put the family mark of ownership on that chair, and it was sealed for life! I remember this because my mother saw what I had done, and to my astonishment had a completely different interpretation of my helpful action. She scolded me enthusiastically, and I learned that things I believed would be helpful could be seen in a very different way. I remember also that my Mom came to me a day or two after that, and apologized for being so hard on me, because she realized I thought I was doing something good. In any case, that chair had our mark of ownership on it, and each of God's children has a mark like that on them. Each child of God is permanently sealed.

In ancient days a seal was normally used by an important person. The important person, let's suppose a king, would have a message for someone. At the bottom of the message, or perhaps it would be folded or rolled up and this would be on the outside, the king would take a burning wax candle and tip it over so a little puddle of wax ran onto the paper. When the wax was beginning to harden but still warm, the king would press his fancy one-of-a-kind ring into the wax, or perhaps another hard object with a shape that was only his. The wax would then take the shape of the king's ring, and when a governor or the captain of the army or whoever got the message, they would look at the seal, the mark on the wax, and they would recognize that seal, and they would know that this really was a message from the king. That's how a seal worked. God has put his seal, his private mark, on us, so that all will know that we are his children.

In Mark 13:26-27 Jesus said that at the End, the Son of Man would return to earth in glory, and would send his angels to the ends of the earth to gather the elect, that is, to gather all his children. These angels will be looking for the seal, the mark of ownership, that God has put on us.

Marilyn and I have four children, and they are fairly close in age, just over four years from oldest to youngest. When they were younger, each spring Marilyn would buy four bright tee shirts, one shirt for each child. One year they were red, another year I remember bright yellow. She would dress them in these shirts especially when we went where there would be crowds of people, so that we could keep track of our children. It is far easier in a group to just look for four red shirts, or four yellow shirts. If there are only three, then you can quickly look around for a fourth shirt of the same color. This is what the seal is: God has gotten us the shirt, and put it on us. We are marked as God's children, God's possession.

Let's look at that text again: (2 Cor 1:21) "Now it is God who makes both us and you stand firm in Christ. He anointed us, and set his seal of ownership on us." Note the opening line, about God being the one to keep believers firm in Christ. That is the purpose of the seal, just like the letters carved in the chair, just like the bright shirt -- the purpose of a seal is that ownership would be marked, firm, and secure.

Ephesians 1 is similar: "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 (1:13)." This passage clearly connects the seal with first becoming a believer in Christ: "when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation. Having believed, you were marked in him (Christ) with a seal."

The Ephesians passage goes on to add an important piece of information: "... you were marked in him with a seal, *the promised Holy Spirit*." 2 Corinthians 1 did not state clearly who or what the seal was, although "anointing" suggests the Holy Spirit, and the context goes on to mention the Holy Spirit, so we would have guessed the seal was the Spirit, from 2 Corinthians 1. But in Ephesians 1 it says clearly "the Spirit."

The Spirit is the Moveable Presence of God. God the Father is enthroned in heaven, the Son enthroned at his right hand, and the Spirit goes wherever God's children are, and wherever God acts. So our seal is not an ordinary seal, not a carved name or a wax imprint or a coloured shirt. Our seal is the Presence of God himself, the Moveable Presence of God. This Moveable Presence is stuck to us, fastened to us, so that the Spirit itself, the Presence of God himself, is the seal. Not only are the children securely marked, so that they will not be lost, so that the angels can find them; the mark is the actual Presence of God. This means that the children are never alone from their Father, or from Christ their Firstborn Brother. The seal is nothing less than this permanent presence of God with his child. This is still good news, is it not?

Besides being given the seal, the children are also given a down payment, or a deposit; in older English it was called a pledge. A deposit or a pledge is a promise to pay, and the teaching of a deposit rests on the teaching of an inheritance.

From time to time one or another of my children say to me, "Dad, I wish you were rich." What they mean is that they know someone who has something they don't have, or we don't have, and they assume that if I were rich, I would buy one of these.

That is normally why they wish I were rich. What they don't realize is that I am cranky enough that even if I were rich, I probably wouldn't buy what they are thinking about.

Mind you, I wouldn't mind being rich. I like the line of that man in the musical *Fiddler on the Roof*. He says, "God, would it spoil some great eternal plan, if you made me a wealthy man?" Those are my thoughts exactly, and the answer from God seems to be that: "yes, as a matter of fact, it would." In any case, I am not rich, and am not likely to become rich, and whatever inheritance I leave for my children is not very likely to make them rich, either.

But God is a different kind of father than I am. He is rich, and he is generous, not cranky, and he has in fact promised to all of his children a big inheritance. We don't know what his inheritance will be. Not a clue, really, only that it will be big, and it will be real wealth.

Suppose you had a distant uncle, a person you did not know much about, and you heard that when he died, you would receive a big inheritance. Sometime later this uncle died, and you began to get excited to receive your big inheritance. Then, a few weeks after you heard that this relative died, while you were away from your house, a gravel truck came and dumped a load of gravel on your yard. Then, another truck came and dumped another load of gravel on your yard. Before they stopped, 40 trucks had come and dumped their loads of gravel on your yard! You came home, and were amazed to see all this gravel. You had no idea why it was there. As you got to the door of your house, a note was stuck there: "No charge for the gravel! This is your big inheritance! Congratulations!"

I suppose that 40 truckloads of gravel do qualify as a big inheritance. But gravel was not at all what you had in mind for an inheritance, was it. No, what you wanted and expected was *money*. Now 40 truckloads of money would be a big inheritance. Well, this we can say for sure about God's inheritance, when we his children get it: our inheritance from God will make 40 truckloads of money seem like 40 truckloads of gravel. Gravel is not bad; it can be useful, although 40 truckloads on your yard could be a real problem, too. But to us, money is a lot closer to real wealth than gravel, and when God gives us our inheritance, and we see it and understand it, we will see that it is as much better than money, as money would be better now than gravel. God will give real wealth to his children, and lots of it.

Now let's talk about the deposit. A deposit is a promise to pay a large amount, and not just a promise with words, but a particular kind of promise. A deposit is a kind of promise where you pay a part of the large amount ahead of time, as a way of showing that you will pay the rest. That is what God has done with our inheritance. He has given a part of this inheritance ahead of time.

When I was 21 or 22, my brother and I bought a motorcycle. We were both college students, living at home and working at lumber mills of some kind during the summer, saving up money to go to college in the fall. The motorcycle was for sale for a low price, I think \$250 or \$300, because the owner needed money badly. It was a

Yamaha, kind of beat up. It had no mufflers, just two very short exhaust pipes, and it left a blue cloud of oil smoke wherever we drove. Neither of us could really afford to buy a motorcycle, but we thought if we split the cost we'd be okay, and at the end of the summer we could surely get the same amount of money back out of it. So we bought it, and smoked and roared around our town that summer.

At the end of the summer we advertised it for \$500 in the local newspaper. A young man we knew named Glen came to look at the bike one Saturday. He drove it up and down the street (the only time it did *not* burn blue) and decided he would take it. But, he would not have the money until a week later, the next Saturday. My brother and I said that was fine, but we wanted a deposit, a down payment, so Glen paid us \$50. That was his promise, his pledge. By giving it he was promising to come the next Saturday and pay the rest, and by taking it we agreed to hold the motorcycle for him until the next Saturday. On that day he did come and he paid the other \$450, and then he took the bike home. So that first \$50 was the deposit, and it was his promise because if Glen did not come back the next Saturday and pay the rest of the money, we kept the \$50 and we kept the motorcycle. That is how a deposit or down payment works.

This is what God has done for his children. He could have simply promised us an inheritance, and then we would wait and just take him at his word. But God did not only promise the inheritance, he also gave a pledge of it, a deposit or down payment.

Now I will quote the whole 2 Cor 1 passage: "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* (vv21-22)." We the children have the seal, the name that marks us as God's possession, as my carved name did in the chair, or the bright shirts on my children. We also have a deposit that guarantees the inheritance of true wealth that is to come. God gave a deposit of the promised inheritance, and the deposit is nothing less than the Holy Spirit himself, again. The Moveable Presence of God is the seal that marks us, and that same Presence is also the deposit, the first instalment of our true wealth inheritance.

Ephesians 1:13-14 puts it this way: "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, the promised Holy Spirit, *who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption (the freeing!) of those who are God's possession -- to the praise of his glory.*"

The Spirit, the Moveable Presence of God, is both the seal and the deposit. The seal is the way God keeps *us*, the children, marked as his possession. We have the name carved in, we have the shirt, as his mark of ownership, so that when the Son of Man comes in glory and sends the angels, it will be very clear to them which are the children of the Father, the younger brothers and sisters of the Firstborn. That is what the seal does: it marks and keeps *us*.

And the deposit, the pledge, marks and keeps *our inheritance*. That also is secured, promised, guaranteed to come at the right time. And the Spirit accomplishes

*both* by being with us. That means that God's own presence, Christ's own presence, is with us all the time, between now and then. The seal and deposit give us great hope, but they also give us God with us everywhere and at all times *now*. The Moveable Presence of God is glued to us, fastened firmly.

The phrase "eternal security" makes some believers nervous, because it sounds to them as if believers can rest in the safety of salvation no matter how sinfully they are living. We have good reason to distrust such teaching. The Scriptures never give assurance to any people living as if they were not children of God. Concerning believers who are living in strong disobedience, the Scriptures still assume that they are children of God, but warn them of grave punishment if they do not turn from their ways (Matt. 7:21-23; 1 Cor. 10:1-13, 21-22; Gal 5:2-4; the Hebrews warning passages; and all the tests of 1 John).

But warning believers who are living in disobedience by no means the same as declaring that those who are genuinely children of God can lose their salvation. The phrase "perseverance of the saints," as "eternal security," indicates that true children of God will always be true children of God, but has a very different view of what constitutes their security. When we use "perseverance of the saints," we make clear that the security of the believer is not that God keeps them *if* they completely turn away from him, but rather that God keeps them *from* completely turning away from him. As the opening line of the 2 Cor.1 passage read, "It is God who makes both us and you stand firm in Christ." That line may or may not suggest "eternal security," depending on how one understands that phrase, but the line clearly indicates "perseverance of the saints," that the saints stand firm by the work of God.

This is the significance of being born into the family of God, and also of the seal that is the Spirit. The seal is God marking us as his own, which could mean that we are kept no matter how we live. But if the seal is the Movable Presence of God himself, working in us, then the endurance of true saints becomes a more accurate statement. The saints endure not because they have more endurance, however much it may seem like to themselves and to onlookers. They endure because "it is (the Spirit of) God who makes both us and you stand firm in Christ."

The deposit of our inheritance works the same way. God has most certainly promised all of his children an inheritance, and promised it in terms that do not leave room for it being lost by any means. It could, again, be taken that the inheritance is guaranteed no matter how the child lives, since the child has received a deposit, a pledge. But since the deposit is none other than the Holy Spirit of God, the promise changes its shape. The Spirit guarantees the inheritance *by keeping the child living obediently*. There will be struggles, and times of sin and defeat, to be sure. But the Spirit prevents the true child from giving up, and keeps the true child trying again and again, teaching the endurance that Jesus himself had in his relentless (and sinless) battle against Satan.

The seal and the deposit do not pay our bills, or necessarily heal us, or rescue us. God can do those things, and sometimes does; but often he does not. We have troubles in our lives, and the seal and the deposit do not make the troubles go away. God understands this. God is apparently not in a hurry to make our troubles go away; at least, it does not seem that way to us. But understand clearly that they will most certainly all go away, rescue is certain, and all our prayers for relief will most assuredly all be answered in God's time. But, he does not appear to us to be in a hurry to do that.

Nevertheless, God is in a hurry to comfort us. We have to wait for relief, but not for comfort. What we need for relief usually escapes us, but what we need for comfort is available. The teaching on the seal and the deposit are a part of that. And the less useful these teachings feel to us, the less hope they give, the less they mean, probably the more we need to tell ourselves these things. We have these teaching now, before the End, so that even in troubles, we have something to thank God for, something to praise him for, a reason to give him glory.

“To him who is able to keep you from falling and to present you before his glorious presence without fault and with great joy -- to the only God our Savior be glory, majesty, power and authority, through Jesus Christ our Lord, before all ages, now and forevermore! Amen (Jude 24-25).”

“May God himself, the God of peace, make you holy through and through. May your whole spirit, soul, and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. *The one who calls you is faithful and he will do it* (1 Thess. 5:23-24).”