

THE READING OF THE WILL

1 Peter 1:3-9

(general idea from Fred Craddock, The Cherry Log Sermons, chapter 19)

**Dr. Howard Batson
First Baptist Church
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Maybe you've never been to one, but perhaps you've seen the reading of a will on a television show or in a movie. Or you've imagined the scene as you've read a book. The family – the relatives – and anyone else who expects to be involved in the distribution of the inheritance gather in a judge's chambers or in a lawyer's office, and the will is read. It's an exciting time. It's an anxious time. Indeed, for some it's a life-changing time.

Fred Craddock says what we do in church is that we read the will every Sunday. We call out the distributions that come from the hand of God to the people of God.

That's one of the reasons we're here – to read the will, God's will – so all the children of God, so all of you can know what your inheritance is. My job this morning is to take you by the hand and to walk off the acres, to walk off the whole ranch so you can see exactly what you've inherited in Christ Jesus.

But there are some people who don't show up for the reading of the will. Where are they this morning? We're reading the will. The room ought to be packed. The anticipation ought to be out the windows. Don't people realize that today we're reading the will as found in Peter's First Epistle?

Some people don't show up for the reading of the will because they are embarrassed. They may be thinking to themselves, "Everybody else is going to get something, but I won't get anything. They won't call my name. So it will be embarrassing. I'm just not going to show up."

Or some people are afraid they are going to be excluded because of their status or lack thereof. In ancient Israel the widow didn't need to show up for the reading of the will because she got nothing. Zilch. Nada. She could sit there all day long, but when they read the ancient Israelite wills her name would not be called. Her problem was that she was a woman. That was the root of many of her problems, because she lived in a patriarchal society, and she suffered. And if the deceased had daughters, they need not show up for the reading of the will either, because the inheritance passed through the menfolk. So if you're a daughter of Israel, do not come to the reading of the will. You will not hear your name.

So some people didn't go because of their lack of status.

When we read the will on Sunday morning, some folk think they shouldn't come to church because they think God won't include them. They feel like a nobody.

But then I think of the passage in Isaiah 56 where the Lord says, “I do not want foreigners to say, ‘I do not have a place among the people of God.’ I do not want the eunuch to say, ‘I am just a dead tree.’ The day is coming, the day is coming,” says the Lord, “when the stranger, the alien, the foreigner, the transient will have a place in my house.”

The way things happen in our world, the benefactor gets to dole out, give out his or her worldly worth in any way he or she might deem appropriate. There are really some strange things, you know. Some people don’t show up at the reading of the will because it’s a time when the benefactor can actually be hateful toward the family. It’s a time when he gets the last word.

And wills can be changed – based upon a whim – changed and changed and changed again. There was a cartoon that depicted a man with his whole family waiting on him. “Can I pour you some more tea, Daddy?” “Can I rub lotion on your feet, Daddy?” “Can I help you, Daddy?” “Can I fluff your pillow, Daddy?” It says in the caption that life had never been better for Mr. Jones since he took on the policy of rewriting his will every single week.

I found some very bizarre cases involving wills.

Have you ever heard of Gunther, the dog? It’s actually Gunther IV. His father, another German Shepherd, Gunther III, was the beneficiary of a multimillion dollar trust. He inherited it all. And now, Gunter IV, the son of the other German Shepherd, has purchased Madonna’s Miami mansion. Gunther doesn’t have owners. He has trustees. Madonna has sold her luxury mansion for \$7.5 million to a German Shepherd dog. Because this dog’s father – Gunther III – that German Shepherd inherited \$20 million dollars. And so Gunther IV will now be taking over Madonna’s master bedroom. That’s not such a big deal to this German Shepherd, however. He is already the proud owner of villas in Italy and the Bahamas, and has seen his nest egg more than triple. (<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/entertainment/833655.stm>)

Now that’s a funny will. The dog gets everything.

Or sometimes people can be vindictive with their will.

This is from the will of a Philadelphia industrialist who died in 1947...

“To my wife I leave her lover, and the knowledge that I wasn’t the fool she thought I was.

“To my son I leave the pleasure of earning a living. For twenty-five years he thought the pleasure was mine. He was mistaken.

“To my daughter I leave \$100,000. She will need it. The only piece of business her husband ever did was to marry her.

“To my valet I leave the clothes he has been stealing from me for ten years. Also the fur coat he wore last winter while I was in Palm Beach.

“To my chauffeur, I leave my cars. He almost ruined them and I want him to have the satisfaction of finishing the job.

“To my partner, I leave the suggestion that he take some clever man in with him at once if he expects to do any business.” (Robert S. Menchin, *Where There’s A Will*, p. 31)

In the book, *Where There's A Will*, that records odd and outlandish will, there is a **man in Boston who died whose will left his wife penniless unless she married again within five years. The reason given for this proviso was he wanted somebody else to find out how hard it was to live with her – truly a monstrous revelation of post-mortem spite. (p. 100)**

The will found in 1 Peter is not spiteful. And the room is filled to the rafters, I imagine, as they read this letter, as they read the will – finding the true inheritance of the people of God. The room is crowded as everybody waits and wonders, “What is it God is going to leave His children?”

It's here in 1 Peter that, like those folk, we, too, hope to hear our name called as Peter reads the will. We wait anxiously, as the people of God, to see exactly what it is that we've inherited. So this morning, get on the edge of your seat. Listen to the words of none other than Peter, himself, as he reads the will of God, the Father – what He has left to His children.

Verse 3

“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His great mercy has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.”

Even as the reading of the will begins, we can tell there is something wonderful, something unbelievable that awaits us, the people of God. He begins with “Blessed be God...” – a basic Jewish statement. Jewish piety prescribed that the benediction, “Blessed be He,” should be pronounced whenever the name of God was uttered. It was a heartfelt outpouring of praise for the marvelous salvation God has brought us in Christ Jesus. “Blessed be God...blessed be He...the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

Those words themselves, “our Lord Jesus Christ,” are an exultant cry of the redeemed. We, the redeemed – those saved from our sins, those saved from the power, the clutches of sin and death – we gladly acknowledge the incarnate Christ. The Christ in flesh. It is through Him that we have been brought into living fellowship with the Father who sent Him. So we call Him Lord – Lord Jesus Christ. When you call Jesus Lord, you acknowledge Him as your master, the one to whom we gladly give our obedience.

The inheritance we've received from God is only because of His mercy. Notice 1 Peter 1:3. “...according to His great mercy.” Mercy is a feeling of pity and compassion toward the miserable. We're the miserable, and God has compassion and pity for us. We did nothing to deserve our great inheritance. But notice, it is not just mercy, but His *great* mercy that has caused us to be born again.

Our inheritance begins at the moment we profess Christ as Lord. Like John the Apostle, Peter depicts the beginning of becoming a child of God as a new birth, a commencement to a drastic new order.

This picture of the new birth is used throughout the New Testament.

- Jesus tells Nicodemus, “Unless you are born again, you will not see the kingdom of God.”
- Titus 3:5 speaks of the beginning of the Christian life as a regeneration.
- Ephesians 2:10 says that Christians have been created in Christ Jesus.

•The Christian is a new creature, a new creation in 2 Corinthians 5:17 and Galatians 6:15.

The basis, the beginning of our inheritance is an actual participation in a new, God-given life. The inheritance we have received begins with a new birth and is completed at the consummation of the Kingdom, when Christ returns for the Church – His bride, His people.

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. He's given us great mercy. He begins the inheritance process by leading us to be born again – born again to a living hope, a living hope based upon the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.

We have a living hope because we have a living God. We have a living God because He has defeated death in the resurrection of Christ. This hope stands in contrast to the empty, frustrating, deceptive, and false hopes of this world. Trials and tribulations, difficulties and sufferings and hardships cannot steal away the hope of the people of God.

Someone has said we can live forty days without food, eight days without water, four minutes without air. But we can only live a few seconds without hope.

Hope is everything, isn't it?

“Hope is the very stuff of life. It keeps the farmer on the tractor. It keeps the prisoner alive. It keeps the student in the books, and the patient watching for the morning. Hope fills present sacrifices with joy and keeps us at worthy tasks, even though the rewards are small and those who say ‘thank you’ are few. This hope of the Christian, though, is not whistling in the dark, nor is it activated by the spring flowers. Rather, it is grounded in the resurrection, the shaking of the dead in the power of the resurrected Lord and Savior, Christ Jesus.” (Fred Craddock, *Commentary on 1 Peter*, p. 24)

And what has He done for us? Look at verse 4. We're allowed to obtain an inheritance.

The inheritance, of course, is our salvation – salvation that begins with our new birth and salvation that ends with the coming of Christ. It is in contrast to the ancient people of God who had inherited an earthly possession, a Promised Land. Ours is not the Land of Canaan. Rather, it's the Kingdom of God.

How does he describe our inheritance? Listen to the Apostle Peter as he does so.

I. Our inheritance is death-proof.

Notice the description in verse 4. It's imperishable. It's death-proof. It's incorruptible, some translations say. It's not subject to decay or dissolution. It belongs to the heavenly realm where neither moth nor rust doth consume (Matthew 6:20). It shows forth the nature of the incorruptible God (Romans 1:28; 1 Timothy 1:17).

The root of the adjective is the idea of “to corrupt” or “to destroy.” Our inheritance is absolutely death-proof.

He's already told us it's grounded in the resurrection of Christ Jesus in verse 3 – "...a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead."

Make no doubt about it. The resurrection of Christ is the crowning point of Christ's redemptive work and the valid foundation for all of God's redeeming work for His people, both present and future. The resurrection is the apex, the climax of the gospel. It is when death is defeated. It is when victory is assured.

Paul said in 1 Corinthians 15 that without the resurrection of Christ there is no hope. You and I are still in our sins. We're a pitiful people. And God is a liar if Christ is not resurrected from the dead. Without the resurrection there is no Easter. With no Easter there is no church.

Our belief about God is a resurrection belief. When Christ died for you and when Christ died for me, He was ushered into the realm of the dead. He was in that disembodied state between death and the resurrection. But His bodily resurrection from the dead, out from among such as are dead people, was the demonstration that he is indeed the Son of God, the Savior of the world, and that His dying sacrifice is sufficient to cancel my sins and your sins and to satisfy the holiness of God. It is only in His resurrection that we have the hope and the guarantee of the resurrection of His people. As He has conquered death and entered upon the heavenly life of joy, so surely, will those who are members of the church where He is the head and we follow Him.

Praise be to God. Hallelujah. Know this morning that our inheritance of the Kingdom of God is absolutely death-proof.

Notice he says in 1 Peter 1:10-11 that in this working of Christ there were sufferings of Christ found by the prophets as they prophesied of the grace of God to come. They knew the sufferings, but also (notice verse 11) they knew the glories. And the greatest glory is the resurrection.

II. Not only is it death-proof, it's sin-proof.

Notice the second descriptive term in verse 4. Unfiled. It's imperishable – it's death-proof. But also it's sin-proof. It's undefiled.

The root verb, "to defile," means to color something by painting or staining it. We are, in our inheritance, free from stain. We are unsusceptible to any stain or sin. Our inheritance – not we ourselves, but our inheritance – is uncontaminated by sin. Our inheritance has the very character of Christ, our great High Priest.

My inheritance and your inheritance is not based upon our good deeds or what we do. It is sin-proof. It cannot be defiled. It is based upon what Christ has done on the cross.

III. It is time-proof.

Here he says it will not fade away. This adjective, used only here in the New Testament, projects a picture of a lovely flower that never fades. What God has left you in His will as a child of God can never, ever perish, lose its power, diminish, or fade away. The attractiveness of what God has left for you – a place in the Kingdom of God, salvation – will never diminish or lose its charm for you.

It's exciting to hear that God has left for us an inheritance of salvation that began even when we were born again, born from above, and continues until the day Christ returns. It's absolutely death-proof. Death cannot take away what God has planned for us.

It's sin-proof. No matter my frailty, no matter my faultiness, no matter my fallenness, nothing I do can take away my inheritance because my sins are forgiven in the blessed name of Christ.

It's time-proof. The inheritance of the Kingdom of God will never fade away, never grow old, never wither or faint.

IV. It's reach-proof.

Notice, "reserved in heaven for you."

Your inheritance is certain because of God's watchful care. It's immune from all the disasters that befall an inheritance on earth – catastrophic events like war, pandemics, can't touch our ultimate inheritance that comes from God the Father. For it is not even placed on earth. It's preserved in heaven above with God. It is, literally, beyond the reach of destructive forces.

But there is even better news. Not only is our inheritance death-proof and sin-proof and time-proof and reach-proof, but he tells us, finally, something about us, the beneficiaries of the inheritance. We (verse 5), those named in the will, are "protected by the power of God through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time."

We are guarded. We are kept. It's a military term indicating that the heirs need protection from enemies. And we've got that protection by the power of God. His power is all around us. It is in the sphere in which we live and move.

There is our inheritance (verse 5). A salvation revealed at the last time.

Lest they be confused about the suffering they experienced in the first century (and experiencing it, indeed, they were), he says rejoice in your inheritance despite the fact that you are now suffering. Notice in verse 6, they are distressed, for a little while, by various trials.

You're going to have a variety of trials and tests in your life, he says. But compared to eternity with God, they amount to absolutely nothing. Rejoice despite your trials and tribulations. For it is by these trials (verse 7) that your faith is tested to see if it is pure gold and not dross or waste. As the refiner tests the gold by heating it, to purify it, to see what is really precious, so we are tested by our trials to see if our faith is real.

And when our faith is real, notice verse 7, it "results in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ."

There is no suffering more difficult to bear than suffering that cannot be understood or explained. Uninterpreted pain is most unbearable. So Peter tells them to see their trials as having a clarifying

and purifying effect, as they join the chorus of praise that will rise as one great doxology at the appearing of Jesus Christ.

It's only on that day that you and I will understand the full disclosure of the difficulties and trials of our lives (verse 8).

Jesus told Thomas, "Blessed are those who have not seen and have believed." Thomas, who insisted on touching the scars. Thomas, who insisted on firsthand, eyewitness experience of the resurrection to believe. Jesus told him on that occasion, "Because you have seen me, have you believed? Blessed are they who did not see and yet believed" (John 20:29).

Even so, Peter himself, having seen Christ, says though his readers have not seen Christ, they love Him. And though they can't see Him now, they believe in Him. They rejoice with joy that cannot be expressed. And so (verse 9) they will obtain the outcome of their faith, the inheritance, the salvation of their souls.

Yes, this little church addressed by 1 Peter gathered around for the reading of the will. Strangers, exiles, nobodies, slaves, women, everybody; they have all come and they are all excited because they said, "The will has been kept guarded in heaven, under lock and key, and nobody can change this will. The value will not go down. It is imperishable. The will is unchangeable." These people are confident that they are going to be taken by the hand outside the building and allowed to walk off the size of their inheritance as the children of God and then taken back inside and run through the unsearchable riches of God's love and grace. Every one of them is expecting it. (Fred Craddock, *The Cherry Log Sermons*, p. 106)

Perhaps the leader gets up and reads the will. He says, "First of all, there is no silver or gold here. If that's what you've come for, you're out of luck. This is a church, and there is no silver or gold. The inheritance is salvation, new birth, resurrection, hope, mercy, security, joy, and grace.

I want to ask you to do something. Do you know of any people who live near where you live and do not show up for the reading of the will. They don't come to church because they don't think they are going to get anything. Do you know any people who, for any reason, have excluded themselves? If you do, I want you to go to them and say, "Last Sunday we read the will, and your name was called out, but you were not there." And then tell them this: "We're going to read the will again next Sunday." So bring them to this place to hear it. We read the will every single Sunday. We claim the salvation of God Sunday in and Sunday out. There is nothing like hearing your name called out, nothing like it in all the world. Nothing like hearing the voice call your name and say, "Child of God, this is yours." (Fred Craddock, *The Cherry Log Sermons*, p. 108)

That's what we do. We read the will every week.