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# 1

## New Birth

1 Peter 1:1–12

**S**o you've become a Christian. You said a prayer. You made a commitment. But what actually happened? What caused you to make this commitment when you did? Is anything really different, and how can you know for sure?

Take a look at your watch. You can see the movement as the seconds tick. What you don't see is the complex activity of wheels or electrical impulses inside the watch that make this movement happen. That's what it's like when a person comes to faith in Jesus Christ. God has been at work behind the scenes, opening your mind, warming your heart, and breathing new life into your soul.

The Bible calls this inner transformation the new birth, and that's the first thing that Peter wants us to discover.

*Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us **new birth** into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. (1 PETER 1:3, emphasis added)*

There is often a great deal of confusion over what is meant by the phrase “born again.” People ask, “Are you a born-again Christian?” as if this was one brand among many.

When the Bible says “you have been born again” (verse 23), it means that God has brought a deep change at the very center of your being. He has given you a new nature, which means that you have a new disposition, a new appetite, and new capacities.

## YOUR NEW DISPOSITION

God created you with your own unique gifts, personality, temperament, and abilities, and it is important to understand that the new birth does not violate what God has made.

Shy sinners become shy Christians. Zany sinners become zany Christians. Cautious sinners become cautious Christians, and cool sinners become cool Christians! The new creation does not contradict the old creation. God does not reverse what He has already done.

The Holy Spirit will help you to gain control to master your own temperament. He will give you power to overcome the effects of sin in your personality—like pride, anger, or greed. But God will not override His own work. He redeems His work by giving *you* a new disposition.

That’s what happened to Peter. Christ took this man with his flair and passion and moved him in a whole new direction. Thomas never had that flair or passion. He was a more introverted type, a thinker who liked asking questions more than launching initiatives. Peter and Thomas were completely different men before they met Christ. And after they met Christ, they were completely different Christians. God’s purpose is to take the unique individuality that He has already created in you and move that in a new direction.

Some time ago I talked with a teenager who had found it difficult to make a commitment to Christ. When I asked her what was holding her back, she told me that she did not want to be like her Sunday school teacher. The teacher was a rather straitlaced older lady who dressed in a conservative manner and didn't look like she laughed a lot. She was a very fine Christian, but her personality, temperament, and style were totally different from the fun-loving teenage girl!

I was glad to have the opportunity of explaining to the girl that becoming a Christian did not mean becoming like the teacher. Her face lit up as she saw that God wanted to take her unique personality and move *her* in a new direction.

God never intended you to spend your life trying to be like somebody else. Every person reflects a unique angle of the glory of God. He has made us all in His image, and yet He has never made two of us exactly the same. In the new birth, God takes your unique individuality and gives you a new disposition so that *you* can begin to live for His glory. There is no other Christian in the world like you.

## YOUR NEW APPETITE

Nature determines appetite, and when you are born again, God gives you a new appetite that reflects your new nature. Birds have an appetite for worms and slugs. Cats have an appetite for meow mix. I don't care for either of these diets because it is not in my nature.

The principle is simple. Cats have an appetite for what cats love. Birds have an appetite for what birds love. Sinners have an appetite for what sinners love. And those who have been born again through the resurrection of Jesus Christ have an appetite for what Christ loves.

This does not mean that old appetites that might lead you into sin disappear. We live this Christian life in the flesh, and so we often find ourselves drawn to things that displease God. But these are not the deepest longings

of your heart. Through the new birth, God creates a new desire within you to know Him, to please Him, and to follow Him.

Many people turn away from Christianity because they think it is about imposing a set of rules on a person's life. Obviously this is not attractive, and thankfully it is not what being a Christian is all about. In the new birth God creates a deep longing in you to live a new kind of life, and real freedom is found when what you most desire turns out to be exactly what God commands.

## YOUR NEW CAPACITY

Nature determines capacity as well as appetite. Dogs can't fly; it's not in their nature. Fish can't run; it's not in their nature. In the same way, sinners can't live in the presence of God or obey the laws of God, because it's not in their nature.

That used to be your position. But when you were born again, God's Spirit came to live in you, giving you not only the desire to live a new life but also the capacity.

If your faith rested on a decision or commitment that you made, the Christian life would be impossible. You would be in the same position as the people in the Old Testament who promised to obey all of God's commandments. They were utterly sincere in their intent, but completely naive about their ability. But you can live this Christian life because God's Spirit is within you. You have the power and the capacity to do all that God calls you to do.

The Christian life is lived from within. It is the growth and outworking of a miracle that has happened within your soul by the power of God's Spirit. He has brought you to a new birth. He has given you a new disposition with new appetites and a new capacity.

Some people have a hard time connecting with this truth because they cannot remember a time or place where they made a definite commitment of faith in Christ. It's important to remember that a person's salvation

comes through faith in Christ, not through a precise or vivid recollection of when that faith was formed.

I can't recall anything about my natural birth, but that does not cause me to doubt that I exist! The evidence that I was born is that I am alive. It's the same with the new birth. The evidence that a person has been born again is that he or she is living the new life. You discover that you have a new disposition and a new appetite, and the wonderful explanation for these things that you begin to see in yourself is that you have been born again.

No wonder Peter says, "Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! He has given us new birth." Never underestimate the miracle of what God has done in bringing you to faith in Jesus Christ.

## WHY YOU?

Have you ever wondered why God moved in *your* life to bring you to faith? After all, there are millions of people who have never come to faith in Christ. When I think about the fact that some of my neighbors, family, and friends have never experienced the new birth, it leaves me asking the question "Why me?"

The only answer to that question is the mercy of God. It is "in his great mercy" that you have been born again (verse 3). Birth is something that happens to you. You do not contribute to it. God did not breathe new life into you because you were a better person or more sincere or more worthy than your unbelieving neighbors or friends. If any of these things were the cause of God's work in you, then the credit for your salvation would ultimately belong to you.

But Peter makes it clear that this is never the case. The only explanation for the miracle of your new birth lies in the mercy of God. Stop and ponder that for a moment. It will leave you with a sense of awe and mystery and wonder.

The reason you see the glory of Jesus is because He has opened your eyes.

The reason you love Him is because He has opened your heart. The reason you want to follow Christ is because He has given you that desire. And the ultimate explanation of these things is not to be found in anything in you, but rather in God, whose great mercy has touched and changed your life. God has been merciful to you. Let that bring you to worship.

If you began reading with the idea that becoming a Christian was all about you making a decision or saying a prayer, I hope you can see that much more was going on behind the scenes. God is at work in your life. In His great mercy He has given you new birth.

## YOUR LIVING HOPE THROUGH THE RESURRECTION

This new birth brings you into “a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead” (verse 3).

Notice that your hope flows directly from the resurrection of Jesus. That’s important. Peter is not talking about the power of a more optimistic view of life. I’ve listened to motivational speakers tell large audiences to “think positive and be positive.” That may be good psychology, but it has nothing to do with Christianity.

Your living hope is not a mind game in which you create your own reality by the power of positive thinking. Peter tells us that it is tied to the resurrection of Jesus. When Jesus rose from the dead, He broke the power of death, and through the new birth the living hope of His victory touches and embraces you.

God has brought you to share in the triumph of Jesus’ resurrection. Death has no hold over Him, and death will have no hold over you. When the moment of your death comes, whether that be through illness, old age, or what we call an accident or disaster, it will be a translation out of your body into the immediate presence of Jesus. Try to take that in. It will help you to overcome fear and to live with confidence.

## KEPT BY GOD'S POWER

You have been born again “into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade—kept in heaven for you” (verse 4).

Your new birth has brought you into a new family. You are a child of God, and as a member of His family you have a share in the greatest of all inheritances. God will keep that inheritance for you until the day when Jesus Christ will come and gather the whole family together into the immediate presence of God.

It is a wonderful thing to know that God is keeping a place in heaven for you. The reservation is made. It has been paid for by the blood of Jesus. There is an inheritance with your name on it, and when you see it you will not be disappointed.

But God does more than keep an inheritance for you. He also keeps you for the inheritance. Through faith, you are “shielded by God’s power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time” (verse 5).

I’ve met many Christians who believe that God has an inheritance for them in heaven, but they sometimes wonder if they will arrive in heaven to receive it. God wants you to know that your salvation does not depend on your ability to hold on to Christ but on Christ’s ability to hold on to you. It does not depend on the strength of your hand but of His, and His hand is stronger than yours. That’s the basis of Christian confidence or assurance.

Christ is keeping an inheritance for you, and He is keeping you for the inheritance. Try to picture the two outstretched hands of Christ. In the one, He holds an inheritance. In the other, He holds you. Both are safe in His hands, and when He comes, He will bring the two together, and the inheritance will be yours.



## TRIALS THAT PROVE YOUR FAITH IS AUTHENTIC

*In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. These have come so that your faith . . . may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed. (VERSES 6–7)*

If you found an old painting that resembled a Rembrandt, you would want to know if it was authentic, and you would seize any opportunity to find out. This is why the *Antiques Roadshow* has been such a success on TV. Experts arrive in a city, and people bring their antiques, wanting to know what they might be worth.

Your faith is of far more value than a Rembrandt painting. Peter says your faith is “of greater worth than gold.” Gold will eventually perish like every other created thing, but your faith, if it is genuine, will last for eternity.

But how can you know that your faith is authentic? How do you know that it is not a passing phase? Peter has the answer. When you suffer grief in all kinds of trials, you will have all the evidence you need that your faith is authentic. Here’s why: If your faith were just a human decision or a passing phase, then as soon as you began to suffer, you would renounce your faith and turn away from God. Then you would spend the rest of your life either saying you could no longer believe in God or else smoldering in bitterness and resentment against Him.

I can think of several people like that. No doubt you can too. The big question is “Why isn’t everybody like that?” All of us experience some share of suffering in this life, so why don’t we all turn away in bitterness and resentment?

Thinking about the congregation of believers I am privileged to serve in Arlington Heights, I can picture people who are struggling with unanswered questions, disappointed hopes, and shattered dreams. I think of some who have lost loved ones, others who have suffered severe illness,

violence, or some other personal catastrophe. *And yet they still believe! They still love Christ!*

There is only one explanation for this: Christian faith is a miracle. It is the seed of the life of God planted within your soul, and it is indestructible.

Think about a bulb being planted in the ground, and try to imagine the experience from the bulb's perspective. The gardener takes you in his loving hand and digs a hole specially shaped for you. He places you in that hole, which seems like a gentle cradle. You look up to the light of the open sky above. Life is good and you are filled with joy.

Then, suddenly, the same gardener who seemed so caring drops piles of dirt on top of you. He buries you, and you find yourself surrounded by darkness. You think your life is at an end, but actually this is the beginning of your growth.

Grief and loss can bring us into experiences of great darkness. But faith is a living seed. Like the bulb, it grows where it is planted, and the amazing thing is that the dirt piled up over it actually contributes to its growth.

Think about your own experience: You have faced significant trials. You live with many unanswered questions. You have put your trust in Jesus Christ, but there are times when you are unable to grasp what He is doing in your life. And yet, if you are a believer, what Peter says will be true of you: "Though you have not seen him, you love him" (verse 8). You still believe in Him! There can be no greater evidence of the authenticity of your faith than that.

Faith that has been proved genuine will result in "praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed" (verse 7). One day God will review everything that has happened in your life, including the places where you chose to love Him and trust Him through things that you did not understand. Then it will become clear that the darkest passages of your life were the places of your greatest triumphs. You will enter into the presence of Jesus with great joy and discover there the full value of your new life in Christ.

## RECEIVING WHAT OTHERS HAVE LONGED FOR

Peter concludes this marvelous opening section of his letter by reminding us of the immense privilege of this new life.

*Concerning this salvation, the prophets, who spoke of the grace that was to come to you, searched intently and with the greatest care, trying to find out the time and circumstances to which the Spirit of Christ in them was pointing when he predicted the sufferings of Christ and the glories that would follow. (VERSES 10–11)*

The Old Testament prophets knew that God would send the promised Deliverer, and the Holy Spirit prompted them to speak about Him.

They knew that someone would come, that this person would suffer, and that afterward He would be surrounded with glory. But they did not know how this would happen or when He would appear.

The prophets longed to know more, and their whole lives were taken up with research as they carefully tried to discern how all this would come about. Their prophecies pointed forward to what you now experience through the new birth.

Think about it: You've got what Isaiah, Moses, and Elijah longed for. "They were not serving themselves but you, when they spoke of the things that have now been told you by those who have preached the gospel to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven" (verse 12).

Then Peter goes one fascinating step further: "Even angels," he writes, "long to look into these things." Angels enjoy life in the immediate presence of God, where they worship and serve their Creator. But since they have never sinned, they cannot know what it is to be forgiven. They do not share your experience of grace, and they cannot begin to imagine what it must be like for the Holy Spirit of God to live in you.

We may be intrigued by the experience of angels, but Peter tells us that angels are fascinated by our unique experience of God's grace. They long

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to look into these things. God's grace is more than angels can fathom. It leads them to worship, and it should do the same for you.

Can you see the breathtaking privilege of being a Christian? You have been given new birth. You are kept by God's power. The greatest of all inheritances is kept for you. When you face trials, they show that your faith is authentic, so that even the most painful experiences of your life will end up rebounding in praise, glory, and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed. You have received what prophets longed for, and your experience of God's grace staggers the angels.

Realize what God has done for you in Jesus Christ, and you will identify with Peter's conclusion: "Though you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy" (verse 8).