

“Praising God for Our New Birth, Part 2”

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Scriptural Foundation: 1 Peter 1:1-5, ESV

Greeting

¹ Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ,

To those who are elect exiles of the dispersion in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia, ² according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, in the sanctification of the Spirit, for obedience to Jesus Christ and for sprinkling with his blood:

May grace and peace be multiplied to you.

Born Again to a Living Hope

³ Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, ⁴ to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, ⁵ who by God's power are being guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.

Two weeks ago I received an email from a man and his wife who attended Bethany regularly for years. They began attending Bethany Community Church in Washington about two years ago. This is what the e-mail said:

“I have some good news to tell you and I think you'll be about as happy as me. I got saved March 24th at 11:15 am this past year.

“For a little bit of background let me tell you when I was six I started going to a Good News Club after school. After the meeting one of my friends asked me if I wanted to go up and get saved. I said, ‘Sure’, and figured after I prayed that I was good to go and am saved.

“As I grew older and through my adult life I went through all the motions of being a Christian, going to church, prayed before meals, etc. But there was no fruit in my life. In my early thirties during a mission conference our pastor and the missionary said they thought I ought to go to Bible college in California, so I did. My area of study was to be a minister of music. I graduated in 1976. All the years of serving in churches but never having a desire to read God's Word or even talk about God, this was my life until about 2 years ago when God really began dealing with me about this. Then, when my brother-in-law, Denny, died I thought, ‘He just got saved and now he's in Heaven, but I've been pretending to be saved for sixty-one years and I'm not going to Heaven.’

“On Monday, March 21st I got a well-written letter from our son. He had been praying for me and felt the Holy Spirit wanted him to say some things to me.” I will now read you excerpts of his letter.

““Dad, know that I love you and look up to you so much! I really mean that! I am ever so grateful for you as it is so rare that anyone gets to have a father like you. I need to be honest with my love for you though, and share my desire to ensure you have not only eternal life but a true joy in your life I wish I could be there in person, dad, and put my arm around you and let you know how much you mean to me. I have never seen you read your Bible, pray (except for the food before dinner) or truly worship God from your heart. This means that your faith has never really grown. If you have the Holy Spirit in you, you may go for a season without desiring to study the Word, but the Spirit of God that is in you will motivate you to do these things. ‘You have seemed to do all the mechanics of Christianity, but without the true heart of it.

‘Your Christianity doesn't seem to flow out of you from the Holy Spirit, but seems more like it flows out of your well intentions instead. Our relationship with God though has nothing to do with us doing stuff through good intentions. I am not judging you, my sweet father, because you are a better person than me. It's just that I can't recall seeing any

evidence of the Holy Spirit in your life. I have wondered for years why you seem to have no real desire from the heart for the things of God. Dad, I urge you that if you have any doubt whatsoever as to why for sixty-one years you have not grown in the Lord that you will consider that maybe you have been deceived this whole time. If you repent and accept Jesus' sacrifice right now and commit yourself to him, Jesus loves you and wants to account righteousness to you so that you can be in a personal relationship with our perfect, righteous God. I want to spend eternity with you, dad.

'Please don't let guilt or thoughts of other people or any kind of pride hold you back, not this time. In the end you will have to stand alone before an infinitely righteous God. No one else can help you at that point. Either you have been considered righteous by Jesus' blood or you will have to instead be judged by your works in life. It is only Jesus' atoning blood that does this. By repenting and accepting this in faith, you will be accounted the righteousness needed to stand before God! You will also then have the Holy Spirit create for you a new heart! The Holy Spirit will give you peace and joy and contentment that I have never truly seen you have, dad. I am praying so hard for you dad! I love you so much. Please accept anything you may be feeling the Holy Spirit urging you to do right away. Every time we put the Spirit off, our hearts get harder and the urging of the Spirit fades.

'Dad, if there was a time to be passionate, it is right now while this window of opportunity is here!'"

This man wrote, "After receiving the letter I spent a couple days thinking so much more about Christ and salvation and humbling myself. On Thursday morning I sat with my wife Brenda and had her read the letter. When she was finished I asked, 'Well what do you think about it?' She said, 'What do YOU think about it? What are you going to do about it?' I then told her I was going to take care of it right then and I prayed to receive Christ as my Saviour. Immediately I felt so light inside - my burden was lifted. Already, I can see changes in my life."

I read that testimony for a number of reasons. First, this testimony reminds us of the spiritual influence a loving child can have upon an earthly father when the Holy Spirit opens a door of opportunity and that son or daughter is faithful and bold to share the Good News of the Gospel so clearly. I know many of you have earthly fathers and mothers who are not born again, and I pray God open doors of spiritual influence for you and you will have courage to share the completeness and wonder of the Gospel of Jesus.

Second, this testimony illustrates the truth that being religious and being born again are two completely different things. Being religious will not make us Christians. Only new birth from God's Spirit will. Peter begins his letter by talking about the new life every genuine Christian is given by God and it is important and vital we discern for ourselves what our state is.

Third, this testimony illustrates new birth always changes the way we live. If we see no real changes in our relationship to sin and our relationship with God, we are right to question whether we have been born again.

Finally, this testimony lifts our hearts to Heaven in praise to God for His wonderful work of grace inside every born again believer. With the Apostle Peter we shout out,

³ Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again to a living hope...

What a joy that is!

In the previous study we learned the Apostle Paul reminds the suffering church in Corinth, God has given them a precious new identity, "If anyone is in Christ, he (or she) becomes a new creature with a new identity."¹ The question Peter answers in these first five verses is, "Now that I am in Christ, who am I?" We jotted down three specific changes God makes in our identity when we are changed, transformed, by Jesus Christ. We consider, first, God calls us as exiles in this world. We are strangers who do not fit in and do not belong to this world. Our citizenship is in Heaven. We also observed God chose us as His elect people. We are chosen by God to live for His honor and glory, a people set apart and set aside by God for His good pleasure. We also recognized God gave us new birth into a new life.

¹ 2 Corinthians 5:17

In this study we are going to focus on that third truth regarding the change of identity we possess once we embrace Christ; that new identity is that we have been given a new birth in Christ and so we have new life. Notice how Peter introduces this topic of the believer's new life in Christ,

³ Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ!

Peter is, first, making a statement. Peter himself is worshipping. I imagine as Peter thinks about the wonder of God's amazing grace, he has to break out into praise and worship of God. But, Peter is making more than just a statement. He is issuing a call to his readers. He is saying, "Let us worship God together for the amazing grace and mercy He has lavished upon us when He gave us new life."

Peter calls God's people who are suffering to keep their eyes from being riveted downward in their pain and move their eyes upward to the glory of God the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! Peter is writing to encourage real world people who are enduring suffering, hostility, anger, intimidation, and persecution because they have decided to follow Jesus, and their suffering and their problems would go away if they would just simply renounce Christ. Peter begins his address to this suffering audience, not with rousing exhortations for them to be strong, nor even with soft, tender condolences of compassion, but Peter begins by talking with his suffering audience and sharing with them precious doctrine. And on the basis of this doctrine, he then calls them to worship God in joy.

At the beginning of Verse 3, Peter urges his readers to worship. Peter knows the path out of despair and fear and anxiety is the path of worship paved with stones of sound doctrine. Joyful worship helps us to look past our present struggles and to God's sovereign and merciful hand.

Sound doctrine was not dry and dull to this fisherman turned apostle. Remember, Peter is not a scholar. He is not interested in doctrine because it is intellectually challenging. Instead, Peter understands doctrine is the fuel of worship and praise to God. In the first three verses Peter teaches the Doctrine of Election, the Doctrine of the Trinity, the Doctrine of God's Foreknowledge, the Doctrine of Sanctification, the Doctrine of the Atonement, and the Doctrine of Regeneration. It is all packed within these few verses and with these doctrines in view, Peter urges us to praise God. Peter knows worship is the leading edge of the Christian's life.

We, as Christians, are a people who must think vertically first, upward, before we think horizontally about what is happening in the here and now. Sound doctrine and worship kiss all through Scripture. You cannot have one without the other. They are always together. Wherever you see worship there is sound doctrine connected to it. Wherever you see sound doctrine there is worship-like response connected to it. They go together like a horse and carriage. Doctrine lays the heavy bricks of a foundation so when storms beat against us we are able stand firm in the midst of that violent pressure. Worship lifts our thoughts and our hearts upward out of the darkness of our present pain to the light of the glory of God. The primary goal of studying sound doctrine is to find our joy in God and Peter knows that.

I confess I am concerned about the way much of modern Christianity severs the connection between sound doctrine and vibrant worship. Instead, sound doctrine is often replaced by raw emotion so that raw emotion, in much of contemporary Christianity, at least here in America, is fueled not by sound doctrine, but it is fueled by simple emotion, so that we rely upon sweet melody or a heavy beat or charismatic leaders to energize our soul so we can lift up our hearts to God in praise. But, the problem is this, in a real world the music stops; at some point the charismatic leader gets distracted, run down, or is removed. What happens when the music stops? Does our worship stop? Is that what we are going to tell a suffering people: "Let's get you all excited for a moment and then you go home and you still have the same problems!?" Is that the foundation we want to lay for our Christian life?

Emotions are like sand that the wind of trial will drive away. We need sound doctrine to be the anchor of our soul or we will not be worshippers in the storm. John Piper writes, "Worship is when the mind apprehends great truth about God and the heart kicks in with deep feelings of brokenness and wonder and gladness and gratitude and the mouth says something like, 'Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ!'"

Here, in Verse 3, Peter takes up the Doctrine of Regeneration. I know there are some large words which are often hard to understand, but many of them are very important words. “Regeneration” is one of them. It is important because the Holy Spirit says it is so because the Holy Spirit included it in Sacred Scripture. This is a word which is not originated in the mind of man, but it is a word connected by the Holy Spirit to the author’s of Sacred Scripture. The puritan, Stephen Charnock, in his excellent and classic work, “The Existence and Attributes of God”, defines regeneration this way: “Regeneration is the universal change of the whole of man. It is as large in renewing us as sin was in defacing us.” This is what Peter is referencing when he talks about us being born again in Verse 3,

³ Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again.

Peter rejoices in the truth that God imparts real spiritual life to His own people and it is not make believe. It is according to God’s great mercy God caused us to be born again. New birth is completely the merciful work of God on our behalf. We are not Christians because we made a smart choice to follow God! That is not the reasons why we have new life. We are Christians because God made a merciful choice to give us new life. That is why we are Christians. Our salvation is not because we wisely invested in a “Heavenly Stock Market” and our return is better than others because we made smarter choices than other people did. That, we often times glory in the choice we made and that is wrong, because the reason Peter says we have new life is because God caused us, in His mercy, to be born again. When I think of that, I stand amazed I am born of God. The only explanation I can have for that is God was merciful to my ignorant, foolish, rebellious soul. God receives all the glory and all the credit.

Prior to our new birth we were spiritually dead in our sins. We were spiritually blind to God’s glory. We were not smarter and we were not more spiritually sensitive. We lived in absolute spiritual darkness without the knowledge of God and alienated from the life of God completely. We were spiritually helpless and hopeless, unable to dress the wounds of our own soul, but now in Jesus, we are made alive and we are created as new persons. While we are able to see the glory of God in the face of Jesus, we are able to walk with God in fellowship and joy.

Jesus speaks of this same truth of regeneration in John 3. Jesus is speaking to a religious leader by the name of Nicodemus. He says to Nicodemus,

³ *“I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again.”*

We learn two truths about regeneration that are vital for us to understand. The first truth is: We must be born again. New birth is an absolute spiritual necessity. There are not two kinds of Christians. There is not an old-kind of Christian or a new-kind of Christian. There are not some Christians who are born again and other Christians who have not been born again. If one is a Christian, a genuine, authentic child of God, then that person has been given new life; they have been born again. Jesus said, “I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again.”

Jesus is talking to Nicodemus who is a wonderful man, a man we would love to have in our home and be our neighbor. He was a man who prayed every day, a man who lived an incredibly moral life, a man who faithfully served God in his local congregation, a man who studied and taught and attempted to live out the Bible and the Scriptures in his life. He was a man, though, who would not see the Kingdom of God in his present state unless something happened to him; unless he was born again. His religion was based on self-righteousness rather than the righteousness of God coming down as a gift from God. His faith was an external faith without any internal transformation. He was like that friend who wrote me that note for the first sixty-one years of his life.

He had a righteousness. When I talked with him I was surprised by this letter because after the years here he “seemed” to me to be like and authentic Christian. That was everything I saw, but he was like Nicodemus. He was not born again and he did not have the life of God and he needed to be born again. This is an absolute necessity; it is not optional.

Being born again is like being pregnant in that either you are or you are not. No one is a little born again or halfway born again. The question I lay upon your soul is this: Have you been born again? You may ask, “How would I know?” I would answer: The same way you know you were born physically. If I asked you, how do you know that you were physically born into this world, you would likely answer, “Because I am physically alive. And everyone who is alive has been physically born.” You would not likely feel the need to drag out your birth certificate or introduce me to some of the witnesses who were at your birth. You will say, “Here is the greatest evidence I can give you. It is not a birth certificate because that can be manufactured. It is not witnesses because they may lie. I am alive!

How do you know you are spiritually born again? It is not by showing a certificate of church membership or baptism. It is not by testifying when you were young you prayed a prayer or by showing me people who were there when you walked down an aisle. How do you know you were born again? It is because you are alive today to God. That is what this man, in the testimony we read, came to realize he did not have. He did not have real life in God. It was all mechanical to him. You must ask the question: “Have I been born again?” and it is asked upon the basis, “Am I alive to God and dead to this world. Has there been this transformation which has taken place in my soul.

The second truth about being born again is: When we are born again, our lives change in practical ways. New birth expresses itself in a transformed life. No one becomes born again by doing good works. That is not what the Bible teaches; it is a work of God completely, but once God does this work there is a real event which takes place and there is a real change. That real change and that new life expresses itself in certain ways.

The Apostle John, in his first letter, says, “Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God,”² but John also teaches us real life change occurs in the life of a person who possesses the life of God inside of them. For example, John says, “No one who is born of God will continue to sin, because God’s seed remains in him; he cannot go on sinning because he has been born of God.”³ This does not mean the person born of God will have a perfect, sinless life, but only the pattern of life will not be one of continual sin. That person’s relationship with sin changes the moment they have the life of God inside of them. Furthermore, John says, a person who is born of God will also show love to others: “Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God.”⁴ John also says our relationship with the world around us changes and we overcome the world: “And his commands are not burdensome, for everyone born of God has overcome the world.”⁵ When we have the new life of God in us we have a new ability to overcome the pressure and squeeze this world places upon us and the temptations of this world so we might obey God and we might glorify the name of Jesus.

This week has been a special week for me. I was able to spend a majority of it with teenagers at camp. I wish I could transport all of you, even for an hour of the week I experienced, to see these teenagers and their commitment to God in their worship and their conversations. It was a slice of Heaven. There were a number of teenagers who committed their life to Christ and whom I believe are born again.

One of those teenagers, and I have not had a chance to talk with him in depth, but my sons came home with a story of him trusting in Christ. He comes from a family who do not go to church very often. He just began coming to Bethany. He gave himself to Christ in a wonderful way this week. Upon his return home, his friends, for his birthday, bought him tickets to a rock concert, so he went with them. He got into that concert, and he said, “After ten minutes I had to get up and leave. I realized this is not of God and I am God’s man now.” Think of that. That is change, is it not?! That is something which really happens. How do you convince a teenager whose friends spend money to purchase a birthday gift and the birthday gift, the concert tickets, are not of God and he has to leave? Will Law do that? If we set down a Law and tell them, “This is what you must not do! Here is the list when you go home.” Only the life of God will do that and make that change.

Peter then settles upon two important directions into which our new life takes us. If you do Bible study here, you will notice there is a word structure: “He caused us to be born again...” then there is a “to a” and “to an”; “to a living hope” at the end of Verse 3, and beginning in Verse 4 he is continuing the same thought, “to an inheritance”. Peter is

² 1 John 5:1

³ 1 John 3:9, New International Version (NIV), 1984

⁴ 1 John 4:7, NIV, 1984

⁵ 1 John 5:3-4, NIV, 1984

mentioning two lines of direction this new life pushes us. In the first, we are born again into a living hope, and in the second, we are born again into a eternal and permanent inheritance.

When we consider this living hope, the New Testament uses the word hope in a completely different way from our normal way of speaking about hope. If we were having a conversation, I might say, “I hope the Dallas Mavericks beat the Miami Heat in Game 6 of the NBA playoffs.” I am using “hope” as a sincere desire for some uncertain future event; it may happen and it may not happen. This is not how Peter and the rest of the authors of Scripture use the word “hope”. Hope in the Bible is never uncertain, but it is a full assurance, a complete confidence God will fulfill His promises to us. Hope becomes an eager expectation of some joyful, future event which we grab and embrace now and even enjoy a piece of it now because of our anticipation and expectation of it. That is biblical hope.

In hope, our faith connects to God’s promises so we experience the joy and strength of our future blessings today, even before we actually possess them. This hope, this confidence, becomes a motivating influence in our lives, particularly when we experience grief, trouble, suffering, and difficulty in this present world. Hope is such an important think to nurture, cherish, and embrace because it is this hope which lifts our eyes off of the difficulties, fears, and anxieties of this temporary, momentary life and look beyond to eternity and to God Himself and to our joyful future. Hope is necessary to a suffering people and that is why Peter writes about it.

The principle is: Our hope is a living hope and not a dead or dying hope. The hope of a believer, the person whose life is now in God, never dies. Some day the joy hope promises will be realized. Hope never dies from failure and never ceases in disappointment. This is what makes biblical hope completely different from every other kind of hope in this world. The hope this world offers is based upon everything which is transitory and which is passing away. It is based upon a human leader’s ability, on military might, or on human ingenuity to resolve our problems, but this world’s hopes are all dying hopes rather than living hopes. The reason for this is sin entered the world and death through sin, so death passed upon all men. Everyone and everything in this world is passing away. There is nothing we see around us or in us which is eternal apart from that which is connected to God and which God imparts to us through regeneration. Our worldly hopes all end with our passing away. That is why Solomon describes earthly hope in Ecclesiastes as he says, “Vanity, vanity all is vanity.”⁶ Solomon continues, “I have seen all the things that are done under the sun; all of them are meaningless, a chasing after the wind.”⁷ He goes on to talk about what he tried to do with the hope this world is offering and in his pursuits of wealth, pleasure, worldly esteem, prestige, honor, wisdom, education, a vital career, and meaningful work, but he realized after he got into them they were empty hopes and that is the way it is for every person who lives under the sun; every person who is living on the horizontal plane without any vertical dimension, who is living only with a view this world “is where I am longing for my joy and happiness to be found”, without an understanding it is only our connection to God which brings us joy.

Are you still living under the sun, or are you living in the Son? A life disconnected from God’s eternal Kingdom, a life with no vertical dimension, and a life with no eternal treasure in view is a life filled with dead and dying hope. What will happen to you when you die? Your earthly hopes will perish and die with you.

There is another way to live! You can live with a new life of God controlling you, motivating you, and moving you and you can possess this living hope Peter talks about. We can rejoice with Paul, “For me to live is Christ and to die is gain!”⁸ Why is that? Death itself does not end our hopes. It does not kill our hopes. Rather, it causes us to realize our hopes. Through death we receive Heaven, joy, honor, perfection, and, most precious of all, the very presence of God.

Notice Peter says, in Verse 3, “...he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.” The principle is: Hope is a treasure to embrace with all the strength of our faith! We know our hope is bound up in the person of Jesus and His resurrection because Jesus lifts our hopes and it is vital for us to grab hope with the arms of our faith and squeeze it tightly to our breast.

Hebrews 10 says this,

²³ Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful.

⁶ Ecclesiastes 1:2

⁷ Ecclesiastes 1:14

⁸ Philippians 1:21

We have a responsibility with this hope. We do not let it lay dormant, but we look at it and we say, “Yes, God has given me new life in living hope. I will claim this hope for myself and I will embrace it and hold fast with a clear and unwavering conscience because He who promised is faithful. That is what I know!”

In the second direction, we are born again into a permanent inheritance, as we read,

⁴ ...into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade—kept in heaven for you, ⁵ who through faith are shielded by God’s power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time.

What a promise! Consider, especially, the value of that promise to those who have lost their earthly inheritance as a result of persecution. The dad leaves a piece of land for his children to farm and to use for their livelihood. Persecution comes in, “No, you do not own that land. Get off of it and go your way!” That is what is happening to these believers.

You have an eternal inheritance. Do not still kick around how you lost your earthly inheritance. It was passing away anyway. I want you to know you have an eternal inheritance. How secure is that eternal inheritance? It is an inheritance which can never perish, spoil, or fade. Peter uses three adjectives which, by contrast, describe every earthly inheritance. Every earthly inheritance will perish, spoil, and fade. They are corrupted by sin. They will fade away and waste away and pass away. That is true of every earthly inheritance, but that is absolutely the opposite of what is true of our Heavenly inheritance.

An inheritance is a gift we receive, simply passed down to us as a result of our being born into a family and that is the reason why Peter connects this inheritance to our new life, to our being born again. We have been born into a new family.

So your earthly family rejected you and cut you out of the will. You have no future in reference to the earthly things your family is connected to. I want you to know you have been born again into a new family and you have an eternal inheritance. This inheritance is different from the inheritance of your family which would have passed to you. This inheritance is unfading, never spoiling, and never perishing.

There are aspects of this inheritance we can enjoy now. Ephesians tells us God gave us the Holy Spirit as a down payment and a guarantee of our inheritance.⁹ We experience the power and the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit as a taste. This inheritance is future and if you are trying to find your best life now, you must find it outside the Gospel. The truth of Scripture is: This is not the best life now. This is the very worst life now. That is not to say every one of us is experiencing bad things, but whether you are doing great in this world or poorly in this world with regards to suffering, that is the worst you will ever experience. When you die you will experience so much immeasurably greater. That is the point.

How secure is this? It is kept by God for you. The idea is it is being guarded and secured for us.

When Peter was in prison in Acts 12, he was “kept” in prison; he was held there. Who keeps our inheritance? God does; it is kept in Heaven and it is safe. Not only is our inheritance kept, but we read,

⁵ ...who through faith are shielded by God’s power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time.

Friends, know your inheritance is absolutely secure and we hold onto it, not through our efforts and not through our own resolve, but we hold onto it through the God who guards us by energizing our faith and continuing to strengthen our faith so we will persevere in faith in this world. That is His means and His instrument.

The Apostle Peter must think of this as being so very precious because Jesus told him he would deny Him three times. Peter said, “No, I will go to prison. I will die for you. I will never, ever forsake you.” And he forsook Him. Did he lose his inheritance? That had to be the question. But, remember what Jesus told him that same night? It must have come back to Peter as he was writing this letter. He said, in Luke 22,

⁹ Ephesians 1:13, 14

³¹ *“Simon, Simon, Satan has asked to sift you as wheat (to take your inheritance from you). ³² But I have prayed for you, Simon, that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned back, strengthen your brothers (because I have a future for you).”*

We are talking about regeneration and being born again. I ask you once again, have you been born again. Later in 1 Peter 1, we read,

²³ For you have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and enduring word of God.

If you are wondering whether or not you have been born again, God says, “Here is the instrument to my Gospel message and my Gospel message has been place in this Book.” I urge you to seek God and if you seek Him you will find Him through His Gospel. It is His Word which imparts life and it is the seed which will be planted in your soul which will bring new life. What a joy that is.

Praise God and blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ who has caused us to be born again into a living hope and into an eternal inheritance. Amen.