

1 Peter, Perseverance, and Missionary Resilience

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The idea of missionary longevity has become an important topic. Mission-sending organizations often consider the best ways to train and support missionaries so that they stay on the field for many years. The book *Worth Keeping* studies the issue of missionary retention and finds that globally, missionary attrition falls between 6.4-7.1%, meaning that on average, a missionary organization will lose one out of every fifteen missionaries it has sent each year.¹ A variety of reasons for attrition exists, and the editors of *Worth Keeping* separate those reasons into unpreventable and preventable causes.

This kind of practical research is invaluable to missiologists, but it is also important to return to Scripture to examine how to encourage missionary resilience. While Scripture does not speak directly to the issue of how missionaries should overcome the challenges of cross-cultural living, it does

¹ Rob Hay, Valerie Lim, Detlef Blöcher, Jaap Ketelaar, and Saray Hay, eds., *Worth Keeping: Global Perspectives on Best Practice in Missionary Retention* (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Publishing, 2007), Ch. 1, Perlego Edition <https://www.perlego.com/book/3295076/worth-keeping-global-perspectives-on-best-practice-in-missionary-retention-pdf>. They separate sending organizations into traditional sending fields (which they call Old Sending Countries) and more recent sending fields (which they call New Sending Countries). The percentage for Old Sending Countries was 7.1%, and the percentage for New Sending Countries was 6.4%.

have much to say about how Christians can persevere in a sinful world. One place that speaks to this issue is the letter of 1 Peter. In this article, I want to show that Peter encourages all believers – including missionaries – to persevere by focusing on the return of Christ. In other words, one of the ways that missionaries can be resilient and persevere through many obstacles is by consistently meditating on their future reward in Christ. I will examine this topic by first looking at several key themes of 1 Peter and then by considering specific mission and mission-sending applications.

Saved in Christ

Where should missionaries find their identity? Language proficiency, cultural insight, numerical success, and general competence in aspects of the missionary task all potentially define a missionary, and each is important in the way it contributes to missionary longevity. Yet, Peter defines the identity of believers in relation to Christ. For example, in 1:1 he addresses the recipients of his letter as “chosen” and then goes on to state how and for what they are chosen: “according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, through the sanctifying work of the Spirit, to be obedient and to be sprinkled with the blood of Jesus Christ” (1:2).² It is in Christ and for Christ that believers are elected and restored to a right relationship with their Creator. Their entire identity – who they are and what they do – takes its shape from their relationship with Christ.

Salvation is a core theme in 1 Peter. Salvation includes deliverance from sin while also highlighting the Christian life and future hope; believers are to rejoice in their salvation, follow Jesus in their daily lives, and live with hope of future glory. Each of these is relevant for the resilience of believers and missionaries.

² Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations are taken from the *Christian Standard Bible*.

One place where Peter conveys this idea about salvation and the identity of believers is in 1:3. Here he states that God has “given us new birth” and this new birth is “through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.” In 1:18-19, believers have been “redeemed from your empty way of life inherited from your ancestors” through the “precious blood of Christ.” And again in 3:18, Peter states that Christ suffered “that he might bring you to God.” As Jobes explains, Peter understands “Christ’s suffering to death as a unique sin offering that provides access to God, making it possible to be born again into the living hope that Christ’s resurrection to eternal life has accomplished (1:3).”³

When it comes to believers understanding their identity as being in Christ, Peter not only speaks to this issue in terms of the initial salvation of believers, but he also relates this idea to other aspects of the Christian life. In 1:14-15, Peter commands believers to pursue lives of holiness, and he roots that command in the nature and character of God. Believers are to pursue holiness because they desire to be “obedient children” who live out the will of their heavenly father since “the one who called you is holy.” In the same way, he also speaks to fear/reverence (1:17-21), love (1:22-25), and growth (2:1-3).

Suffering in various ways is also the norm for the Christian life (1:6). I will examine this theme in more depth in the next section, but for now, it is worth noting that Peter helps believers see that they are a suffering people primarily because they serve a Messiah who suffered. In 2:20, he writes that believers have favor with God if they endure suffering while doing good. He then explains why, “For you were called to this, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his footsteps” (2:21). In almost the same wording in 3:17, he writes that it is God’s will for believers to suffer while doing good. Then he explains the reason in verse 18: “For Christ also suffered . . .” Then in 4:1 he commands, “Since Christ

³ Karen H. Jobes, *1 Peter*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 238.

suffered in the flesh, arm yourselves also with the same understanding.” A believer’s identity is shaped by his or her relationship with Christ – believers suffer because Christ suffered.

Finally, when Peter writes of the future glory of believers, he does so by relating it to Christ. The clearest reference to this idea is in 5:10, where Peter writes that believers are called “to [God’s] eternal glory *in Christ*” (Emphasis mine). Elsewhere, though, Peter paints a picture of believers walking a similar path as Jesus. One example of this theme is in 3:18-22. This text is a complicated one; but, for our purposes, we have already seen that in 3:17, it is God’s will for believers to suffer while doing good, and verse 18 states the reason is that Christ also suffered. The ὅτι (for) in verse 18 provides the connection, emphasizing the ground or reason for the content in verse 17.

Peter concludes this text in verse 22 by describing the exaltation of Christ and the fact that he is now “at the right hand of God with angels, authorities, and powers subject to him.” Then in 4:1-6, he transitions back to the suffering of believers, using the conjunction οὖν or “therefore.” This inference helps us make the connection between Christ’s suffering and subsequent exaltation and the suffering and future glory of believers. As Schreiner explains, “The connection between the two sections is this: since Christ’s suffering is the pathway to glory, believers should also prepare themselves to suffer, knowing that suffering is the prelude to an eschatological reward.”⁴ In other words, just like Christ suffered during his earthly life, believers also suffer, but in the same way the faithful, covenant-keeping Christ was exalted, believers too, if they are faithful and persevere until the end, will enter into glory.

Finding one’s identity in and seeing all of life shaped by Christ are important concepts for missionaries. The missionary life is often a transient one. Locations of service, types of work, and even our teammates or partners can all change. They often change quickly and unexpectedly. If one’s identity is found in being an expert in navigating cultural dynamics in one context,

⁴ Thomas R. Schreiner, *1 & 2 Peter and Jude*, Christian Standard Commentary (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2020), 226.

but then the door closes to living among those people, the loss of identity may severely affect that person's ability to stay on the field. Alternatively, suppose one's sense of self-worth is found in knowing how to answer one specific people group's common objections in evangelistic conversations. What happens when that person shares the gospel with a different group, whose questions he has never considered? Similarly, what happens to the self-worth of people who become missionaries after being in an established ministry (e.g., pastors) or a successful career and then are shredded by the humiliating process of language learning? In all of these situations, such experiences may negatively impact the missionary's sense of self-worth and leave him or her feeling like a failure who contributes little to the work, unless they see all of life shaped by their relationship to Christ.

Peter desires all believers to find their identity in Christ. Regardless of whether they serve in cities or in rural areas, in a monocultural or multicultural context, whether their work is among a people who primarily need to hear the gospel for the first time or if it is focused more on leadership development, missionaries should find their sense of self-worth in Christ. To state it a different way, the primary calling of the missionary life is to know Christ and be found in him. This enables the missionary to press on in the face of the challenges and losses inherent in life and ministry.

Suffering as Sojourners

One question that we may wrestle with at times is if missionaries are called by God and are faithful in walking with Christ, why must they face so many challenges in their work? 1 Peter is helpful here since he addresses similar questions. In fact, biblical scholar Andrew Mbuvi argues helpfully that the motif of "exile" is foundational to understanding the epistle.⁵ This motif

⁵ Andrew M. Mbuvi, *Temple, Exile and Identity in 1 Peter* (New York: T&T Clark, 2007), 28. Available at: <https://www.perlego.com/book/803998/temple--exile--and--identity--in--1--peter--pdf>.

speaks to the place of Peter's original audience in society – that is, they were outsiders or even outcasts because of their relationship with Christ.

We have already seen that in 1:1, Peter refers to his recipients as chosen, but then he further describes them as “living as exiles.” Instead of seeing the recipients as literal exiles, though, it is better to understand that Peter uses this term to describe the Christian life during the “already but not yet” period as they wait for the return of Christ. As Keener explains,

Jewish people dispersed outside the holy land recognized themselves as God's chosen people, but often lived as resident aliens in the predominantly gentile cities where they settled. This was true in Roman Asia Minor (where all the named Roman provinces are located). They were the Judean Diaspora, those dispersed beyond their ancestral homeland. Peter, however, refers to a spiritual rather than ethnic diaspora, and he transfers these images to all who now follow Israel's God in Christ (1 Pet 1:17; 2:11). They are God's people residing as aliens in a culture foreign to their divine origin.⁶

Understanding Peter's use of this term enables his readers to understand the place of suffering in the letter. As Brooks explains, “These believers were societal outcasts because of their faith in such a sense that Peter could use the metaphor of exile to describe them. As a result of their commitment to Christ, they faced trials (1:6) that could be described as ‘fiery’ (4:12) and were insulted (4:14), slandered (2:12; 3:16), and misunderstood (4:4).”⁷

While these ideas of suffering and sojourning (that is, living as exiles) are intertwined, Peter orients his recipients' thinking about them by explaining them through a Christological and eschatological lens. In the previous

⁶ Keener, *1 Peter: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2021), 45. Emphasis his.

⁷ Will Brooks, “Evangelism in 1 Peter: The Verbal Proclamation of a People Awaiting the Return of Their King,” in *Reading 1 Peter Missiologically*, edited by Abeneazer Urga, Ed Smither, and Jessica Udall (Forthcoming).

section, we examined the Christological lens, namely that believers suffer in their earthly lives because Christ suffered in his, or as Peter puts it, they “share in the sufferings of Christ” (4:13). At the same time, Peter also labors to help his readers understand that part of the reason they live and suffer as exiles is because they are waiting for Christ’s return.

One place that displays this perspective is found in 1:6. Here, Peter explains that believers rejoice in the living hope (1:3) and the future-oriented nature of their salvation (1:5), “ready to be revealed in the last time,” which has been brought about by their new birth. Then Peter introduces a concessive idea stating that they rejoice “even though” they suffer, and he describes this suffering as happening “now for a short time.” While it may seem that Peter means the kind of trials these believers are facing only last briefly, in reality, he means they last a short time when compared to eternity.⁸ The “short time” here likely points to the entirety of the Christian life, a time frame supported by the fact that the result of the trials comes about not in the near future but rather is revealed “at the revelation of Jesus Christ” (1:7).

Peter then builds off this idea in verse 13 by commanding believers to “set your hope completely on the grace to be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ.” This final phrase in verse 13 is the same as the one in verse 7, and thus, believers can endure suffering in this life because of their confidence that God will fulfill his promises. As Jobes explains,

The fact that the addressees have already experienced suffering for the name of Christ suggests that Peter is exhorting them to continue to hope even though it may at times seem futile. . . . Peter therefore orients his readers to a future eschatology of a grace that is fully present but not fully realized in their lives, a grace that is fully guaranteed by the past event of the redeeming death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.⁹

⁸ Schreiner, *1 & 2 Peter and Jude*, 65.

⁹ Jobes, *1 Peter*, 110.

One additional text where we see this future orientation is in 2:11-12, where Peter once again refers to his readers as “strangers and exiles.” Not only does Peter refer to them as exiles in this passage, but he also points to the persecution they face as a result of this status, stating that unbelievers will “slander you as evildoers” (2:12). Amid this situation, Peter commands them to live honorably and do good, and this command has an eschatological purpose, namely that “they will see your good works and will glorify God on the day he visits.” Peter’s hope is that unbelievers will see the good deeds of Christians, listen to the gospel, and come to faith in Christ before he returns to judge the world. As Jobes states, “The winsome way of life of Peter’s readers even in the midst of a difficult social situation is hoped to be the witness that would bring unbelievers into the Christian community so that they too might glorify God on the coming day of judgment.”¹⁰

While the situation of believers is difficult, the command is simple. The believers are living as exiles and slandered by unbelievers. Yet, Peter’s command is not to worry about these matters but only “conduct yourselves honorably.” We can combine this command with the one in the previous section of the letter that states God has chosen believers and formed them into “a people for his own possession” (2:9) so that they might “proclaim the praises of the one who called you out of darkness and into his marvelous light.” In that sense, regardless of the situation missionaries find themselves in, God’s will and his calling for them are clear – they are to do good and proclaim the greatness of God.

Missionaries will likely have little difficulty understanding the exile motif in 1 Peter since they live outside their homeland among people with different worldviews and cultural norms. Personally, I remember when I first moved overseas. I was a Westerner living in a small city in Asia with only a handful of other foreigners, and every time I walked down the street, people would stop and stare. I started to think, “I am strange.” This type of strangeness is

¹⁰ Jobes, *1 Peter*, 173.

exactly what Peter wants his readers to reflect on – though not because they are Westerners living in Asia like I was, but because they belong to Christ while living in a world set in opposition to his kingdom.

While missionaries may understand the theme of exile, it may still be difficult for them to accept the idea of suffering. When trials, challenges, setbacks, or disruptions to the work occur, it may be difficult for missionaries to understand or embrace them. Such events may also negatively affect the longevity of missionaries as they question whether they are actually contributing to the work or even if they are really living out God's will for their lives.

Peter's teaching, though, addresses these concerns in a few ways. First, understanding suffering through a Christological lens helps them to see that trials are not only a normal part of the Christian life but are also a means by which they "share in the sufferings of Christ" (4:13). Second, viewing trials through an eschatological lens helps missionaries to understand that their trials are only "for a short time" (1:6) during their period of sojourning and that eventually these trials will produce a faith in them – and hopefully in others – that will result in "praise, glory, and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ" (1:7).

Anticipating Future Glory

Now that we have seen that missionaries have been saved in Christ and suffer as sojourners, we might consider what it is that missionaries should anticipate. Should they look forward to specific and measurable results like conversions, churches planted, or reaching a point in the work when they can exit? These are all worthy pursuits as Paul says in Romans 15:20, "My aim is to preach the gospel where Christ has not been named." At the same time, though, we have already seen that Peter commands believers to "set your hope completely on the grace to be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ" (1:13). In this section, we will look at several other texts that show that the promise of an eschatological reward should be the missionary's

overarching goal and one that encompasses and influences every other goal in mission work.

In 1:3, Peter explains that God, in his mercy, has given us new birth. He then goes on to unpack in verses 3-5 the results of that salvation for believers, with each introduced by the preposition εἰς and with each of the results being future oriented. The first is the living hope in believers, which points believers forward to the consummation of God's saving promises in Christ. This hope is "living" because Jesus has risen, and as believers walk with the risen Lord and trust him in the midst of various trials, their certainty of the consummation of future promises grows. The second is their inheritance (1:4), which Grudem describes as "their portion in the new creation and all its blessings."¹¹

The third result, "a salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time" (1:5), emphasizes the glorification aspect of salvation. The adjective "ready" reminds believers that though their salvation is yet to be consummated, God has already purchased, completed, and confirmed their salvation through the covenant faithfulness of Christ. Given their current suffering, such a reminder would have been a great comfort to Peter's original hearers.

We have already examined verses 6-7, where Peter introduces the theme of trials. Whereas many commentators see the purpose of suffering in these verses as producing better character, Liebengood makes an important distinction here that in the text, the goal is eschatological. He writes that "the motivation for enduring trials is the certain outcome – eschatological salvation, an incorruptible inheritance for those who maintain faithfulness."¹² The analogy in verse 7 supports Liebengood's explanation. Though gold is purified by fire, Peter does not praise the post-purification quality of gold.

¹¹ Wayne Grudem, *1 Peter*, The Tyndale New Testament Commentaries, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 61.

¹² Kelly D. Liebengood, *The Eschatology of 1 Peter: Considering the Influence of Zechariah 9-14*, Society for New Testament Studies Monograph Series 157 (Cambridge/New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 179.

He uses the analogy to say that even though gold has been purified and is high quality, it still perishes. The faith of believers, on the other hand, is even more precious because it will never pass away.

In that sense, Peter once again points his readers forward to their future rewards. In verses 3-5, though, the future rewards were a result of being born again, but here in verse 7 they are the result of a genuine faith. This testing process results in “praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ.” As Schreiner notes, the verb “may be found” points to the future judgment “when God examines the life of each person.”¹³ For faithful believers, this judgment is not to be feared since they are promised a reward for their perseverant faith.

Of these three promised rewards, glory is one of Peter’s favorite terms, which he uses ten times in a variety of ways. Of those ten, eight are especially eschatological in nature: one refers to the fleeting nature of glory in this life (1:24), two point to the glory Christ received for his covenant-keeping faithfulness (1:11; 1:21), two refer to the revelation of this glory at Christ’s return (4:13; 5:1), and three refer to the reward for believers who persevere until the end (1:7; 5:4,10). What is interesting here is that Peter uses the same term to speak of Christ’s reward for his faithfulness and believers for theirs. This relationship and similar trajectory of Christ and believers are common themes in Peter. Both Christ and believers are rejected by this world and suffer, both are called to persevere until the end, and both are rewarded with glory for their faithfulness. Honor is used similarly both here and in 2:7.

Peter’s emphasis on future reward and a coming judgment is not limited to 1:3-9, but these themes are at the heart of the epistle’s message. Believers are commanded to pursue honorable lives (2:12) and have reverence for God (1:17) since a future judgment is coming (1:17; 2:13). Enduring suffering while doing good “brings favor with God” (2:20), and this favor points to an

¹³ Schreiner, *1 & 2 Peter and Jude*, 68.

eschatological reward.¹⁴ The ones who persevere in faith will receive honor (2:7) and will “inherit a blessing” (3:9) in the same way Christ was honored (2:4). Believers rejoice in sharing Christ’s sufferings “so that [they] may also rejoice with great joy when his glory is revealed” (4:13). Elders are pointed toward sharing in “the glory about to be revealed” (5:1) and for those who shepherd well, they are promised that “when the chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory” (5:4).

For missionaries, then, it is important to consider how this promise of future reward and coming judgment should affect all other goals within the missionary task. This relationship is important in the light of the epistle since Peter “imparts an ethical quality of life *now* by setting present Christian experience within an eschatological perspective.”¹⁵ In other words, the promise of future reward is not something believers just sit around and wait for. Instead, the reality of the future has an impact on how we live today.

In light of their future inheritance, missionaries must give as much attention to their own spiritual growth and walk with the Lord as they do the work. They must be growing in Christ as they set their hope on his return, trusting in him and depending on him in ways that help them persevere until the end. Doing so, while necessary for their personal spiritual growth, also leads to missionary resilience as they see challenges not just as setbacks to the work but as opportunities to “share in the sufferings of Christ” (4:13).

At the same time, though, the future judgment speaks to the urgency of the missionary task. In Peter’s own words, “The end of all things is near” (4:7). Thus, missionaries are right to labor so that unreached peoples and places can hear the gospel. It is right for them to be intentional in crossing cultural boundaries, learning the language, and studying culture so that healthy churches are planted and leaders are trained for those churches. Future judgment, though, not only reminds us that the work must be done,

¹⁴ Schreiner, *1 & 2 Peter and Jude*, 154-156.

¹⁵ *Jobes, 1 Peter*, 49.

but it also points to *how* it must be done. It means that missionaries do their work with a recognition that, in Paul's words, "the fire will test the quality of each one's work" (1 Cor 3:13), and thus, they do the work with the ambition that those they lead to faith and the churches they plant will persevere until the end.

Application

As we have examined these three themes of being saved in Christ, suffering as sojourners, and anticipating future glory, we can see how interconnected they are. Since Christ has saved believers, their entire lives take shape based on their relationship with him, which leads them to be sojourners and exiles in a world opposed to his reign. As sojourners, believers constantly face trials and suffer along the journey, which leads them to set their hope on Christ's return and the promise of eschatological reward. And, this promise of future reward leads them to persevere by trusting in Christ and to glorify him by doing good. This interrelationship and, in fact, the message of the whole letter can be summarized by 4:19: "So then, let those who suffer according to God's will entrust themselves to a faithful Creator while doing good."

In reflecting on these themes, we can make a few final statements in relation to missionary resilience. In their study on longevity, Hay et al. found that organizations from both Old Sending Countries and New Sending Countries reported a clear sense of calling to be the most important factor in reducing missionary attrition.¹⁶ Missionaries tend to define their calling narrowly or specifically as associated with a specific place or people, which can be very helpful for missionary longevity as missionaries desire to live out that calling by committing to those people for the long term. One challenge, though, is that if the situation changes, missionaries who only understand their calling in this way may end up questioning their calling.

¹⁶ Hay, *Worth Keeping*, Ch. 1.

Peter's teaching in 1 Peter is intended for all believers, but he defines God's will as simply doing good and proclaiming the greatness of God. Missionaries may be more resilient if they balance their specific calling with this broader calling given to all believers. All believers should all seek to walk with Christ and glorify him in whatever context and among whatever people they find themselves. We daily seek to know Christ, to do good to others, and to find ways to proclaim the greatness of God to a lost and dying world. When trials or setbacks arise that affect the work or reduce access to some specific location, balancing this broader calling for all believers with their specific one can help missionaries to adjust, persevere, and press on.

Additionally, missionary resilience increases when missionaries labor for their future reward in Christ instead of focusing on the need for immediate results. Some dangerous trends in recent missions history include focusing solely on social needs, watering down the claims of the gospel to make it easier to accept, or using strategies that lead to quick decisions without any plan for discipleship. In contrast to these approaches that focus on immediate results, Peter's emphasis on honor being due to those who persevere until the end reminds us that missionaries must labor for results that stand the test of time. They must seek to impart a perseverant faith to all those they lead to faith.

Conclusion

In conclusion, 1 Peter encourages missionaries to persevere by focusing on the return of Christ. Seeing themselves as sojourners who are united with Christ leads to missionary resilience and will enable them to persevere through many obstacles by consistently meditating on their future reward in Christ.

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