

## A Living Hope

### 1 Peter 1:3-9

When I was a child I wanted some distant relative that I didn't know to leave me a fortune. I would imagine how I would use my newly acquired wealth. I would build this or go there. Sometimes I would be generous and share, but more often as I dreamed I would think of all the things I would do for myself.

Inheritance is more than a modern idea spawned by an exponential growth of global wealth in the last few centuries. Since earliest times, people have talked and argued about inheritance. They have both protected it and squandered it. Virtually every society has known the anticipation of receiving property from someone who has died. To be an heir is to be the recipient, or the someday recipient, of something considered precious.

You and I don't have to dig too deeply to notice some family or other around us that skirmish over inheritance-related matters. Festering wounds in certain clans, of promises anticipated, argued, and broken, are just below the surface. For some of us a family fight over inheritance has been manifested in the resistance, or claimed inability, to make a generous offering or commitment. For others of us it works the other way around, and the church's mission may be blessed by someone sharing a substantial gift inherited.

The Bible makes more than 250 references to inheritance, a clear sign that everyday conversations about legacy took place in ancient life as well. Some of these references are found in well-known stories: "But when the tenants saw the son, they said to themselves, 'This is the heir; come, let us

kill him and get his inheritance" (Matt. 21:38). "Someone in the crowd said to him, 'Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me'" (Luke 12:13).

Who can know all the motivations for the excitement we attach to the prospect of receiving an inheritance? Is it the monetary value that gives an heir the sudden sense of abundance, wealth, and leisure? Is it an emotional or sentimental tie to the prior generation(s) that feels so good? Is it some romantic hope that a new possession will open the door to the "privileged life"? Who can say? Every experience of inheriting property or contemplating as much is different for each family and individual.

Inheritance is not the exclusive domain of the wealthy. We can bequeath all kinds of items to another person, even if we do not dwell in the land of riches. There is one poignant example from Boston's Holocaust Monument, a walk-through sculpture that bears this inscription of a concentration camp survivor:

Ilse, a childhood friend of mine, once found a raspberry in the camp and carried it in her pocket all day to present that night to me on a leaf. Imagine a world in which your entire possession is one raspberry and you give it to your friend. (Gerda Weissman Klein)

Imagine giving a single raspberry to your best friend as your last act of kindness in life, before being shuffled off to the gas chamber. *That* is generosity!

Consider a different extreme—gifts to others that can only be called bizarre. When the controversial hotel magnate Leona Helmsley died a few years ago, she made news by leaving her Maltese dog \$12 million in her will. The dog may still be sorting through what do with the inheritance.

To all the properties ever passed along to successor generations, to all earthly inheritances, one thing is common. They all lack permanence. Regardless of whether an inheritance has a high or low estimated value, it will always wither and fade, like the grass and flowers of which the prophet Isaiah once spoke. Even a precious raspberry given with the generosity of a whole life behind it is temporal.

When the writer in 1 Peter spoke of believers being gifted with an inheritance that is "imperishable, undefiled, and unfading" (v. 4), we naturally perk up. What could possibly be given to us that would not decay? Even land given by the Lord as a possession (Deut. 15:4)—a prized inheritance for the ancient Hebrews—could come up short through erosion, drought, infestation, and takeover.

The writer of 1 Peter said one inheritance will put the insignificance of all others into perspective. This one is given by divine mercy, made possible by the resurrection of Jesus Christ, and secured in heaven. It will be best received as a gift and best known through the life of genuine faith. **Peter W. Marty**

This inheritance we have received: by great mercy, God "has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead" (v. 3b). This inheritance is about the relationship between God and humanity. It is an inheritance of joy and praise. As a part of the human community we are the recipient of new birth. This is the gospel in miniature: (1) the first word is praise, because (2) God acts toward us in mercy, and thus (3) we are enabled to act in joy.

Our inheritance is faith which consists of both knowledge and deep trust in God's benevolence. The Heidelberg Catechism (1563) says: true faith "is not only a certain *knowledge* by which I accept as true all that God has

revealed . . . , but also a wholehearted *trust* which the Holy Spirit creates in me through the gospel, that, not only to others, but to me also God has given the forgiveness of sins, everlasting righteousness and salvation, out of sheer grace solely for the sake of Christ's saving work."

In the twentieth century, Swiss theologian Karl Barth added to this discussion of faith an emphasis of a personal relationship with God, with whom we have a personal trust and belief through His Son, Jesus Christ and His resurrection.

The "outcome of" . . . our inheritance of . . . "faith" (v. 9), according to 1 Peter, is salvation. This faith and salvation does not exempt us from suffering in this world. "Now for a little while you have had to suffer various trials" (v. 6). The writer acknowledged that the Christian churches to whom he was writing had endured suffering, just as gold is tested by fire. We can debate the causes and benefits of human suffering, but we are sure that it exists.

You may be feeling beat up by life these days. Maybe you've lost a job or your family is in turmoil, or your health is poor. Maybe a friend has turned against you, or an investment has gone bad, or the system has let you down. Whatever the circumstance, if life has become such a struggle that your faith itself feels under siege, then receive these words of Peter. They were written for folks like us who have struggles and suffering. Your faith may lead to suffering in the short term, but 1 Peter affirms that its ultimate goal is salvation: "You are receiving the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls" (v. 9). Salvation has both future and present dimensions: "a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time" (v. 5) and "you are [already] receiving . . . the salvation of your souls" (v. 9). **Martha Moore-Keish**

Aside from them temporary suffering, our inheritance of genuine faith will always possess the impetus to rejoice, regardless of circumstance. This may be one of the toughest realities for us Christians to adopt. We may profess joy with our lips, but when the chips of life are down, will we rejoice from the center of our being? Can we find a way to elicit praise even in life's darkest moments? True joy is not a piece of, or an addendum to, the Christian life; it weaves itself into every facet of the Christian life.

The author of the Peter letter spoke several times of joy. He connected "an indescribable and glorious joy." (v. 8) with the suffering of "various trials" (v. 6). Joy and suffering go together in a genuine faith. Most of the time in Scripture, joy actually springs from sorrow or suffering. It can even be a consequence of defeat. It need not arise from the neatness of life, when all is running smoothly. Paul is emblematic of those who know that joy and sorrow are comingled—never separated entities in the eyes of God. In fact, he wrote his most remarkable treatise on joy from a prison cell.

Our inheritance is that we were made for joy. If only we could eliminate all hurts in the world—all of the pain, grief, and disappointment. However, no one ever promised as much, and as Christians who seek to live a genuine faith we discover that joy is sown in tears.

As I have matured and learned, I now realized that I have an inheritance from my grandparents and my parents; not just the land that my grandparents left to me and each of their grandchildren collectively, or the property that my parents left me and my siblings. Our inheritance has not always been in the form of money and property, but more in the form of belief, faith, loyalty, endurance and hope.

Jesus left us an inheritance that is "imperishable, undefiled, and unfading." Remember, Jesus bequeathed two things to his disciples before

departing: peace and joy. The first he breathed; the second he lived. "I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete"([John 15:11](#)). **Peter W. Marty**

Thanks be to God...He has given us this living hope!

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