

First Letter of Peter . . . Catholic Scripture Study

Memorize: *Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! By his great mercy we have been born anew to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.*

Week 1 – Introduction (1 Peter)

I. SAINT PETER THE APOSTLE

The Gospels and the Acts of the Apostles give us the main features of Saint Peter's character, but do not provide enough information for a biography of the Apostle.

A. Name Change Indicates Peter's Mission

Peter was originally called Simeon, in Hebrew (cf. Acts 15:14; 2 Peter 1:1), or Simon, the Greek form of the same name.

- Jesus surnamed him **Cephas**, as recorded in John 1:42. In Aramaic the word is **Kepha**. (*Cephas* is the Greek transliteration of *Kepha*).

From this word (*kepha*), which in Aramaic (the language mostly spoken by the Jews of the time) means stone or rock, comes the name Peter, the Greek for rock.

“And I tell you, you are Peter (*Petros, Kepha*), and on this rock (*petra, kepha*) I will build my church, and the powers of death shall not prevail against it” (Mt 16:15).

In Greek the play on “Peter” and “rock” is not perfect, since the former is *Petros* and the latter is *petra*. However, it is perfect in Aramaic where both are *kepha*.

Remember that the Gospels were **written** in Greek, based on the spoken Aramaic.

- *Peter* as *rock* will be the **foundation** of the future community.

Neither *Petros* in Greek nor *kepha* in Aramaic is a normal proper name: rather it is a nickname (something like *Rocky*).

B. Background

Like most of our Lord's first disciples, Simon Peter was a native of Bethsaida (cf. John 1:44), a city of Galilee on the northeast shore of late Tiberius (also called Gennesaret).

Like his father John and his brother Andrew, he was a fisherman. We also know that he was married, because Jesus cured his mother-in-law, who was living in Capernaum (Mt 8:14).

Before meeting Jesus, Peter had very probably been a disciple of John the Baptist, along with his brother Andrew (cf. Jn 1:35, 40). It was Andrew who brought Peter to Jesus (cf. Jn 1:14-42), thereby beginning a relationship which was to change his life.

Peter was eventually chosen to be one of the Twelve and later became their leader.

- In every list of the Apostles in the New Testament his name heads the list, thus indicating his **primacy** among them.
- In addition, Peter often acts as a spokesman for the apostles.

Within the Twelve, Peter, James and John constituted an inner circle, the only ones to witness:

- the resuscitation of the daughter of Jairus;
- the Transfiguration of our Lord, and
- His agony in the garden.

C. Was Peter in Rome?

There is evidence to support an ancient tradition of Saint Peter spending a period in Rome, as its bishop, and suffering a martyr's death there under the emperor Nero.

According to tradition, Peter was crucified upside down.

On the basis of information supplied by Eusebius (Bishop of Caesarea and the first Church historian c. A.D. 260-339) and by Saint Jerome, some put the likely date of his martyrdom at the year 67 which was when St. Paul also died.

Others, however, suggest the year A.D. 64, when, after the burning of Rome, Nero was responsible for the persecution and death of very many Christians.

Finally, a very ancient tradition, supported by archaeological excavations, says that the tomb of the Prince of the Apostles lies under the altar of St. Peter's basilica.

D. Authorship and Date

The greeting at the start of the letter names the author as the Apostle Peter (cf. 1 Peter 1:1), a witness of the sufferings of Christ (cf. 1 Peter 5:1). This is consistent both with the external testimony of Tradition and the examination of the text itself.

Until recently the unanimous judgment of the Christian tradition was that First Peter was written by the Apostle Peter in Rome during the final years of his life, sometime in the early 60s.

Irenaeus of Lyon, writing about the year 180 is the first to confirm Peter's authorship of the letter. 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.

As usual, modern scholars argue about the date and authorship of the letter, but their arguments are not fully convincing. We will adhere to the ancient tradition of the church.

Some scholars claim that the Greek style of the letter is too smooth and sophisticated to be the work of an uneducated Galilean fisherman like Peter. The text of 1 Peter 5:12 seems to imply that the letter was written by Silvanus.

By Silvanus, a faithful brother as I regard him, I have written briefly to you . . .

This is significant, since the secretarial practices of antiquity often gave scribes generous latitude in adding refinement and precision to the thoughts of an author with less facility in the language.

If indeed there was this kind of working relationship between the apostle and his secretary, there is no problem with crediting Peter with the content of the letter and Silvanus with its literary expression.

E. Origin

The letter is addressed to a number of Christian communities in different parts of Asia Minor which is now modern Turkey.

As indicated at the end of the letter, it was written in “Babylon” (5:13), a code word for Rome, the capital of the empire. It is not a reference to the city of that name in lower Mesopotamia.

Rome was often given the symbolic name of “Babylon,” as we see, for example, in the book of Revelation (cf. Rev 14:8; 16:19; 17:5; etc).

- So the letter was written from Rome.

This is supported by Christian writers who identified Peter, along with Paul, as a cofounder of the Church in Rome (St Irenaeus,

Against Heresies 3, 3) and as one who spent the latter years of his life there (St. Jerome).

F. 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.

While it is probable that there were both Gentile and Jewish converts in these churches, Peter seems to be addressing a largely Gentile audience, called from the nations through Christ to the inheritance of Israel.

G. Content

The letter is an exhortation, composed by Peter in Rome and sent to the Christians (Gentile converts) in Asia Minor to console and strengthen them (cf. 5:12) in the new life to which they have been introduced by baptism.

They are suffering persecution which seems to come from pagan neighbors who revile and abuse them for the “name of Christ” (4:14).

Peter writes to urge them to be faithful to their calling, seeing that they are **“a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation”** (2:29).

This persecution could cause a crisis of faith for some; for others, it could quickly lead to discouragement and confusion about God’s purpose for these trials.

And so Peter writes to the Christians of Asia Minor to console and exhort them to stand firm in the midst of difficulties.

H. Themes

There are several theological themes which can be identified in the letter.

1. The first theme is resurrection, new life, and inexpressible joy through baptism into Christ.
2. Another theme is the call to holiness. The climax of the call to holiness is an invitation to share in the suffering of Christ. This suffering is not a curse but a blessing (3:14; 4:14).

Instead of being disheartened by abuse, they should count it a privilege to suffer the same mistreatment endured by their Lord.

3. A third theme, the exhortation to “do good” and “avoid evil,” predominates especially in chapters 2-4. 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.

Address and Greeting (1 Pet 1:1-2)

Read: 1 Peter 1:1-2

[1] Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, to the exiles of the Dispersion in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia,

[2] chosen and destined by God the Father and sanctified by the Spirit for obedience to Jesus Christ and for sprinkling with his blood: May grace and peace be multiplied to you.

A. Peter, an Apostle

In the opening sentence the author identifies himself simply as ***Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ***. Peter, of course, is Simon Peter, renamed by the Lord, and the Leader of the Twelve (see Introduction).

“Apostle” means “one who is sent” and by claiming this title Peter humbly but directly claims authority as one sent by Christ to announce the good news.

B. Exiles of the Dispersion

The **Dispersion** (Diaspora) originally referred to Jews who lived outside of Palestine, especially after the Babylonian Captivity.

Here it has a somewhat different meaning. Some translations use the word “sojourners” (resident aliens) to indicate that the exiles are Christians living on this earth as pilgrims, journeying towards their true homeland, heaven.

- Christians are strangers and exiles in this world.

C. Chosen Sojourners of the Dispersion

Peter addresses the Christians of Asia Minor (modern Turkey) as **chosen “sojourners” of the dispersion**. Each term indicates something important about the theme of the letter.

“**Chosen**” or “elect” immediately links the recipients of the letter (the Christians of Asia Minor) to the call and destiny of the people of Israel (see Ps 105:6; Is 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 and the Christian people as a “chosen race.”

The phrase, “chosen sojourners of the dispersion,” identifies the recipients of the letter vividly with the elect people of God now living outside their true home (heaven), waiting for their full redemption, in continuity with the people of Israel described in the Old Testament.

D. Called, Chosen, Redeemed, Sanctified

Peter now tries to impress upon the Christians of Asia Minor (and **all** Christians) how God has not only saved, but highly exalted them through Baptism.

Verse 2 is a short, profound profession of faith in the Blessed Trinity. It associates the three Persons of the Trinity with three aspects of redemption.

E. Chosen

- They have been chosen by the Father from all eternity.

It is not an accident that they have been chosen, but fully according to God's foreknowledge and purpose: chosen by God's prevenient favor (grace) to be Christians.

F. Redeemed and Sealed by the Blood of the New Covenant

- They have been redeemed by the Son.

By referring to **obedience to Jesus Christ** and to **sprinkling with his blood**, Peter is reminding them that they are called to obedience to Christ and membership in the New Covenant he established, and sealed by the blood he shed on the cross.

In Exodus 24:8, Moses sprinkled the people of Israel with the blood of the Sinai covenant, binding them to Yahweh and consecrating them to be a holy and priestly nation to the world (Exodus 19:6).

Exodus 24:8: *And Moses took the blood and threw it upon the people, and said, "Behold the blood of the covenant which the LORD has made with you in accordance with all these words."*

Exodus 19:6: *And you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.*

G. Sanctified

- They have been sanctified by the Holy Spirit, that is, made holy or set apart for God.

Later, 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.

H. Grace and Peace

Peter concludes his greeting with the prayer: ***may grace and peace be yours in abundance***. Together grace and peace sum up the early Christian expression of blessing.

This was a common Christian greeting in New Testament times.

The greeting expresses a wish for God's blessing (which comes in the form of sanctifying grace and the gifts of the Holy Spirit) and inner peace, the effect of the reconciliation with God which Jesus has brought about.

New Birth into a Living Hope (1 Pet 1:3-9)

Memorize: *Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! By his great mercy we have been born anew to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead (1 Peter 1:3)*

I. OPENING A BLESSING AND PROCLAMATION

The opening blessing of First Peter is one of the most inspiring passages in the New Testament.

The blessing is at one and the same time and offering of praise to God for his works and the proclamation of God's works. It announces the key themes that Peter will unfold in the remainder of the letter.

Read: 1 Peter 1:3-9

[3] *Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! By his great mercy we have been born anew to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead,*
[4] *and to an inheritance which is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you,*

[5] *who by God's power are guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.*

[6] *In this you rejoice, though now for a little while you may have to suffer various trials,*

[7] *so that the genuineness of your faith, more precious than gold which though perishable is tested by fire, may redound to praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ.*

[8] *Without having seen him you love him; though you do not now see him you believe in him and rejoice with unutterable*

and exalted joy.

[9] As the outcome of your faith you obtain the salvation of your souls.

A. Blessed be God for His Wonderful Gifts (1 Peter 1:3)

Using the form of a Jewish blessing, Peter is offering praise to God the Father, the source of **mercy**, for the benefits Christians have received.

Peter gives praise to God the Father for two specific gifts –

- the gift of new birth – a spiritual rebirth through faith and Baptism, and
- an imperishable inheritance (heaven: eternal life, salvation).

B. The Gift of New Birth

The first gift 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 birth (**born anew, born again, born from above**) through the resurrection of Jesus.

- The resurrection of Christ is the cause and source of our new birth into God's people and household.

That 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.

- Today, baptism is still celebrated at the Easter Vigil during the RCIA.

The Greek word for **born anew** means “regenerate” or “cause to be born again.” For Peter, the rebirth of Jesus from the dead (resurrection) gives believers a spiritual rebirth by grace (regeneration).

The idea is that God fathers or begets us anew, not in the natural way of biological parentage, but in a supernatural way and gives us a share in his own divine life.

C. A Living Hope

This is not mere optimism or wishful thinking, but the earnest desire, made possible by grace, for the unseen glory of heaven.

- This hope is the hope of obtaining 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:” that is our living hope.

D. The Second Gift (1 Peter 1:4)

The second gift is **an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you**. This triad of adjectives powerfully conveys the security of our inheritance in Christ.

Whereas all earthly treasure is subject to decay, Peter assures us that we have an inheritance that is:

- **imperishable** – eternal life in heaven,
- **undefiled** – it contains no evil and has no stain or defect, and
- **unfading** – it will never grow old or lose its glory.

Why? Because it is kept in heaven for us by God himself, where no moth and rust consume (Mt 6:20)!

E. Faith and Assurance (1 Peter 1:5)

Peter gives us 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 in the last time***.

Peter is referring here to the climactic end of history, when the **definitive** salvation of believers will take place in connection with the Second Coming (described in 1:7 as ***the revelation of Jesus Christ***.)

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.

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 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” (Jn 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? The reason is because their faith has not grown after baptism – they have not nourished their faith.

- They need a spiritual awakening – a spiritual rebirth.

The Word of God produces a new birth that brings about the fruit 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 it, so that it might bear all the fruits of God's life in us.

F. Joy in the Midst of Trials (1 Peter 1:6-7)

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. But then he tells us that now we must be ready to **suffer through various trials**, even if only for **a little while**.

G. Faith Tested By Fire

Peter compares the testing of our faith to the purification of gold by fire. 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.

The thought of Christ coming in glory should greatly encourage Christians to bear trials cheerfully.

H. The Goal of Faith

As the outcome of your faith you obtain the salvation of your souls.

Even though Christ is not yet seen, they attain (*are attaining*) the goal of their faith, which is the salvation of their souls. This salvation of our souls is the salvation of our entire lives, including our resurrected bodies.

Salvation is here described as a **future** event, which means it cannot be reduced to an event or experience already completed in the past.

Reflection and Application (1:6-9)

In this you rejoice, though now for a little while you may have to suffer various trials,

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.

So what is Peter talking about?

- He is saying that it is only through the Gospel that we can experience true joy in the midst of suffering.

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 has power to engage and overcome the sufferings of the world.

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

I. CONTINUITY OF THE OLD AND NEW TESTAMENTS

The Holy Spirit, who earlier proclaimed salvation by the mouth of the Old Testament prophets, is now, through those who preach the Gospel (the apostles and prophets of the Church), announcing that salvation has arrived.

Read: 1 Peter 1:10-12

[10]The prophets who prophesied of the grace that was to be yours searched and inquired about this salvation;

[11] they inquired what person or time was indicated by the Spirit of Christ within them when predicting the sufferings of Christ and the subsequent glory.

[12] It was revealed to them that they were serving not themselves but you, in the things which 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 long to look.

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 carefully **searched and inquired about** what the spirit of Christ was showing them.

What was the Spirit of Christ showing them?

The **person or time (or, time and circumstances)** concerning the sufferings destined for Christ and the glories to follow them.

A. The Spirit of Christ

The spirit of Christ is the Holy Spirit (1:12). The activity of the Spirit is here linked with the inspiration of the prophets, who spoke the word of God to Israel and foretold the suffering of the messiah (e.g. Is 52:13 - 53:12).

B. Important Insights (1 Peter 1:10-12)

We can 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.”

From Peter's perspective, the prophets were already being led by the Spirit of the Messiah who was to come afterwards, and the 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 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 Sunday on the road to Emmaus (See Luke 24:25-27 below).

And he said to them, "O foolish men, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken!

Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into his glory?"

And beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them in all the scriptures the things concerning himself.

C. What Even the Angels Longed to See (1 Pet 1:12)

By stating that these are ***things into which angels long 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.

These things are now revealed to the Church through the Spirit and to the angels through the ministry of the Church (Eph 3:10).

Preparation for Week 2

1. Read: First Peter, Chapters 1 and 2.
2. Review Study Questions 1-4 on Chapter 1, pg 39 in ICSD
3. Look up Scripture references.