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Grace Fellowship Church, Port Jervis, New York

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Faith Proved Genuine

1 Peter 1:3-7

Prayer: *Father, we just again thank you for who you are, we thank you that we worship the Prince of peace. And Lord, we want more than anything to learn more and more about who you are and how to live our lives in honor of you. And so I thank you for the book that you've given us, I thank you for your Holy Spirit, who you promise to accompany us if we but ask, and so we ask this morning that your Holy Spirit would guide us as we again open up your letter in 1 Peter and that you would give us the ability again to make it of lasting value. And I pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.*

1 Peter 1:3-7 says: 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, to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, who by God's power are being guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. In this you rejoice, though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various

trials, so that the tested genuineness of your faith -- more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire -- found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ.

Peter is painting a picture here of extreme opposites, of a living hope with great, great rejoicing and grief in all kinds of trials. The joy side of Peter's words is a series of bold statements detailing what a living hope in Jesus Christ consists of. He speaks of our inheritance in terms of our new birth, our living hope, an inheritance that never perishes, spoils, or fades, all kept in heaven for us. And then he identifies who "us" is. It is those who, according to verse 5, who by God's power are being guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. Did you get that? I mean, did you get what he's saying? Does what he's saying make sense? What Peter is saying is that all of the treasures of heaven are being kept for those who through faith are shielded by God's power until -- until the work that he's doing in us is finished. God is right here, right now, today preparing us for "*a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.*" That's the joy side of Peter's words. It's the good news. Peter himself in verse 6, he says: *In this you rejoice.* And why shouldn't we rejoice, I mean, we literally have treasures in heaven and we have the new birth, we have the living hope. Do

you rejoice greatly in these? Are they a source of great comfort, great joy? Or are they more like religious cliches, statements which sound nice but which really in reality have no substance for me. I mean, have you ever thought about that phrase: *Treasures kept in heaven for you?* Have you ever considered your inheritance? Now maybe it has little or no appeal, I mean, if I found out that I inherited a hundred million dollars in a currency that I had no use whatsoever for, let's say it was a hundred million Martian dollars deposited in the First Bank of Mars. I wouldn't get too excited because I don't live on Mars, I mean, I live here on earth. And we read Peter's glowing account of what God has in store for us in heaven and my guess is that we start to think along those lines. I mean, Gee, it's great, I've got some really neat stuff that's coming when I die but until then really, what's the point about dwelling on it? Well, that thinking is false and it is also dangerous. And like most false thinking, its danger is that it appears reasonable, it appears logical, and it appears maybe even spiritual, but only on the surface. Most of us have heard that statement: "He is so heavenly-minded that he is no earthly good." It's glib and it's patently false. I mean think about that. "He's so heavenly-minded that he's no earthly good." Have you ever met anybody that's like that? I mean so given to spiritual things that he's useless when it comes to earthly things? I've never met anybody even remotely like that. However, I can certainly say the

opposite. Have you ever met anyone who is so given to earthly things that he was no spiritual good? I met quite a few folks who fit that description.

Listen to how C.S. Lewis describes this in *Mere Christianity*. He says: "A continual looking forward to the eternal world is not (as some modern people think) a form of escapism or wishful thinking, but one of the things a Christian is meant to do. It does not mean that we are to leave the present world as it is. If you read history, you will find that the Christians who did most for the present world were just those who thought most of the next. The Apostles themselves, who set on foot the conversion of the Roman Empire, the great men who built up the Middle Ages, the English Evangelicals who abolished the Slave Trade, all left their mark on Earth precisely because their minds were occupied with Heaven. It is since Christians have largely ceased to think of the other world that they have become so ineffective in this." And I love it how he concludes this, it says: "Aim at Heaven and you will get earth 'thrown in': Aim at earth and you will get neither."

All Lewis is saying is what Jesus said in *Matthew 6:33*. Jesus was addressing the very same things that we all concern ourselves about, he's addressing what are we going to eat, what are we going to drink, what are we going to wear, where are we going to live?

And his answer was incredibly simple. He said: "*But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you.*" You see, all of these non kingdom things that we put all of our energy into, our careers and our homes and our cars and our stuff, it is really those things that are illusory and unreal. Just go up into your attic or go down to your basement and gather up all of those things that at some point were so important to have, that you just had to have that are now gathering dust and ask yourself if it was worth the effort. You know, we say what you see is what you get, but that's dead wrong because what you see is not what you get. What you see in this life is only one side of reality. It is the fleeting, fleshy, incipient hint of what we are supposed to be but aren't by a long shot. I mean an acorn and an oak tree are two vastly different things and we are at best acorns in the making. Our value is not vested in what we are today but rather in what we are designed to be tomorrow. And what we are destined to be tomorrow is a direct result of what we pour our energy into today. I mean, this world is always going to tell us that what matters is the here and now. And it will literally try to force us to fix our eyes only on what we can see, hear, feel, taste, and touch. You know, from God's perspective that is incredibly short-sighted. I mean from God's perspective we are these incredible eternal creatures that he created in his own image and he designed to rule and reign for all eternity. And we're

stuck for this briefest of moments in this world of flesh and blood that masquerades as if it's everything. The only thing this world runs on is a longing for a satisfaction that it can never deliver. And we know that for a fact, I mean, we know that because we have a record of those who literally got every single thing this world could possibly deliver and found that it came up way, way short. I mean Solomon was the wealthiest, most powerful, wisest, and most indulged human being that ever lived. He had every single appetite met in full including food and sex and money and power and influence. I mean God purposely gave him the keys to every single kingdom there is on this earth, and he said you can have every single thing they have to offer you. And after sampling all of those for many, many years, Solomon said this in *Ecclesiastes 1*. He said: *I have seen all the things that are done under the sun; all of them are meaningless, a chasing after the wind.* See, the problem is, the problem is the only ones who get to the place where they see that all this world has to offer is basically smoke and mirrors are the ultra rich and the ultra powerful. Those folks who comprise less than one-tenth of less than one percent of the world's population, they know, they know for a fact that this world doesn't satisfy, but they're not telling. I mean, the rest of the world spends its entire life just grinding forward thinking if only, if only, if only, and you can substitute whatever you want in that "if only." If only I'd get that job, if only I'd get that

raise, if only I'd get that promotion, if only I'd get that lottery ticket or that inheritance. See, the vast majority of people in this world grind forward every single day hoping that they can grab a better hold of that brass ring. But those who are given every brass ring this world has to offer are never satisfied. In fact they may be the most miserable people in the world because they alone realize that striving itself is what gives them purpose. And after arriving at what they strived for and realizing that there's nothing there, it takes that purpose away.

Consider this statement by a present day equivalent of Solomon, a man most of you know, a man by the name of Tom Brady, quarterback of the New England Patriots, most successful football team in history, multi, multi millionaire, movie star looks, married to one of the most beautiful women in the world. I have a short video describing what he says about what this world has to offer. Would you cue that up? (Playing video)

Do you know how many males there are in this world who think if I could just be Tom Brady, I mean, I'd have the greatest life you could possibly imagine. Yet the only one who doesn't quite see it that way is Tom Brady. I mean, imagine the frustrations of God seeing us, the crown of his creation, set apart for an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for

you, and yet constantly preoccupied with nothing. C.S. Lewis wrote in *The Weight of Glory*, he said: "It would seem that Our Lord finds our desires not too strong, but too weak. We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased."

1 Corinthians 2 says: *But as it is written: "Eye has not seen, nor ear heard, nor have entered into the heart of man the things which God has prepared for those who love him."* God is saying that nothing that any human being has ever seen or ever heard or ever even entered into his imagination can capture what it is that God has prepared for those who love him. I mean, this is the same God who's already demonstrated an ability to create galaxies in the trillions, and microscopic worlds that make something as tiny as a human T cell pulsate with mysteries that science is not going to be able to unwrap for the next 500 years. That God is telling us that what awaits us as his children is literally beyond comprehension. But it's out of sight and so it's out of mind. And so God says in *2 Corinthians 4:18*: *So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen, since what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.* What is seen is the careers, the homes, the cars, the

stuff. God says those are all temporary. What is unseen is those things that build on the foundation of Jesus Christ and that is eternal. Fact is and I think we all agree, most of us put all of our energy into the temporary, into what is seen. Even though I strongly suspect that all of us have had our share of Tom Brady moments when we realize that everything this world holds out to us is ephemeral, it's fleeting, it's cotton candy, you know, something that appears to have substance and as soon as you try to grab ahold of it, put it in your mouth and it just melts, it just disappears. That's exactly what this life consists of, it's cotton candy. Is that really what you want to spend your life pursuing? You know, one thing I know beyond a shadow of a doubt, there will come a time when every one of us will realize how foolishly we've squandered our time here on earth. We love the idea that there's going to be no weeping in heaven but we forget that God says just before he mentions that, he says this in *Revelation 21*, it says: "*He will wipe away every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.*" Where do you suppose those tears that he wipes away come from? Maybe it's regret, even in heaven.

What do you think heaven is going to be like? I mean if we think it's as unreal as Mars is, then there's really no use in thinking about it, is it? God says: *So we fix our eyes not on what is seen*

but on what is unseen. But you know, the unseen world also has its eyes fixed on us. Hebrews 12 says: We are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses. You know, I've compared them before to the way we respond when we watch a horror movie. You know, we see the protagonists taking a wrong turn, going down the wrong path, opening up the wrong door and everybody just recoils in horror because we're the ones in the audience, we see what's going on, we know where this bad choice is leading. I can't help but think that that great cloud of witnesses more often than not is horrified but what they now know as reality by the bad choices they see us making. One thing we know is that God repeatedly tells us to take the eyes off the horizontal earthly plane and focus it on the vertical heavenly plane, even if sometimes it does feel like Mars. And God commends Abraham for focusing in the right direction in Hebrews 11. He says this: By faith he made his home in the promised land like a stranger in a foreign country; he lived any tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise. For he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God. That city is heaven. That's what Abraham fixed his eyes on.

Someone recently asked me if it was appropriate to aggressively pursue advancing in the kingdom of God like you would pursue advancing in any other endeavor. I said absolutely. In fact it's

a no-brainer. I mean as Jim Elliott famously said, he is no fool who gives up that which he cannot keep to gain that which he cannot lose. My greatest fear is that so many Christians think being a Christian means you said the sinner's prayer and then you passively wait on God by showing up in church once a week and then you just wait for the rapture. That's not kingdom living. You know, if the kingdom of God is not your passion, why are you even wasting your time coming to church? I mean Jesus himself said: *I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot. I wish you were either one or the other! So, because you are lukewarm -- neither hot nor cold -- I am about to spit you out of my mouth.* I mean that's vivid imagery but it captures what Jesus thinks. He goes on to say in *Matthew 11: From the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven has suffered violence, and the violent take it by force.* This is a kingdom that is not at all passive. The difference is how forcible men and women lay hold of that kingdom. You see, in the kingdom of God you rise up by humbling yourself, you become first by seeking to become last, you lead by serving, you win by losing, and you live by dying. That's how you advance in this kingdom.

And this leads me to the second part of Peter's statement. Now the first part is all about the joy, it's the new birth, it's the living hope, it's the treasures that are laid up in heaven. And

the second part is the kingdom part. Peter speaks of our treasures as *"an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, who by God's power are being guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. In this you rejoice, though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials, so that the tested genuineness of your faith -- more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire -- is found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ."* So Peter spent the first part of the paragraph speaking about these incredible treasures that await us and then he does a 180. He says there's going to be grief, there's going to be pain, there's going to be trials. And we say why? Why is that? Why so? Why the grief, why the pain, why the trials? Well, here's why. God is right here, right now today preparing us for *"a salvation ready to be revealed in the last day, in the last time."* Listen to what God is saying here. You see, what God is actually preparing to reveal in the last time is not a what, it's a who. It's you and me. I mean the single greatest event in the history of the universe is the birth, the life, the death, and the resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ. It is what all of space and time in the universe is organized around. That God himself would become one of us, that he would live out his perfect life so that he could ransom and rescue us by subjecting himself to the utter humiliation of a public

execution on a cross. There's a glory to that and there's a glory to that that cannot go uncelebrated. And the time is coming when the entire universe, from people to angels to animate and inanimate objects, they will all sit transfixed at a celebration at what Peter calls *a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time*. And you and I have a critical role to play in God's revelation of his Son's glory through our salvation.

You know, last time we looked at Peter's introductory paragraph to his letter, and we saw there he refers to us as *elect exiles, chosen by the foreknowledge of God through the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit for obedience*. I took a whole message to explain that, so I don't really have the time to reiterate it, but what God is saying here is that you and I were chosen by God for a salvation that represents some aspect of God's character and attributes.

There's something about the way that God plucked you and me out of the streaming masses that were to a person headed to hell. We were as well. We were headed there as well when he saved us, when he did a heart transplant on us, when he infused us with his Holy Spirit to change the very way that we now relate to the Bible, his word, by obeying its statutes. Now all of that was done by God in our lives in preparation of what he is speaking of right here. We are right here, right now being prepared for one great event, the greatest event of all time, when each of his redeemed will stand as

unique testimonies of the manifold wisdom of God. It will be "the great day of salvation," the culmination of our existence. And you know what the main event is going to be? Well, according to Ephesians 3, it's going to be a cosmic version of show and tell. I mean, we're going to show the universe the wonder of God's wisdom and we're going to tell the universe of his goodness and love. And do you know what God is going to show that same universe? It's going to be something more precious to God -- this is God's word -- it's more precious to God than gold itself. It's the one thing that God longs for in you and me, it's the one thing that he plants, that he nourishes, that he refines, that he protects and judiciously watches over. It's our faith. See, God didn't choose us for our good looks or our good deeds for that matter. He chose us for reasons known only to him to somehow reflect back to him the glory of his Son's triumph through the faith that he's planted and nurtured in us. So why is there grief? Why is there grief in all kinds of trials? Well, Peter explains that in verse 7, he says: *So that the tested genuineness of your faith -- more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire -- is found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ.* Folks, that one day of revelation is the reason why you and I exist. That's why we're here.

I'm so grateful to our Sunday school program 'cause there's lots

and lots of young people even in the church now who understand that because they understand the answer to the first question of the shorter catechism: What is the chief end of man? Chief end of man is to glorify God and enjoy him forever. See, nothing else matters. Our problem is we constantly get that backwards. See, that great cloud of witnesses in my estimation is constantly doing one of these kind of face plants as they're looking down at how foolishly we squander the privileges we've been given. I mean we don't just look at this seen world, we stare, lovingly transfixed by it so much so that we ignore the unseen world. That's perfectly backwards. It's the seen world that's phony. It's the seen world that's temporary and illusory. It is the world that is one day going to utterly disappear. Listen to what Peter himself says in *2 Peter 3:10*. He says: *But the day of the Lord will come as a thief in the night, in which the heavens will pass away with a great noise, and the elements will melt with fervent heat; both the earth and the works that are in it will be burned up. Therefore, since all these things will be dissolved, what manner of persons ought you to be in holy conduct and godliness, looking for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be dissolved, being on fire, and the elements will melt with fervent heat? Nevertheless we, according to his promise, look for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells.* Peter's telling us that every last bit of this world is going to be

swallowed up in a conflagration so great that all of the elements themselves are going to melt in fervent heat. I mean that doesn't mean that we're not to nurture and care for this gift that God gave us in this planet, but it does mean we need to get our priorities straight. It is the unseen world that is the real world. It's the one that counts, the one that is eternal, the one that we need to fix our eyes on. And that's why Peter tells us we can expect trials and all kinds of grief while we are stationed on this temporary "seen" existence. And it is the seen world that we occupy today that is preparing us for the ultimate reality. The ultimate in show and tell. And you know some of us get this but really most of us don't.

I want to talk this morning about someone who got it, someone who successfully navigated the whole process of grief and trials in an extreme way and what it has meant for her. The one who has already successfully navigated that process was a young girl by the name of Cassie Bernall. She was one of the victims of the massacre that took place in Littleton, Colorado. She's one of the few people in the United States to have willfully died a martyr's death. Believe it or not, it was ten years ago that the *Dallas Morning News* reported this: "The Greek word 'martyria', which means 'witness' appears throughout the books and letters that became the New Testament. There was more to being a martyr than dying a tragic

death and the word certainly didn't imply that someone had a death wish. The key was that the believer refused, in the face of terror and torture, to deny Christ. Thus a martyr's death was a public witness. Today the word 'martyr' is highly relevant in Uganda, China, Iran, Indonesia, Sudan and elsewhere and last week in Littleton, Colorado. The story of a 17-year-old Cassie Bernall inspired many young believers to embrace the true meaning of the word. In the days since the massacre, her story has spread worldwide. The details may vary, but no one challenges the heart of the story. Classmates, other Christians, and four members of her own West Bowels Community Church youth group witnessed her death in the Columbine high school library. As the killers in the black trenchcoats approached, Cassie clutched her Bible and ducked under a table. After playing cruel jokes on other victims one gunman asked Cassie, 'Do you believe in God?' She paused. Some witnesses said the smoking gun already was aimed at her. 'Yes, I believe in God,' she said. The gunman laughed and said, 'Why?' And then he killed her." *Reuters* news service added this note: "Witnesses said she hesitated because she knew she would die if that was her answer."

That three-letter word "yes" cost Cassie Bernall her life. Now some of us suggested that, you know, if she had only remained silent, she might have spared her own life, I mean, she could have

lived to share her faith another day, perhaps to marry and raise up children to further serve the kingdom of God. But if the chief end of man is to glorify God, then what's the point? See, most people think the chief end of man is simply to spread the gospel, and if that's the case then those folks have a point, but if in fact the chief end of man is to glorify God then Cassie Bernall did precisely what she was put on earth for. Please understand, spreading the gospel is our privilege and our responsibility but it never comes at the expense of the glory of God. And you know, those two gunmen, they were actually doing their own form of show and tell. They were in their own way glorifying their own god who happened to be Satan. They had filled themselves up with the glory of the prince of this world. And Jesus identified exactly what that was all about in *John 8:44* describing the enemy. He said: *"He was a murderer from the beginning, and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he speaks a lie, he speaks from his own resources, for he is a liar and the father of it."* You see, in the midst of all the carnage that took place that day, God had his witness handpicked for that day and for that precise moment. And Cassie Bernall is the living embodiment of 1 Peter 1:7. You see, it was the gunman who brought the grief and trial of terror and death and Peter tells us: *These have come so that the proven genuineness of your faith -- of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire -- may result in*

praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed. All of that was captured in this one three-letter word that Cassie uttered: "Yes".

I was explaining to my kids what had taken place that day and that Cassie had said "yes." And one of my kids asked me, "Dad, if it was me under that table, what would you want me to do?" Now that question brings it all the way from Littleton, Colorado to Port Jervis, New York. Moms, I want you to think about that for a second; dads as well, because it's going to tell you where your heart really is. I said, "No matter what situation you find yourself in, I will always want you to put your trust first and foremost in God." I told my kids that Cassie Bernall gave up the 60 or so more years that most people have in this life and in return she assumes the position of glory and honor forever in the only world that really counts. I said, a hundred years from now we're all going to be where she is. But she will have the martyr's crown for all eternity. James says: *Blessed is the man who remains steadfast under trial, for when he has stood the test he will receive the crown of life, which God has promised to those who love him.* I told them, when we get to heaven, the most precious thing we will ever know will be those things that had Jesus Christ at its foundation, those things that advanced his kingdom. I guarantee you at that point nothing else will matter. All the seen

things that we strive for all be seen as temporary, fleeting, and ultimately silly. As the scripture says: *From the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven has suffered violence, and the violent take it by force.* Cassie Bernall forcibly advanced the kingdom of God through one simple word: "Yes." There's no doubt that she and her family had to suffer grief and all kinds of trials. I mean it's just not right for moms to have to bury their 17-year-old daughters, but Cassie's mom made her mind clear. This is what she said on *ABC's 20/20*, she said, "Would I have done that? I might have begged for my life! She didn't! She may have been 17, but she is probably a better woman than I'll ever be!" Cassie was buried in a white casket designed so that all of her friends could write all over it. And her mother Misty's final message on that casket read: "Your courage and commitment to Christ have gained you a special place in heaven and I'm proud to call you my daughter. I love you so much. Mom." See, this trial had come so that Cassie's faith which is far more valuable to God than anything on this earth that is going to one day just completely fall apart, that this faith may be proved by those trials to be real and thus become a source of great honor when Jesus Christ is revealed.

And Jesus says: *Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and for ten days you will have tribulation. Be faithful*

unto death, and I will give you the crown of life. Now I find it stunning and somewhat astounding that it's already been ten years since Cassie died. She was only 17. I mean that means that in seven more years she will have spent half of the 34 years of her existence on earth and half of it in heaven. That's how fast life goes by. I mean *Psalm 102* says: *For my days vanish like smoke.* *James 4* says: *What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes.* Now, one thing I can tell you for certain whether you are a child or a millennial, you are going to blink your eyes and find that life in this seen world is just about over and done, and the seemingly small choices you make today are going to influence the choices you make tomorrow, because nobody gets there in giant leaps. And we all get there, whether it's as a spiritual giant or a spiritual disaster in little tiny steps, steps and decisions that all appear to be minor but in reality are major. See, the decisions that we make every single day are either for the kingdom, for the unseen world or for this seen world that seems so important when it's not. And for many of us, those hundreds of little decisions will produce a life spent on nothing, nothing of eternal value. And it will happen so fast you will not be aware of it because you're right in the middle of it. I mean, Cassie Bernall had all of the hundreds of little decisions that she would make in her life rolled up into one gigantic decision. She made the right one. In the only world that really

matters, Cassie Bernall owns the crown of life. For all eternity Cassie's coin in the realm will be that she gave up her life for her master, and all of eternity is going to prove that it was the wisest thing she ever did.

But what about us? You see, all of us have the exact same opportunity as Cassie. It may not come in the form of martyrdom but each one of us has on a daily basis opportunities for us to lay down our lives for the Master to aggressively advance the kingdom, to lead by serving, to win by losing, to live by dying. As Jesus said: *"Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it."* See, it all depends on which prize your eyes are fixed on, on what world you really care about. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen but on what is unseen, since what is seen is temporary but what is unseen is eternal. Let's pray.

Father, I thank you for the example we have in Cassie Bernall and I just -- I don't know, it's stunning to me that ten years have gone by since that awful day and it is a stark reminder of how fast this life goes. Only one life so soon it will pass, only what's done for Christ will last. Father, give us the understanding and the grace to realize that, to act on that, and to live it, I pray in Jesus' name. Amen.