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Reading 1 Peter Missiologically: The Missionary Motive, Message, and Methods of 1 Peter

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Chapter 1

Salvation of the Nations

The Vision of God's Mission in 1 Peter 1:10–12

Joshua Bowman

> Concerning this salvation, the prophets who prophesied about the grace that was to be yours searched and inquired carefully, inquiring what person or time the Spirit of Christ in them was indicating when he predicted the sufferings of Christ and the subsequent glories. It was revealed to them that they were serving not themselves but you, in the things that have now been announced to you through those who preached the good news to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven, things into which angels long to look. (1 Pet 1:10–12)[1]

Introduction

In 1 Peter 1, Peter encouraged Christians to rejoice in suffering because they have a precious salvation that will result in glory to Christ. The focus text of this chapter is 1 Peter 1:10–12, where Peter emphasizes that his readers are the beneficiaries of the Old Testament prophets' inquiry, anticipation, and service. Peter wrote about how believers could have confidence in their identity in Christ and endurance despite ongoing trials. Although their present circumstances were troubling, Peter's hearers were privileged to see fully what Old Testament saints only saw partially.

This passage opens doors to exploring key themes related to the Messiah and salvation about which the Old Testament prophets inquired. The longing and desire of the prophets, which are now fulfilled, provide confidence for those waiting for their final redemption and escape from persecution. The Holy Spirit revealed the message that believers have, and angels long to investigate it. Finally, this revealed salvation prompts faithful Christians to endure suffering, preach the word, walk in obedience, and engage in God's mission to the nations. Instead of shrinking back in fear, the great salvation of 1 Peter 1 provides a solid biblical and theological basis for engagement in missions.

1 Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations in this chapter are from the English Standard Version.

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Reading 1 Peter 1 missiologically forces us to consider some of the following questions: How do verses 10–12 motivate suffering Christians to engage in the mission of God?[2] What is the great salvation that prophets inquired about and that angels long to understand? How did the prophets serve us?

The primary goal of this chapter is to evaluate how 1 Peter 1:10–12 provides motivation and mandate for Christians to endure suffering and engage in missions. This passage teaches that suffering believers can proceed in joy, hope, and confidence because God has revealed what the prophets longed to know about salvation in Christ, which is the foundation of our faith and motivation for missions.

Suffering, Salvation, and Motivation in 1 Peter 1

Peter addressed his letter to Christians scattered across Asia and living as aliens (1 Pet 1:1). He wrote to people living in culturally inhospitable contexts. They were "distressed by various trials" (1:6), treated harshly just as Christ was (2:21), and exhorted not to "be surprised at the fiery ordeal" that tested them "as though some strange thing were happening to you" (4:12).

Suffering was not only a future possibility but an ever-present reality to those Peter addressed (4:16, 19; 5:1, 8–10).[3] Peter placed the hardships of these brothers and sisters in the context of Jesus's suffering. The prophets predicted Jesus's suffering (1:12); he was the rejected stone (2:7); his suffering is an example to Christians in their distress (2:21); his suffering was on behalf of sinners (3:18); and our suffering causes rejoicing as we share in Christ's suffering (4:13). Finally, our suffering is merely for a "little while," and it unites us with the experience of other Christians suffering around the world (5:9–10).

2 Seland expounded on Peter's suffering theme by saying, "We thus find in 1 Peter that the author envisages Christians who have to stand up for their faith; we do not always get a clear picture of what kind of problems they have to cope with, but the author's emphatic use of 'sufferings' and his exhortations fully demonstrate the need for both theological and practical comfort." Seland, "Resident Aliens in Mission," 588.

3 Flemming said, "Words for suffering appear more in this letter than any other New Testament book. Peter sews this thread into the whole fabric of the letter (see 1:6–7; 2:12, 18–25; 3:13–18; 4:1–6, 12–19; 5:8–10). But what does suffering have to do with mission? In the first place, Peter sees the experience of undeserved suffering as something quite normal when God's people engage their world. Christians should not be surprised when they find themselves coming under fire, 'as though something strange were happening' (3:12)." Flemming, "Won Over without a Word," 60.

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In the context of distressing trials, Peter wrote about grace, peace, and hope (1:2–3). He described an inheritance reserved in heaven. Imperishable, undefiled, and reserved—these are the Spirit-inspired adjectives that describe this heavenly inheritance (1:4). Peter's main point is to assure suffering believers that God protects their salvation. Martin Williams argued that salvation is the central theme of 1:3–12, pervading the opening section and the entire book.[4] Salvation here is key as Peter stresses its timing, surety, and revelation.

Therefore, based on the reality and assurance of their coming salvation, the primary response of God's people should be rejoicing (1:6). Considering the hardship and stress of persecution that scattered believers across Asia, fear and anxiety would have been a normal, fleshly response. Instead, Peter elicited the opposite. Confidence, peace, and even joy come from faith in the promised salvation of the Lord. A careful reader can already ascertain deep theological truths that motivate believers to engage in God's mission, regardless of circumstance or convenience.

Though salvation is a motivating factor, according to Peter, the primary joy comes from the glory and honor that will be received (1:7–8). After God reveals salvation (1:5), next comes the response of faith leading to "the salvation of your souls" (1:9). It seems oxymoronic to acknowledge distress yet frame it in the context of joy. Yet, scattered people living under religious persecution have peace to the fullest (1:2).

The focus text of this chapter, 1 Peter 1:10–12, begins by referring to "this salvation," which is best understood in the context of the two preceding references to salvation listed above (1:5, 9). In these three verses (1:10–12), salvation is desired by and revealed to the prophets, which motivates believers to engage in missions and obey the ethical instructions in the remainder of Peter's letter.[5]

Salvation Desired

In verses 10–12, Peter made a theological argument that served as a basis for confidence in suffering, obedience to ethical instructions, and participation in God's redemptive mission. Peter encouraged and exhorted

4 Williams, *Doctrine of Salvation*, 149–50.

5 Muriithi points to how 1 Peter is a book looked to by Africans to "find answers to questions about how the truths concerning salvation and faith apply in such circumstances. How can they live as Christians in the midst of persecution, poverty, and sickness?" Muriithi, "1 Peter," 1544. Furthermore, "This message speaks to African Christians who are suffering the ravages of war, famine, and disease, and who want to know where God is when they suffer like this." Muriithi, 1543.

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faithfulness among scattered believers based on the glorious salvation that is sure to come. The challenge for readers of the epistle was that their recent experiences of suffering tempted them to doubt the timing and surety of salvation. Therefore, suffering in 1 Peter is a catalyst that intensifies the search for understanding Old Testament prophecy.[6]

Summarizing the structure of 1 Peter, D. Edmond Hiebert asserted that 1 Peter 1:1–12 provides the doctrinal foundation for three cycles of practical exhortations. He explained,

> The opening paragraph (1:3–12), setting forth the glories of our salvation in Christ, provided a solid foundation for Peter's series of exhortations that were intended to strengthen and stimulate the suffering readers. The first cycle of exhortations is grounded in the readers' personal experience of salvation (1:13–2:10); the second appealed to them on the basis of their position in the world (2:11–3:12). The remainder of the epistle is devoted to exhortations dealing with the crucial theme of Christian suffering (3:13–5:11).[7]

Joy and glory were promised to these disciples, but the recent trials tested their strength. Paul Achtemeier described how Peter's appeal to prophetic searching compels confidence in this struggling Christian community: "The reference to the OT prophets searching out the grace in which the NT community stands points to the continuity of God's purpose and thus the unity of divine revelation, which in its turn underlines the certainty of the announced salvation in Christ in the midst of circumstances that contradict rather than confirm it (cf. v. 6)."[8]

Peter attempted to bolster the faith of sufferers by attaching current hope to past predictions of Old Testament prophets. Thomas Schreiner explained Peter's reference to the past by saying, "The link between vv. 9–10 is the term 'salvation' (*sōteria*). The salvation believers experience now, which will be consummated in the future, was also prophesied in the past. Believers in Christ represent the fulfillment of prophecy."[9] Peter was not merely offering empty promises or platitudes to those living in hostile environments whose lives were in danger. Instead, he reminded them to look back. He asked them to consider how the prophets foretold Christ's coming, suffering, and glorification.

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6 Davids, *First Epistle of Peter*, 62.

7 Hiebert, *First Peter*, 20.

8 Achtemeier, *1 Peter*, 108–9.

9 Schreiner, *1, 2 Peter, Jude*, 71.

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The consistent, accurate, and bold predictions comforted and emboldened Peter's audience to stand confidently, knowing that their faith rested on trustworthy evidence. Those engaged as disciples of the Lord will face hardship due to gospel proclamation. Therefore, Peter connected past revelation with current realities to show how both were expected and will be overcome.

Verse 10 ends with Peter describing the "careful searches and inquiries" made by the prophets about their own prophecies and the "grace that would come to you." In order to understand Peter's argument, an overview of several Old and New Testament passages that describe this prophetic quest is in order.

Prophetic Inquiry

Peter's reference to Old Testament prophets emphasizes the unity of all Scripture and assures his audience that appeals to joy and glory are not illusions meant to spark false hope. Douglas Harink connected Petrine themes of suffering, glory, and prophetic expectation by saying,

> It becomes clear that the Messiah did not come lately upon the scene—unprecedented, unanticipated, unheralded—as if only those who live after the birth and death of Jesus share in the grace of the Messiah. The Spirit of the Messiah (*pneuma Christou*) was already at work long ago, inciting in the prophets of Israel an intense inquiry into the *kairos* of the Messiah and bearing advance witness (*promartyromenon*) through them to the sufferings and the subsequent glorification.[10]

Jesus's identity, suffering, deity, and glorification were not fabricated by a band of followers after his death on a Roman cross. The prophets saw in part, trying to discern things that did not come into focus during their lifetimes. The mystery was partially revealed, and they had enough information to search and ask questions. Since the inquiry started in antiquity, Robert Leighton succinctly reminds us that "the prejudice of novelty is removed."[11]

Daniel 9 provides an example of one prophet who carefully studied the prophecies of those who came before, seeking to discern the times of desolation, judgment, and the coming Messiah. Verse 2 says, "I, Daniel, perceived in the books the number of years that, according to the word of the Lord to Jeremiah the prophet, must pass before the desolations of Jerusalem." Daniel continued in prayer to confess that Israel "has not listened to our servants the prophets" (v. 6). Israel had been punished because they refused

10 Harink, *1 & 2 Peter*, 50.

11 Leighton, *Commentary on First Peter*, 62.

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