

CATHOLIC COMMENTARY ON SACRED SCRIPTURE



First and
Second Peter,
Jude

Daniel Keating

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Daniel Keating



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Editors' Preface

The Church has always venerated the divine Scriptures just as she venerates the body of the Lord. . . . All the preaching of the Church should be nourished and governed by Sacred Scripture. For in the sacred books, the Father who is in heaven meets His children with great love and speaks with them; and the power and goodness in the word of God is so great that it stands as the support and energy of the Church, the strength of faith for her sons and daughters, the food of the soul, a pure and perennial fountain of spiritual life.

Second Vatican Council, *Dei Verbum* 21

Were not our hearts burning while he spoke to us on the way and opened the scriptures to us?

Luke 24:32

The Catholic Commentary on Sacred Scripture aims to serve the ministry of the Word of God in the life and mission of the Church. Since Vatican Council II, there has been an increasing hunger among Catholics to study Scripture in depth and in a way that reveals its relationship to liturgy, evangelization, catechesis, theology, and personal and communal life. This series responds to that desire by providing accessible yet substantive commentary on each book of the New Testament, drawn from the best of contemporary biblical scholarship as well as the rich treasury of the Church's tradition. These volumes seek to offer scholarship illumined by faith, in the conviction that the ultimate aim of biblical interpretation is to discover what God has revealed and is still speaking through the sacred text. Central to our approach are the principles taught by Vatican II: first, the use of historical and literary methods to discern what the

biblical authors intended to express; second, prayerful theological reflection to understand the sacred text “in accord with the same Spirit by whom it was written”—that is, in light of the content and unity of the whole Scripture, the living tradition of the Church, and the analogy of faith (*Dei Verbum* 12).

The Catholic Commentary on Sacred Scripture is written for those engaged in or training for pastoral ministry and others interested in studying Scripture to understand their faith more deeply, to nourish their spiritual life, or to share the good news with others. With this in mind, the authors focus on the meaning of the text for faith and life rather than on the technical questions that occupy scholars, and they explain the Bible in ordinary language that does not require translation for preaching and catechesis. Although this series is written from the perspective of Catholic faith, its authors draw on the interpretation of Protestant and Orthodox scholars and hope these volumes will serve Christians of other traditions as well.

A variety of features are designed to make the commentary as useful as possible. Each volume includes the biblical text of the New American Bible (NAB), the translation approved for liturgical use in the United States. In order to serve readers who use other translations, the most important differences between the NAB and other widely used translations (RSV, NRSV, JB, NJB, and NIV) are noted and explained. Each unit of the biblical text is followed by a list of references to relevant Scripture passages, Catechism sections, and uses in the Roman Lectionary. The exegesis that follows aims to explain in a clear and engaging way the meaning of the text in its original historical context as well as its perennial meaning for Christians. Reflection and Application sections help readers apply Scripture to Christian life today by responding to questions that the text raises, offering spiritual interpretations drawn from Christian tradition or providing suggestions for the use of the biblical text in catechesis, preaching, or other forms of pastoral ministry.

Interspersed throughout the commentary are Biblical Background sidebars that present historical, literary, or theological information, and Living Tradition sidebars that offer pertinent material from the postbiblical Christian tradition, including quotations from Church documents and from the writings of saints and Church Fathers. The Biblical Background sidebars are indicated by a photo of urns that were excavated in Jerusalem, signifying the importance of historical study in understanding the sacred text. The Living Tradition sidebars are indicated by an image of Eadwine, a twelfth-century monk and scribe, signifying the growth in the Church's understanding that comes by the grace of the Holy Spirit as believers study and ponder the word of God in their hearts (see *Dei Verbum* 8).

A map and a Glossary are located in the back of each volume for easy reference. The glossary explains key terms from the biblical text as well as theological or exegetical terms, which are marked in the commentary with a cross (†). A list of Suggested Resources, an Index of Pastoral Topics, and an Index of Sidebars are included to enhance the usefulness of these volumes. Further resources, including questions for reflection or discussion, can be found at the series website, www.CatholicScriptureCommentary.com.

It is our desire and prayer that these volumes be of service so that more and more “the word of the Lord may speed forward and be glorified” (2 Thess 3:1) in the Church and throughout the world.

Peter S. Williamson
Mary Healy
Kevin Perrotta

Note to Readers

The New American Bible differs slightly from most English translations in its verse numbering of the Psalms and certain other parts of the Old Testament. For instance, Ps 51:4 in the NAB is Ps 51:2 in other translations; Mal 3:19 in the NAB is Mal 4:1 in other translations. Readers who use different translations are advised to keep this in mind when looking up Old Testament cross-references given in the commentary.

Introduction to 1 Peter

The First Letter of Peter is a hidden gem, tucked away among the † catholic epistles, just waiting to be discovered.¹ Overshadowed by the longer and weightier letters of Paul, 1 Peter has often been neglected or undervalued.² My aim in this commentary is to aid the reader in discovering the riches of this letter, in the hope that he or she may hear its proclamation of the † gospel anew and follow the call to suffer joyfully with Christ.

Aim of 1 Peter

It was the common practice of early Church commentaries on the Bible to identify the aim of a given biblical book right from the start.³ What, then, is the aim of 1 Peter? Peter writes to the churches in five regions (see 1:1) to prepare them for suffering in imitation of Christ. As members of God’s household, they need to know their new identity in Christ, learn how to relate to others both within and outside the Church, and be ready to undergo affliction for their faith. In fact, the characteristic feature of this letter is the sharp contrast between the sober call to suffer in imitation of Christ and the “indescribable joy” (1:8) that is ours because of our new standing in Christ. Like a symphony that moves back and forth between major and minor keys, 1 Peter oscillates between the

1. Donald P. Senior, *1 Peter*, SP (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2003), 3, claims that “the First Letter of Peter is one of the New Testament’s most eloquent and theologically rich books.”

2. First Peter received some commentary in the patristic and early medieval periods (e.g., Clement of Alexandria, Didymus the Blind, Bede the Venerable) but considerably less than the Epistles of Paul. For a thorough bibliography of 1 Peter in the Christian † tradition, see John H. Elliott, *1 Peter*, AB (Doubleday: New York, 2000), 155–304.

3. In the Church Fathers, this was called the *skopos*, the “aim” or “purpose,” of the biblical book.

expression of profound joy on the one hand and the call to endure trials on the other. Peter's aim is to show that the Christian life, characterized by a living hope and deep joy, will also be marked by suffering for the sake of Christ.

Authorship and Date

Until recently the unanimous judgment of the Christian tradition was that 1 Peter was written by the apostle Peter in Rome during the final years of his life, sometime in the early 60s. We find probable allusions to 1 Peter already in the *First Letter of Clement* (dated to 95) and citations in Polycarp's *Letter to the Philippians* (dated 108–25).⁴ Irenaeus of Lyons, writing about the year 180, is the first to confirm Peter's authorship of the letter.⁵ This judgment is endorsed by Tertullian (c. 200), Clement of Alexandria (c. 220), and the early Church historian Eusebius of Caesarea (c. 325), among others.⁶

Doubts about Peter's authorship arose in the early modern period with the rise of historical-critical biblical scholarship. For a time, the predominant view among scholars was that 1 Peter actually came from the Pauline school and was dependent on Paul's teaching. This view no longer commands the field. The present consensus among those who do *not* accept Peter's direct authorship is that the author is one of Peter's disciples in Rome, writing after Peter's death sometime between the years 70 and 95.⁷ Still, a set of contemporary scholars make the case for Peter's authorship and argue that the evidence against Peter as author is not as compelling as many scholars have claimed.⁸

What are the grounds put forward for questioning Peter's authorship of this letter? First, many conclude that a Galilean fisherman whose native language was †Aramaic could not have written the quality of Greek that 1 Peter displays. Second, many question whether the Christian mission extended to all the regions mentioned in 1:1 by the time of Peter's death. Further objections arise from the perceived historical and literary context of the letter, leading many to conclude that the letter belongs to a period late in the first century, after Peter's death.⁹

4. For example, *1 Clement* 1.1–2 (1 Pet 1:1–2, 17); 49.5 (1 Pet 4:8); *Polycarp* 1.3 (1 Pet 1:8); 8.2 (1 Pet 2:21).

5. *Adversus Haereses (Against Heresies)* 4.9.2; 4.16.5; 5.7.2.

6. For a complete list of citations of 1 Peter in Tertullian, Clement, Eusebius, and other early Church Fathers, see Elliott, *1 Peter*, 138–48.

7. For a summary of this conclusion, see Elliott, *1 Peter*, 127–30.

8. For example, Norman Hillyer, *1 and 2 Peter, Jude*, New International Biblical Commentary (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1992), 1–3; Karen H. Jobes, *1 Peter*, BECNT (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005), 14–19.

9. For a full list of objections raised against Peter's authorship, see Jobes, *1 Peter*, 6–14; Elliott, *1 Peter*, 120–22.

Defenders of Peter's authorship propose that Peter may have dictated the letter to a colleague who rendered Peter's words into elegant Greek. We know that Paul himself dictated several of his letters (1 Cor 16:21; Col 4:18; 2 Thess 3:17; Philem 1:19). Many scholars identify Silvanus as Peter's scribe, but the reference to the author writing "through Silvanus" (5:12) most probably refers to Silvanus as the bearer, not the writer, of the letter. Others argue that Peter could have learned to write in Greek at the level we find in 1 Peter, given at least two decades of mission work.¹⁰ One recent study concludes that the Greek of 1 Peter is not as polished as many have claimed, that it shows signs of being written by a native †Semitic speaker, and that it is within the ability of a non-native Greek speaker to learn.¹¹

The objection against the Christian mission to Asia Minor is not weighty. There is no strong historical case against Christian presence in these regions by the 60s, and Peter could be writing to churches that he did not establish directly. In response to the objections from historical and literary context, a majority of scholars, even of those who reject Peter's authorship, no longer judge the evidence to demand a late first-century date.¹² More positively, there are some striking similarities between 1 Peter and Peter's speeches in the Acts of the Apostles. While this does not prove Peter's direct authorship, it shows that the thought and language of 1 Peter is consistent with what is recorded of Peter's words in Acts.

The issue of authorship remains open and contested, but we can safely conclude that the author is either Peter himself or someone from his close circle of disciples in Rome writing in his name shortly after his death. While I recognize the force of some of the arguments against Peter's direct authorship, I believe the stronger case still remains for Peter as author, and I will assume his authorship in the course of the commentary. Whether or not Peter is the author, 1 Peter remains an †inspired and †canonical book of the Bible.

The Recipients of the Letter

The recipients of this letter are Christians resident in five Roman provinces of Asia Minor: Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia (see the map on p. 27). The order in which the five provinces are listed possibly reflects the

10. Hillyer, *1 and 2 Peter, Jude*, 2.

11. Jobes, *1 Peter*, "Excursus: The Syntax of 1 Peter: How Good Is the Greek?" 325–38.

12. Paul J. Achtemeier, *1 Peter*, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996), 37, and Jobes, *1 Peter*, 11, argue that the church structure evident in 1 Peter actually points to a more primitive era of the Church.

circular travel route that would have been taken by the bearer of the letter, who would have delivered it to each province in turn.¹³

Given Peter's emphasis on suffering throughout the letter, it is evident that the Christians he is writing to are experiencing trials and persecutions. It is possible that these Christians were undergoing formal trials in Roman courts, but it seems more likely that Peter is referring to the ongoing, daily abuse and criticism that Christians were receiving from their pagan neighbors.

What is the identity of the audience Peter is writing to? Are they Jews, †Gentiles, or a mixture of both? Peter's use of the term "†dispersion" (1:1) led some early Christian commentators to conclude that the audience was mainly Jewish, given that "dispersion" was used as a technical term to designate the Jewish community outside Palestine. In addition, the audience is told to "maintain good conduct among the Gentiles" (2:12) and to cease behaving like the Gentiles do (4:3). This would naturally indicate that the audience was Jewish. However, there are even stronger indications that the audience was composed mainly of Gentiles. Peter speaks about their "former ignorance" (1:14) and the futile life inherited from their ancestors (1:18). He identifies them as coming out of darkness (2:9) and having been "no people" (2:10) before their new birth in Christ. All of these designations apply to Gentiles much more readily than to Jews. While it is probable that there were both Gentiles and Jews in these churches, Peter seems to be addressing a largely Gentile audience, called from the nations through Christ to the inheritance of Israel.

The Use of the Old Testament

First Peter makes abundant use of the Old Testament, with at least eighteen direct citations and twenty-five allusions. The references are predominately from four books—Genesis, Isaiah, Psalms, and Proverbs—and Peter normally makes use of the Greek version, the †Septuagint (LXX). We will pay special attention in the commentary to how Peter applies the Old Testament to the Christian community and the new way of life Christians are called to as God's household. Three Old Testament texts in particular play a central role in Peter's exhortation:

1. Exodus 19:5–6, for Christian identity as a royal priesthood and holy nation;

13. See Elliott, *1 Peter*, 91–93, for a detailed outline and map of this projected circular travel route through the five provinces.

2. Psalm 34, for a way of life marked by trusting in God, doing good, and avoiding evil;
3. Isaiah 53, for describing Christ's voluntary suffering and our imitation of him.

More than any other New Testament author, Peter develops his understanding of Christ from the texts of Isaiah on the †Suffering Servant.

Theological Themes

The first theme sounded by 1 Peter is resurrection, new life, and inexpressible joy through baptism into Christ (see 1:3–9). This theme is so predominant that some commentators have speculated that 1 Peter was originally written to accompany a baptismal liturgy.¹⁴ While this is unlikely, 1 Peter can be understood as a resurrection letter that resounds with the joy of the new life we now have through our baptism into Christ.

This initial joyful theme is moderated by a second theme, the call to sobriety and holiness. As resident aliens and sojourners on earth (see 1:13–17), Christians are called to live good and upright lives in the midst of non-Christians (see 2:11–12). The climax of the call to holiness is an invitation to share in the suffering of Christ. By circling back to this theme again and again, Peter makes clear that readiness to suffer in imitation of Christ is at the heart of his message. It is striking that Peter, who for a time resolutely resisted Jesus' own path to suffering (Mark 8:31–32), should emphasize the call to suffer for the sake of Christ more than any other author in the New Testament.

A third theme, the exhortation to “do good” and “avoid evil,” predominates especially in chapters 2–4. Though easily underestimated, this theme is marked by a wide and original vocabulary. For Peter, a crucial part of living as a Christian in pagan society is the visibility of our good life and actions. By doing good and avoiding evil we give effective witness to Christ.

An important image for 1 Peter is the Church as the temple and house of God (see 2:4–10). As we shall see in greater detail in the commentary, Peter not only employs the image of “house” or “household” to portray the Church's spiritual identity, but also uses words related to “house” to describe relationships in the Christian community.¹⁵

14. For example, F. L. Cross, *1 Peter: A Paschal Liturgy* (London: Mowbray, 1954).

15. Elliott, *1 Peter*, 113, proposes “the household of God” as the root metaphor and organizing ecclesial image in 1 Peter.

Israel and the Church

Many commentators have concluded that, for Peter, the Church replaces Israel as the new people of God.¹⁶ They hold that Peter maintains what is called a †supersessionist account of the relationship between Israel and the Church, whereby the Church simply replaces Israel in the plan and purpose of God. But it is not clear that Peter views the relationship this way. Strikingly, he never addresses the issue of Jews and Gentiles, as Paul frequently does, but simply applies the call and privileges of Israel to the Church. While this *may* be a supersessionist reading on Peter's part, given the lack of evidence I believe it is better to interpret Peter as teaching the *continuation* of the promises to Israel in the Church (composed of both Jew and Gentile) and to leave open the question of how he views the status of Israel as a distinct people.

Language and Structure

Scholars have debated the quality and elegance of the Greek style in 1 Peter,¹⁷ but there can be no doubt that 1 Peter gives us a fresh and unique account of the gospel and the Christian life. In just over a hundred verses, we find sixty words that are used nowhere else in the New Testament, and a further seventy-four that are found only once outside of 1 Peter.¹⁸ The presence of so many unique or rare terms characterizes an author who is confidently proclaiming Christ in his own words, not one who is trying to imitate the style of another.

Though 1 Peter is not a tightly ordered letter, the basic structure is clear. Following the opening greeting (1:1–2), the first part of the letter (1:3–2:10) proclaims who we are in Christ as God's holy people. The second part of the letter (2:11–5:11) is mostly exhortation about how Christians are to live. But Peter is not just moralizing about doing good and avoiding evil. He is grounding our new way of life in the new birth we have received in Christ as members of God's household.

16. See Achtemeier, *1 Peter*, 70; Senior, *1 Peter*, 12; Elliott, *1 Peter*, 113. However, J. Ramsey Michaels, *1 Peter*, WBC (Waco: Word, 1988), liv–lv, maintains that 1 Peter should not be read in a supersessionist way.

17. Elliott, *1 Peter*, 64, describes 1 Peter as “relatively polished Greek,” while J. N. D. Kelly, *A Commentary on the Epistles of Peter and Jude* (London: A&C Black, 1969), 31, claims that its Greek is “unimaginative, monotonous and at times clumsy.” Achtemeier, *1 Peter*, 2, says that the Greek of 1 Peter “belongs stylistically with the best prose of the NT,” but that “the quality of its Greek ought nevertheless not be exaggerated.” On the basis of her study of the language of 1 Peter, Jobs, *1 Peter*, 337, concludes that “the Greek of 1 Peter indicates an author whose first language was not Greek.”

18. See Elliott, *1 Peter*, 41–64, for an exhaustive list of 1 Peter's vocabulary.

The image of God’s “house” or “household,” when integrated with the related images of God’s “nation” and “people,” helps to unite the parts of the letter.¹⁹ The opening proclamation of the gospel (the kerygma) reaches its climax with the announcement that we are God’s temple, house, nation, and people (2:5–10). Then the teaching (didache) of how we are to live as God’s people and household follows. Peter describes quite practically what it means to be God’s holy people and to live as God’s household. In other words, the structure of the letter shows us that our *spiritual* identity as God’s people and household in Christ has *practical* consequences for how we live.

Interpreting and Applying 1 Peter for Today

Peter originally wrote this letter to a set of churches in Asia Minor in the first century. Their world passed away long ago. How does this bright yet sober letter apply to us in the twenty-first century? How can we read it as the living Word of God that continues to speak to us today? I propose that in the task of interpreting and applying 1 Peter for today, we can distinguish four categories of texts.

The first category is composed of familiar passages that we find relatively easy to understand and apply. Among these are the proclamation of new birth into a living hope (1:3–9), of our identity as a holy nation and royal priesthood (2:9–10), and of “the God of all †grace” who will “restore, confirm, strengthen, and establish” those who have suffered for the gospel (5:10). The challenge we face here is to go beneath the surface of these texts, deepening our understanding of their Old Testament context and penetrating what they mean for us in Christ.

A second category is composed of passages that are relatively clear but hard to embrace because they present the high calling of the cross. We find it hard to accept that we are “exiles and sojourners” in this world (2:11). When Peter tells us we should not be surprised by the fiery ordeal that descends on us, but rather rejoice that we get to suffer along with Christ (4:12–13), we may tend to shrink away. We need faith and courage to hear and respond to a word that cuts against the grain of contemporary views on happiness and the desire to live a life of comfort and ease.

The third category is composed of passages that present a view of relationships foreign to our modern societies and values. Peter consistently calls those in the Christian community to “be subject” or “be subordinate” to those in

19. The Greek word “house” or “household” (*oikos*) appears just twice in the letter (2:5; 4:17), but Peter’s use of related words that are built from the root, *oikos*, suggests that the Church as God’s “house” is an important unifying theme in 1 Peter: “slaves” (*oiketēs*, 2:18); “stewards” (*oikonomoi*, 4:10); “to build” (*oikodomēō*, 2:5, 7).

some kind of authority (2:13–20; 3:1–7; 5:1–5). In part, our society has changed dramatically from the first century and we need to read and apply these texts for our own time, with the benefit of twenty centuries of the Church’s wisdom. At the same time, we need to allow ourselves to be challenged by these texts *precisely* because they present a mind-set so different than our own. Rather than dismissing them as outdated, we should ask how we can apply them in a way fitting for our day, so that the whole counsel of Scripture has its place in our lives.

Finally, there are obscure texts in 1 Peter. Who are the “spirits in prison” that Christ preached to after his death (3:19–20)? What does Peter mean when he says that those who have suffered in the [†]flesh have ceased from sin (4:1)? While doing our best to understand these passages, we need humility in the face of their obscurity, recognizing that we may not be able to reach a definitive interpretation. The traditional rule for biblical interpretation applies here: interpret the more difficult and obscure passages by those that are clear and more evident, within the context of the living tradition of the Church.

First Peter has much to say to our generation. Like the Christians of the first century, we too need to recapture our identity as God’s household and embark on a way of life distinct from those around us (1:14). We too are called to live justly and be examples to those around us, so that they may respond more readily to the gospel (2:12). We too need to be ready to give an account of the hope within us with gentleness and reverence (3:15). And we too live in an age when many Christians are called to suffer for their faith without reviling or giving abuse in return (2:23). Filled with passages that inspire, challenge, and even perplex us, 1 Peter is very much a word for our day.

Outline of 1 Peter

Address and Greeting (1:1–2)

Part One: Who We Are as God's People and Household (1:3–2:10)

A. Opening Blessing and Proclamation (1:3–12)

New Birth into a Living Hope (1:3–9)

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

B. New Way of Life in God's Household (1:13–2:10)

Call to Holiness in Conduct (1:13–21)

Call to Love the Brothers and Sisters (1:22–25)

Call to Be God's Household, Priesthood, and People (2:1–10)

Part Two: How We Are to Live as God's People and Household (2:11–5:11)

A. Order in Relationships (2:11–3:12)

General Exhortation to Good Conduct (2:11–12)

Secular Authorities (2:13–17)

Household Servants (2:18–25)

Wives and Husbands (3:1–7)

Exhortation to Unity, Love, and Humility (3:8–12)

B. Faithfulness in Suffering for Christ (3:13–4:19)

Suffering and Witness in Imitation of Christ (3:13–17)

Christ's Victory through Suffering (3:18–22)

Suffering and Doing the Will of God (4:1–6)

Love, Hospitality, and Service in God's Household (4:7–11)

Reprise: Sharing in the Sufferings of Christ (4:12–19)

C. Concluding Exhortations (5:1–11)

Exhortation to Elders and Younger People (5:1–5a)

Exhortation to All: Humility before Each Other and God
(5:5b–11)

Final Greeting (5:12–14)

Address and Greeting

1 Peter 1:1–2

¹Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, to the chosen sojourners of the dispersion in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia, ²in the foreknowledge of God the Father, through sanctification by the Spirit, for obedience and sprinkling with the blood of Jesus Christ: may grace and peace be yours in abundance.

OT: Exod 24:3–8

NT: Acts 2:9; Eph 1:3–20; Phil 3:20; Heb 9:13–14

Catechism: apostles, 2–3, 858–62

¹ In the opening sentence the author identifies himself simply as **Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ** (see the introduction for a discussion of the authorship of the letter). At the close of the letter, Peter will describe himself as “a fellow [†]presbyter” and “a witness to the sufferings of Christ” (5:1), but here at the start he simply calls himself an apostle of Jesus Christ. “Apostle” means “one who is sent,” and by claiming this title without adornment, Peter humbly but directly claims authority as one sent by Christ to announce the good news.

Peter addresses his audience as **chosen sojourners of the dispersion**. Each term indicates something important about the theme of the letter. “Chosen,” or “elect,” immediately links the audience to the call and destiny of the people of Israel (see Ps 105:6; Isa 45:4). To be chosen is to be favored by God and under his blessing. Peter will use this term again to denote Christ himself as the “chosen” one of God (2:4, 6), and the Christian people as “a chosen race” (2:9). “Sojourner” means “resident alien,” one who lives in a land far from home.



Fig. 1. Map of Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, Bithynia.

Peter is already signaling a theme he will return to in 2:11—that the Christian people are strangers and exiles in this world. Finally, “†dispersion,” literally, *diaspora*, was used as a technical term for the people of Israel living outside of the Holy Land. Like Israel in exile, the Christian people are a set of scattered communities, living away from their true homeland, which is heaven (see Phil 3:20). The phrase, “chosen sojourners of the dispersion,” taken together, identifies the audience vividly with the elect people of God now living outside their true home, waiting for their full redemption, in continuity with the people of Israel described in the Old Testament.

The letter is addressed to those living in **Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia**, five provinces of ancient Asia Minor (modern-day Turkey). In Acts 2:9, we are told that residents from three of these provinces (Pontus, Cappadocia, Asia) witnessed the outpouring of the Spirit and heard Peter preach on the day of Pentecost. It is at least possible that churches in these regions were founded by those who heard Peter preach in Jerusalem. Galatia was a site of Paul’s early mission and the destination of one of his earliest letters (see Acts 14:1–20; Gal 1:2). Bithynia is mentioned as a place Paul sought to evangelize but was prevented from doing so (Acts 16:7). Evidently, Bithynia too was evangelized in the end.

Why are these five provinces linked together as the common audience for Peter’s letter? We cannot be certain, but it is possible that they define a travel

Diaspora

The *Diaspora*, from Greek “to scatter,” began with the exile of Israel to Babylon in the early sixth century BC. This devastating event, which included the destruction of both the city of Jerusalem and Solomon’s temple, marked the beginning of the ongoing existence of Israel as a nation outside of the Holy Land. From this point onwards, a majority of the people of Israel had to practice a way of life faithful to the †covenant of the God of Israel in the midst of foreign nations and strange gods. In the Greek Old Testament (the †Septuagint), the term “Diaspora” is used frequently to identify Israel in exile, waiting to return (see Deut 30:4; Neh 1:9; Ps 147:2; Isa 49:6). Peter makes use of this powerfully evocative term to describe the Christian people called to live a way of life faithful to the †Messiah away from their true and eternal home.

BIBLICAL BACKGROUND



route taken by the bearer of the letter (probably Silvanus; see 5:12) who set out from Rome by ship, landed in Pontus, went by land through the adjoining provinces visiting all the churches and delivering a copy of the letter, and then sailed back from Bithynia to Rome. In any case, we have in 1 Peter a true “encyclical” or circular letter, sent by Peter to the various churches in Asia Minor to testify to them about the true †grace of God (5:12).

- 2 Peter could easily have stopped here, concluded his greeting to the churches, and moved on with the body of the letter. But he adds three short phrases that tie his message directly to the work of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. In short, Peter gives a Trinitarian description of how the Christian people are called and redeemed.

First, they have been chosen **in the foreknowledge of God the Father**. The Father stands at the beginning as the source. All that has happened in Christ is according to the Father’s eternal plan (see Peter’s speech in Acts 2:23). It is not an accident that they have been chosen, but fully according to God’s foreknowledge and purpose (Eph 1:3–10).

Second, their calling takes place **through sanctification by the Spirit**. To be †sanctified is to be made holy or set apart for God. Shortly Peter will call them to live a holy way of life, imitating God who is holy (1:15), but he begins here by grounding this call to holiness in the sanctification that they have *already* received through the Spirit.

Third, they are called to **obedience and sprinkling with the blood of Jesus Christ**. The call to obedience marks the whole letter (1:14, 22; 3:6). But to

what does “sprinkling with the blood of Jesus Christ” refer? One clue comes from Heb 9:13–14, which speaks of the sprinkling of the blood of Jesus in the New Covenant for the forgiveness of sins. But the essential background for the phrase “sprinkling with blood” is found in the [†]covenant ritual described in Exod 24:1–8. There Moses “took the blood and sprinkled it on the people, saying, ‘This is the blood of the covenant which the [†]LORD has made with you in accordance with all these words of his’” (Exod 24:8). Just as in the Old Covenant the people of Israel professed their obedience to God’s Word (Exod 24:3, 7) and then were sprinkled with the blood that sealed the first covenant (Exod 24:8), we too in the New Covenant are sanctified by the Spirit for obedience to the Word of God as we submit to “sprinkling with the blood of Jesus Christ” for the forgiveness of our sins. Peter may be recalling their baptism when they confessed their faith and obedience to Christ in the context of being cleansed from their sins by the blood of Christ through the waters of baptism. “Thus the end point of election includes both obedience to the gospel and membership in the new covenant people.”¹

In these three brief clauses, Peter locates our call firmly in the united work of the three Persons: the Father, the Spirit, and the Son.

Peter concludes his greeting with a prayer: **may grace and peace be yours in abundance**. In the Greek culture of the day it was conventional to offer “grace” (*charis*) as a form of greeting. But in the New Covenant the term “grace” takes on a much more significant meaning because of the work of Christ, and Peter will make grace a key theme of the letter.² The offer of peace was more typical of Jewish greetings. Together “grace and peace” sum up the early Christian expression of blessing.³

1. Donald P. Senior, *1 Peter*, SP (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2003), 27.

2. For “grace” in 1 Peter, see 1:10, 13; 2:19, 20; 3:7 (translated “gift” in the NAB); 4:10; 5:5 (translated “favor” in the NAB), 10, 12.

3. The combination of “grace” and “peace” also occurs frequently in Paul’s letters; for example, Rom 1:7; 1 Cor 1:3; 2 Cor 1:2; Gal 1:3; Eph 1:2.

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.

3

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

4–5

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).

6–7

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.