

# Inheritance

LaGrave Avenue Christian Reformed Church

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1 Peter 1:3-9

I don't suppose anyone has ever been to a reading of a will? I confess that I never have. We've probably all seen fictional will readings on television sitcoms and commercials, but I've never actually seen a real one. They must be out there. A person dies, and her lawyer calls all family members and friends together, and the contents of the will are disclosed, and everyone finds out what the deceased has left them. To my daughter I leave the house. To my son I leave the yacht. To my dear friend Gladys, I leave the Renoir. That's how it's pictured on TV and movies.

Well in his reflections on our chapter, theologian and preacher Fred Craddock made a connection that I'd never thought of before, one that is helpful in understanding tonight's passage. Fred Craddock says that in a way, all of us have been to the public reading of a last will and testament. In fact, we are in the middle of such a reading right now.

In a way, if you think about it, a church service is a lot like the reading of a will: Every Sunday we get together to read God's will in both of his testaments. Every Sunday our Father calls us together, and His representative, that's me, reads out the benefits divine that we in Christ possess. Every Sunday we hear about the things he has bequeathed to us as his children. It's not exactly like a regular will. Our God's not dead. He is alive. So this is a sort of living will. But even so we get together every week, we read from this testament and we are reminded that we have a delightful inheritance; an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade.

This image of us being heirs of Christ and receiving an inheritance through him comes up multiple times in the Bible. Paul uses it. Romans 8: "The Spirit that you received did not make you slaves so that you should be subject again to fear again, the Spirit you received brought about your adoption to sonship (it made you children of God) and by that Spirit we cry "Abba Father!" The Spirit testifies with our Spirit that we are God's children and if children then heirs, Heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ." Ephesians 1: "When you believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance." The Preacher of Hebrews also uses the image too. "For this reason Christ is the mediator of a new covenant, that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance."

So this is imagery of believers receiving an inheritance through the will and testament of our God is a pretty big one in the New Testament. But it's also not one we reflect on a lot, and I would like to do that tonight. Why might this image of an inheritance have been so popular in the preaching and writing of the early church?

Well, part of it is that many of the members of these early churches would have been slaves. Somewhere between 10 and 20 percent of the population of the Roman Empire were slaves and while there were certainly wealthy and Middle class people in the early church, most scholars agree that there were lots of slaves and poorer people. Remember Paul in 1 Corinthians 1:26? "Brothers and sisters, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many of noble birth." We know that the church addressed by 1 Peter had its share of slaves. Peter addresses them specifically in chapter 2, telling them how to relate to their masters.

Slavery in the Roman world was a miserable business. Some slaves served in the mines. They had a brutal existence. Here's a description from a historian named Diodorus Siculus who wrote just before the time of Jesus. "the slaves who are engaged in the working of [the mines] produce for their masters' revenues in sums defying belief, but they themselves wear out their bodies both by day and by night in the diggings under the earth, dying in large numbers because of the exceptional hardships they endure. For no respite or pause is granted them in their labors, but compelled beneath blows of the overseers to endure the severity of their plight, they throw away their lives in this wretched manner; indeed, death in their eyes is more to be desired than life, because of the magnitude of the hardships they must bear."

Serving as a slave in a household was better than the mines, but still pretty awful. You were property and your master could treat you however he chose. Many slaves endured horrific sexual abuse. Even without

that their lives were unimaginably hard. Here's a description of household slavery from Seneca: When we recline at a banquet, one slave mops up the disgorged food, another crouches beneath the table and gathers up the left-overs of the tipsy guests. Another carves the priceless game birds. Hapless fellow, to live only for the purpose of cutting fat capons correctly. Another, who serves the wine, must dress like a woman..." and then it goes on to describe how these slaves were at the mercy of their master's corrupt appetites.

Do you think these slaves had ever been to the reading of a will? Do you think these slaves had hope for anything like inheritance? Hardly. Many of these slaves would be prisoners of war and conquest who had been wrested from their homes and carried off to these new places. They were hundreds of miles from their true homeland and the people they loved. They had no property. They were property. They had no inheritance. They had no status. They had no home.

But now here Peter and Paul and all the other messengers of the gospel and they say, "You are children of God. The Spirit you received doesn't make you a slave, subject again to fear. The Spirit you received brought about your adoption to son ship. You are heirs and co-heirs! You have a delightful inheritance!"

To see the power that this inheritance language had for these original hearers you have to imagine the scene. Many scholars think that the beginning of 1 Peter was part of a baptism liturgy. That these words were read at the baptism of new converts. So imagine this scene in a house church in Ephesus. 5 people are about to be baptized – three men and two women. They are all slaves. There are a couple of Africans from Cush, a couple of barbarians from Northern Europe, a 12-year-old boy from Gaul who had been taken from his family. The pastor ushers them down into the water and pronounces over them their new family name: "I baptize you into the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." They come out from the font hair is still dripping and one of the elders wraps them in a white robe to signify their new life in Christ Jesus. And then Peter's letter is brought out and read. The reading of the will begins: "Praise be to the Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given you new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Christ from the dead! And into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade. That inheritance is kept in heaven for you, so nothing that happens to you in this world can take this inheritance away. In this you greatly rejoice even though now, for a little while, you may have to suffer grief in all kinds of trials.

Do you hear how this inheritance language would speak to the heart of these people!? Before they heard the gospel these slaves couldn't imagine having the status of an heir. Why would anyone put their name in a will? Who would leave them anything? But in Christ they have an inheritance that that brings them into a family of intense love, and gives them an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade. I can almost see the joy on these people's faces as they hear the good news of that inheritance.

In New York City there is an island in Long Island Sound called Hart Island. For over 100 years Hart Island has been the place where New York City buries people with no name. Every year on the street, in the tenements, in nursing homes, in middle class apartments, people die and no one knows who they are. No relatives show up to say I know this person, he's part of my family. No friends can be found interested in going to this person's funeral let alone paying for it. This person is literally nameless and rootless in the middle of the city. When you die with no name, they take you to Hart Island, and they will find a spare patch of earth for you, and there, prisoners from Riker's Island will dig your grave and lay you in the ground and put a blank marker over you and your place will remember you know more. Do you know how many people, how many nameless people, are buried on Hart's Island? Approximately one million. One million nameless souls without an inheritance. Don't you think some of those folk might have liked an invitation to be part of a family? To be invited to this weekly reading of the will and to hear the Father say to them: "You have an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade, kept in heaven for you."

The world is full of lonely, rootless souls looking for real connection. Some of them are living on the streets of New York and Grand Rapids, some of them are sitting in corner offices and living in penthouses. All of them need to come to this reading of the will, and hear their Father speak their name and realize who they truly are.

When we hear the will read here every week, we don't just hear that we have an inheritance, we also hear something about what we are inheriting, and how that inheritance changes our life right now. I want to conclude with two things that Peter says are part of our inheritance.

The first is Living Hope. We have been given new birth into a living hope. If we were to randomly ask people what this living hope is that Peter is talking about, most of us would probably say, Peter is talking about life after death. Our hope is that, when we die, we will live with Jesus forever. And that's right of course. But that focuses on the future aspect of our hope, and I think Peter wants us to see that this hope is a right now hope, not just a hope for the future. It is a living hope.

What's the difference between ordinary future hope and living hope? An analogy: When a couple gets married and thinks that someday they would like to have children, they have a hope. They think of the future they think, "I sure hope we have kids someday." That is ordinary future hope. But when the wife actually becomes pregnant and the baby begins to grow inside her, the ordinary future hope changes and becomes more like a living hope. It is still a hope for the future. It is still a looking toward the due date when this little one will be welcomed into the world. But now the little one is, in a sense, already present. And the mode of hope changes. Hope becomes busy. Hope makes preparations. There are new clothes to buy, and new furniture, and baby blankets, and baby toys. There are baby showers and doctor's visits and ultra sounds. There is a change in diet for the Mother. Certain foods and drinks are left behind, and new attention is given to the food being eaten. Attentions shift. Husband and wife listen quietly for signs of the baby's movement. They are alert to the presence of this child growing between them. Living hope now and it is active.

That's the kind of pregnant expectation that grows in us once the Holy Spirit starts kicking and moving among the people of the inheritance. We don't sit by passively, waiting for a heavenly reward. Our hope leads to joyful preparation. In anticipation of the new creation we begin preparing for the new creation and for the coming of our King. we start living a new creation life in the middle of the old creation.

Another part of our inheritance is the gift of joy. You are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy in Christ, says verse 8. What sort of gift is that? There's a kind of joy that might be called Chuck E Cheese joy. As you know, Chuck E Cheese is an entertainment Mecca for younger children. It's filled with games and activities and junk food all aimed at young kids. It's the ultimate birthday destination/party place for any 6-year-old. And there is a kind of joy that a 6-year-old will experience at Chuck E Cheese. They will be entertained. They will have fun. They will come away saying that they had a good time. That's Chuck E Cheese joy, and there are all sorts of adult equivalents.

But the joy that is bequeathed to you in Jesus is a little deeper than that. Fred Craddock tells a story about how early in his ministry he went on a mission trip with a group of 13 and 14 year olds from his church. They went and did work fixing homes and helping people in a poorer part of the world. When they got back home all the kids were sitting in a row outside of church waiting for their parents to come and pick them up. They all looked and smelled like 13 year olds do after a week sleeping in a sleeping bag and living out of a suitcase and showering intermittently. Craddock asked one of the boys who looked scruffy and exhausted, "So are you tired?" And the youngster said, "Wow am I tired. But this is the best tired I've ever been!" That's joy. That's the glorious and inexpressible joy that verse 8 is talking about. Not the Chuck E Cheese happiness. But that tiredness and satisfaction that comes after working with your heart soul strength and mind at significant work, with people you love, work that brings light into the darkness, work that that gives glory to the master, and that witnesses to the new creation.

Living hope and Inexpressible joy. It's good stuff that our Father gives us isn't it? So praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. He has given us a delightful inheritance. ©Rev. Peter Jonker