

Opening Blessing and Proclamation

1 Peter 1:3–12

The opening blessing of 1 Peter is one of the most inspiring passages in the New Testament. Even in English translation, the powerful language and dynamic movement of the text are striking. Just as in verse 2, Peter offers his blessing in terms of the activity of the Father (vv. 3–5), the Son (vv. 3, 7–8), and the Spirit (vv. 10–12). The blessing is at one and the same time an offering of praise to God for his works and a proclamation of God's works. It is both a prayer and a proclamation, announcing key themes that Peter will unfold in the remainder of the letter.

New Birth into a Living Hope (1:3–9)

³Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who in his great mercy gave us a new birth to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, ⁴to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you ⁵who by the power of God are safeguarded through faith, to a salvation that is ready to be revealed in the final time. ⁶In this you rejoice, although now for a little while you may have to suffer through various trials, ⁷so that the genuineness of your faith, more precious than gold that is perishable even though tested by fire, may prove to be for praise, glory, and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ. ⁸Although you have not seen him you love him; even though you do not see him now yet believe in him, you rejoice with an indescribable

and glorious joy, ⁹as you attain the goal of [your] faith, the salvation of your souls.

OT: Exod 20:6; 34:7; Prov 17:3; Sir 2:5

NT: Matt 25:21; John 20:29; 2 Cor 4:17

Catechism: blessing, 2626–27; resurrection of Jesus, 651–55; faith and assurance, 163; eschatology, 673–74

Lectionary: Second Sunday of Easter (Year A)

Peter opens with a Jewish prayer form called a [†]*berakah* (Hebrew for “blessing”), **Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ**, offering praise to God the Father, the source of **mercy**, for the benefits Christians have received.¹ It was precisely God’s mercy that was the basis for his covenants with Moses and David.² By speaking of God’s mercy as the basis for the blessings received in Christ in the New Covenant, Peter strongly indicates continuity with the action of God in the Old Covenant.

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Peter gives praise to God the Father for two specific benefits. The first is a **new birth to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead**. God the Father has given us a new birth³ through the resurrection of Jesus. Why the link between our new birth and Christ’s resurrection? Because the resurrection of Christ is the cause and source of our new birth into God’s people and household. This is why the sacrament of baptism—the sacrament of our “new birth”—was normally celebrated in the early Church at Easter, the feast of the resurrection.

Peter speaks of a **living hope**, a theme that recurs throughout the letter (1:13, 21; 3:5, 15). This hope refers to the object of our hope, namely, the full inheritance (v. 4) that we will receive when Jesus Christ comes again (vv. 5, 7). It is a *living* hope because Jesus Christ himself is alive, and we have come to life in him. As Peter says in 2:2, we are like newborn babes, drinking pure spiritual milk, so that we “may grow into salvation”: this is our living hope.

The second benefit is **an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading**. The triad of adjectives powerfully conveys the security of our inheritance in Christ.⁴ Whereas all earthly treasure is subject to decay, Peter assures us that we have an inheritance—eternal life in heaven—that cannot perish, that

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1. The *berakah* is the standard form for Jewish blessings. For examples in both the Old Testament and New Testament, see Gen 14:20; 1 Sam 25:32; Ezra 7:27; Ps 31:21; Dan 3:28; Luke 1:68; 2 Cor 1:3; Eph 1:3.

2. See Exod 20:6; 34:7; Deut 5:10; 2 Sam 7:15; Ps 89:28.

3. The ESV translates this “caused us to be born again,” whereas the RSV has “we have been born anew.” The verb here, “to give new birth” (*anagennaō*), is unique to 1 Peter in the Bible (occurring here and in 1:23), but it is synonymous with the phrase in John 3:3, “to be born from above,” or “to be born again.”

4. In Greek, the three words display a delightful alliteration: *aphtharton, amianton, amaranton*.

Faith and Assurance

The Catechism states that faith already provides a genuine foretaste of the eternal life we hope for: “Faith makes us taste in advance the light of the beatific vision, the goal of our journey here below. Then we shall see God ‘face to face,’ ‘as he is.’ So faith is already the beginning of eternal life: When we contemplate the blessings of faith even now, as if gazing at a reflection in a mirror, it is as if we already possessed the wonderful things which our faith assures us we shall one day enjoy” (163).



has no stain or defect, and that will never lose its glory. Why? Because it is **kept in heaven** for us by God himself, where no moth and rust consume (Matt 6:20).

Peter gives further assurance that even in this life we are **safeguarded through faith by the power of God**, so we should not be afraid. It is not only our future inheritance in heaven that is secure. Even now on earth we ourselves are safeguarded through our faith in Christ, safeguarded, that is, for **a salvation that is ready to be revealed**. Peter is referring here to the second coming of Christ (see v. 7). “Salvation” is the general term in 1 Peter that sums up all that we receive in Christ. In some cases it refers to our present status in Christ that comes through faith and baptism (3:21), but here it points to our future destiny that will be ours when Christ returns (see also 1:9, 10; 2:2). For Peter, our salvation is both present and future; it is something that we have already entered into through faith and baptism but that will be completed only when Christ comes again.

The final time refers to Christ’s return and the end of the world. “Final,” or “last,” translates the Greek *eschatos*, from which we derive †eschatology, the account of the last things that will occur when Christ comes again. “Time” translates *kairos*, a word that often means God’s timely intervention according to his plan. In 1 Peter, *kairos* clearly carries this sense (see 1:11; 4:17; 5:6); it refers to God’s providential time when he will act. The “final time,” then, is that moment in human history when God will intervene decisively through the return of Christ and bring our salvation to completion.

Reflection and Application (1:3–5)

What are we to make of Peter’s claim (v. 3) that we have been given a “new birth” in Christ? Do we as Catholics believe that we are “born again”? We

certainly do. This new birth is God's gift that comes to us through faith and the sacrament of baptism. The Catechism teaches us that "Baptism gives us the grace of new birth in God the Father, through his Son, in the Holy Spirit" (683). It goes on to say, "one becomes a *member* of [the people of God] not by a physical birth, but by being 'born anew,' a birth 'of water and the Spirit' (John 3:3–5), that is, by faith in Christ, and baptism" (782).

Why, then, do many Catholics not seem to show the signs of this birth in Christ? There can be many reasons, but primarily it is because many Catholics have not continued to grow in the new life they have received. The Catechism also says: "For all the baptized, children or adults, faith must grow *after* Baptism" (1254). Looking back at my childhood and adolescence, I can recognize periodic signs of the new birth I received in baptism as an infant, but for the most part I did not give my faith much nourishment. It was not until my faith was awakened in early adulthood that I began to experience more fully the signs of this new birth.

Peter tells us further (1:23) that we have been "born anew, not from perishable seed but from imperishable seed, through the living and abiding word of God." What does this mean? The logic is this. Every kind of seed produces something of its own kind. Grass seed produces grass. Human seed produces humans. In an analogical way, divine seed, the Word of God, produces a new birth that brings about the fruits of divine life in us. This rebirth is a remarkable thing: it is what makes us capable of being holy, of loving one another, and of enduring suffering for Christ's sake. But we have to nourish and cultivate this seed, so that it might bear all the fruits of God's life in us.

Peter now introduces a profound paradox: the presence of inexpressible joy in the midst of suffering. He says first that we **rejoice in this** living hope, which is our salvation, present and future. Who would not rejoice? But then he tells us that **now** we must be ready to **suffer through various trials**, even if only for **a little while**. This echoes Paul's reference to the "momentary light affliction" that is preparing us for "an eternal weight of glory" (2 Cor 4:17).

Using a metaphor found frequently in the Old Testament (Job 23:10; Prov 17:3; Wis 3:5–7; Zech 13:9), Peter compares the testing of our **faith** to the purification of **gold by fire**. The sentence structure is difficult to follow, but the point of the comparison is perfectly clear. If gold, the most precious of earthly substances, requires purification, how much more does our faith—more precious than any earthly gold—benefit from the purifying fire of our trials. "For in fire gold is tested, and worthy men in the crucible of humiliation" (Sir 2:5).

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The Testing of the Saints

Bede the Venerable (c. 672–735) produced one of the earliest complete commentaries on 1 Peter in the Western Church. He offers this statement on the benefit we gain through the purifying fire of our trials: “The endurance of the saints is well likened to gold, because just as there is no metal more precious than gold, so this [endurance] is most worthy of all praise in the sight of the Lord. . . . For just as gold shut up in the furnace is purified by the flames but gleams when it is brought out, so the perseverance of the faithful appears contemptible and foolish indeed during the persecutions of the faithless, but when the struggle with tribulations is over and the time of retribution is at hand, then it is clear how worthwhile their glory is, how much their virtue has produced in the flames of their sufferings.”^a

a. *Commentary on the Seven Catholic Epistles*, trans. Dom David Hurst, OSB (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian, 1985), 73–74.



The term **genuineness** is difficult to capture in one English word. It really means “the genuine quality produced through testing.” The point is this: through various trials faith is made more pure, just as gold in the fire. When Jesus is revealed in his coming again, all these trials will result in **praise, glory, and honor** for those who have endured faithfully. They will hear the Lord say, “Well done, my good and faithful servant” (Matt 25:21).

8–9 Peter knows that the Christians he is addressing have **not seen** Jesus with their own eyes. Nonetheless, he reminds them that despite not seeing him, they came to **love him**. And **though** they **do not see him** in the present time either, yet they continue to **believe in him**. As Jesus said to Thomas, “Blessed are those who have not seen and have believed” (John 20:29). Faith and love are not dependent on seeing the risen Lord with our eyes.

More than this, Peter says that they **rejoice with an indescribable and glorious joy** in the present time. Despite serious trials, the living hope they have in Christ brings profound joy. This is not the stoic, cheerless attitude sometimes ascribed to Christians, but rather the deep joy that comes from already possessing a foretaste of our heavenly inheritance. And it is joy that has the upper hand here. Structurally, Peter surrounds the promise of suffering (vv. 6b–7) with joy on either side (vv. 6a and 8). Suffering and trial are fenced in, so to speak, by the overwhelming reality of the great joy that is ours even now in Christ.

Even though Christ is not yet seen, they **attain the goal** of their **faith**, which is **the salvation of their souls**. The verb is best rendered by the English present

progressive tense: they *are attaining* the goal of their faith, even as they move toward that final goal.⁵ And the goal is salvation, the full inheritance that will be ours when Christ returns again. But what does Peter mean when he says “the salvation of your souls”? “Soul” here should not be understood in contrast to the body, as if only the spiritual part of us will be saved at the last day. To the contrary, “soul” represents the inner and essential life of a human being but does not exclude the body. The salvation of our souls is the salvation of our entire lives, including our resurrected bodies.

Reflection and Application (1:6–9)

How can joy coexist with suffering? In the natural order of things, joy and happiness are equated with the *absence* of suffering. When suffering arrives, sadness and grief naturally follow. Is Peter then being incoherent when he speaks in one breath of “indescribable and glorious joy” and the suffering of “various trials”? No, not if we take into account the power of the †gospel. Only through the gospel can we experience true joy in the midst of suffering. Since we have a “new birth” and a “living hope” within us, the trials of life need not quench our joy. Saint Francis of Assisi is a remarkable example of this. He experienced what he called “perfect joy” right in the middle of his most intense trials.

Peter is simply recasting here what Jesus said to his disciples: “Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude and insult you, and denounce your name as evil on account of the Son of Man. Rejoice and leap for joy on that day! Behold, your reward will be great in heaven” (Luke 6:22–23). Knowing profound joy even in the midst of genuine suffering is a mark of the disciples of Jesus; it shows that we possess more than transient enthusiasm. Even though we haven’t seen the risen Jesus with our eyes, we do have the Holy Spirit dwelling in us, and so we can “rejoice with an indescribable and glorious joy.” As we experience and display this paradoxical joy in the midst of trials, we give witness to those around us that the gospel gives power to engage and overcome the sufferings of the world.

The Prophets Fulfilled in the Gospel (1:10–12)

¹⁰Concerning this salvation, prophets who prophesied about the grace that was to be yours searched and investigated it, ¹¹investigating the time

5. Several contemporary translations—the NRSV, ESV, and NIV—use the present progressive tense to express the ongoing reception of salvation that will be ours fully only when Christ returns.

and circumstances that the Spirit of Christ within them indicated when it testified in advance to the sufferings destined for Christ and the glories to follow them.¹² It was revealed to them that they were serving not themselves but you with regard to the things that have now been announced to you by those who preached the good news to you [through] the Holy Spirit sent from heaven, things into which angels longed to look.

OT: Isa 53

NT: Luke 24:25–27

Catechism: Old Testament prophets and prophecy, 64, 702, 719

Lectionary: 1:8–12, Nativity of John the Baptist (vigil)

10–11

There is no getting around the fact that this sentence is convoluted and difficult to follow. Reading it aloud leaves one somewhat breathless. But with patient attention, the meaning becomes clear, and we can see how the reference to the prophetic prediction of Christ's suffering fits with Peter's overall aim in the letter.

The topic at hand is **this salvation** referred to in verse 9 and identified by Peter here as **the grace that was to be yours**. Peter is saying that the [†]gospel of Jesus Christ did not appear from nowhere, from out of the blue. It had a history and was predicted by the prophets long ago. In fact, the **prophets searched and investigated** carefully what **the Spirit of Christ** was showing them. What were they carefully inquiring about? The **time and circumstances** concerning **the sufferings destined for Christ and the glories to follow them**. The phrase "time and circumstances" could also be translated "the person or time" (NRSV), but given that the "person" in question is already acknowledged as "the Christ," it is more likely that the prophets were carefully investigating the time and circumstances surrounding the sufferings of the Christ. How much did the prophets understand about the coming of the [†]Messiah? We really don't know, and it may have varied from prophet to prophet. What Peter tells us is that they were carefully inquiring and searching about what was to come.

We gain several important insights from what Peter says here. First, the Spirit who inspired the Old Testament prophets is already called **the Spirit of Christ**, or of "the Messiah."⁶ From Peter's perspective, the prophets were already being led by the Spirit of the Messiah who was to come afterwards, and their words pointed forward to his coming. Second, the prophets were not mere puppets serving as mouthpieces but wrestled in their minds and hearts to understand what the Spirit was showing them. They were fully engaged in their task of speaking the Word of God. Third, Peter asserts that the Old Testament prophets

6. Our English term "Christ" derives from the Greek word *Christos*, which translates the Hebrew term meaning "Messiah." When we say "Jesus Christ," this is equivalent to saying "Jesus the Messiah."

predicted the sufferings of Christ and his exaltation to glory. This is consistent with Luke’s account of Jesus’ words to the apostles on Easter day:

He said to them, “Oh, how foolish you are! How slow of heart to believe all that the prophets spoke! Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and enter into his glory?” Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them what referred to him in all the scriptures.

Luke 24:25–27

Peter does not state here which prophets he has in mind. But given that he will directly cite Isa 53 later in the letter, it is probable that this great †servant song is the primary witness to Christ’s sufferings that Peter has in view (see in the introduction “The Use of the Old Testament”).

We shouldn’t miss the theme of “suffering and glory” embedded here. Peter has already told us (vv. 6–7) that the trials we must suffer will yield a life of glory. Now he speaks of the prophets predicting the sufferings of Christ and the glories to follow. At the close of the letter, he will explicitly identify himself as a “witness to the sufferings of Christ and one who has a share in the glory to be revealed” (5:1). The theme of suffering leading to glory is paramount throughout 1 Peter.

Peter next describes the insight that the Spirit of Christ gave to the prophets. They were told that the sufferings of Christ and the glory to follow were not going to happen in their own time, but rather in *your* time—the time of Peter and those to whom he is writing. Through the preaching of the gospel down the centuries, we too are now included in this fulfillment. By their preannouncement of the work of Christ, the prophets **were serving not themselves** and their own generation directly, but were serving us, preparing the way for us to hear and respond to the gospel.

12

The very things the prophets predicted **have now been announced to you by those who preached the good news to you** (literally, who “evangelized” you), that is, Paul and other first-century missionaries. And this too has come about through **the Holy Spirit**. Just as the Spirit inspired the prophets to predict these events, so he also inspires the proclamation of their fulfillment in Christ. It is the one and the same Spirit who both inspired the prediction and proclaims the fulfillment of the gospel.

By stating that these are **things into which angels longed to look**, Peter demonstrates how astounding and precious the good news of the gospel is. Not only did the prophets diligently inquire into what the Spirit was showing them, but even the *angels* longed to get a glimpse of what God would do in his Messiah.

Peter does not explain what he means by the angels longing to look into these things, but probably he is referring to the eager interest of the angels to witness the unfolding of God's glorious plan to save the world through the suffering Messiah. They were on the edge of their seats, longing to see the fulfillment of God's amazing plan. What the angels longed to see has now been revealed to us through the gospel.

With this climactic statement, the opening blessing and proclamation draws to a close. In these few verses (3–12) Peter marvelously displays what God has done for us in Christ: a new birth to a living hope, an inheritance that cannot fail, and a salvation already under way to be completed when Christ returns. All this was predicted by the prophets through the Spirit and has now come to fulfillment in us. We too are called to suffer through trials in order to attain the glory that awaits us. The dominant note sounded here is the inexpressible and glorious joy that is ours because of what we have received in Christ through the Spirit from the Father.