

Diverse Ways in which Muslim Background Believers Are Living Out I Peter 4:12-14

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Abstract

“Suffering” is a prominent motif in Peter's first letter. This article focuses on I Peter 4:12-14 and examines how Muslim background believers live out this passage. These three verses are relevant to believers of Muslim background because they face challenges like those experienced by first-century believers. The various ways in which Muslim background believers are living out I Peter 4:12-14 during difficult trials is instructive to believers from different contexts and backgrounds.

Key Words: believers, boldness, Christ, glory, persecution, perseverance, rejoice, suffering, trials

Introduction

This article studies the theme of “suffering” in Peter's first letter, focusing on I Peter 4:12-14. Missiological lessons on suffering can be drawn from this passage and applied to global missions. In particular, the article examines how Muslim background believers (MBBs) live out I Peter 4:12-14. Given the significant increase in Christian persecution in recent decades, I Peter 4:12-14 is highly relevant to MBBs, who face different challenges and dangers. Despite these trials, MBBs continue to persevere in their faith, demonstrating a willingness to pay the ultimate price to follow Jesus. Their steadfastness in creative access countries is an inspiring example to all believers.

Sharing The Love of Christ with His Muslim Persecutors

The following story exemplifies the complex situations MBBs face today:

As a member of Pakistan's tiny Christian minority, Hamid was treated poorly by Muslims in his community. By God's grace, however, today, Hamid loves and shares Christ with his persecutors. Growing up, Hamid Banday had every reason to hate the Muslims in his Pakistani village. His Muslim classmates bullied him, and villagers harassed and discriminated against his family because of their Christian faith. Village authorities even denied them use of the local water well during peak summer heat. Hamid never saw a reason to show love to Muslims ... until he realized God had told him to. With God's guidance and help, he now tries to see Muslims as God sees them, as people made in His image who are in need of a savior (The Voice of the Martyrs 2021; italics original).

The Current State of Persecuted Christians: A Call to Awareness and Action

In the past year, the persecution of Christians around the world has reached alarming levels, with nearly 5,000 believers killed for their faith. This tragic loss of life underscores the extreme risks that Christians face in many parts of the world, simply for their devotion to Christ. Additionally, almost 4,000 Christians were abducted, often subjected to violence, forced conversions, or exploitation. These figures, drawn from the 2024 Open Doors World Watch List (Open Doors 2023) as well as other accessible information (Global Christian Relief 2022; The Voice of the Martyrs 2024a; The United States Commission on International Religious Freedom 2022), highlight the severe and ongoing threats to religious freedom that many Christians endure daily.

Share the Sufferings of Christ

Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal among you, which comes upon you for your testing, as though some strange thing were happening to you; but to the degree that you share the sufferings of Christ, keep on rejoicing, so that also at the revelation of His glory you may rejoice with exultation. If you are reviled for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you (I Peter 4:12-14, NASB 1995).

Elisabeth Elliot put the matter this way: “Our vision is so limited we can hardly imagine a love that does not show itself in protection from suffering... The love of God did not protect His own Son... He will not necessarily protect us - not from anything it takes to make us like His Son. A lot of hammering and chiseling and purifying by fire will have to go into the process” (citation).

The Theme of Suffering in First Peter: Destination, Audience, and Purpose

Suffering is a major theme in the first epistle of Peter. Even though the focus of the article is on I Peter 4:12-14, it is important to highlight the continuity of the theme of suffering throughout the entire epistle, particularly in the following passages: 1:11; 2:19-20, 21-23; 3:14, 17; 4:1, 12-13; 5:1, 8-10.

It is important to give a brief introduction regarding the destination, audience, and purpose of I Peter. The letter was addressed to Christians (Jewish believers and converted pagans) who were in the Roman provinces of Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia (See I Peter 1:1). Peter H. Davids states that “these are Christians living in the northwest quadrant of Asia Minor bordering the Black Sea, an area that Luke reports Paul was not allowed to evangelize (Acts 16:6-10)” (Davids 1990, 7).

There are different points of view regarding when the letter was written. While some scholars have suggested a later date and pseudonymous author (Jobes 2005, 5; Elliott 2000, 127-130), most scholars agree with the traditional view that I Peter was written by the Apostle Peter between AD 62-67. I Peter was written from Rome, referred to historically as “Babylon” due to its moral decadency and idolatry--traits that had significant implications for the believers.

The purpose of the letter is to encourage believers in their faith amid suffering and trials. I Peter 4:12–19 is part of the larger section of 4:12–5:11. Scott McKnight states that Peter’s letter is “an exhortation to holy endurance of suffering because these Christians have experienced the salvation of God and because salvation is promised to them in all fullness when the final day arrives” (McKnight 1996, 33; Hiebert 1984). The Apostle Peter also warns the believers about the trials and tribulations they will face and encourages them to persevere in the Lord.

Michaels suggests that we must look simultaneously at 4:12 and 5:1. Peter addresses his readers afresh as “Dear friends” (4:12) but delays his specific appeal to them (*parakalo*) until the beginning of the following section, focusing the appeal on one group among them, the “older ones” or “elders” (5:1) (Michaels 1988, 257). According to Peter H. Davids, “the elders were not the older people in the church, but the leaders of the community; it is the title of an officer rather than a description of seniority.” (Davids 1990, 175).

The following section focuses on I Peter 4:12-14, viewing the passage through a missiological lens.

“Suffering” in I Peter 4:12-14

Suffering is a central theme throughout the I Peter, with a particularly strong emphasis in 4:12-14. In these verses, Peter addresses the reality of suffering as an integral part of the Christian experience, particularly for those who are committed to following Christ in a hostile world. The Greek term translated as “sufferings,” *pathēmasin*, is crucial for understanding Peter’s message. Derived from the word *pathéma*, this term carries a rich and multifaceted meaning, encompassing physical and emotional suffering and the broader experiences of passion, affliction, and endurance that come with being a follower of Christ.

The word *pathéma* is used in various contexts throughout the New Testament, each offering a different dimension of suffering as a Christian. In Galatians 5:24, for example, Paul writes about “the flesh with its passions and desires,” linking the concept of *pathéma* to the internal struggles and desires that believers must crucify in their pursuit of holiness. *Pathéma* refers to the passions and emotions that must be subdued in the Christian life, highlighting the internal aspect of suffering.

In Colossians 1:24, Paul offers another perspective: “I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake.” This verse presents *pathéma* as “suffering” that can be embraced with joy, especially when it is endured for the sake of others and for the gospel’s advancement. Paul’s willingness to suffer on behalf of the Church reflects a deep understanding of the redemptive value of suffering—a theme that resonates with Peter’s message in his first epistle.

Finally, in 1 Peter 4:13, the Apostle directly connects the concept of *pathéma* to the sufferings of Christ: “that you share the sufferings of Christ.” Here, suffering is not merely a consequence of following Christ but is portrayed as a means of participation in His own sufferings. Peter encourages believers to see their trials as a way to identify with Christ more deeply, sharing His pain and glory.

Expect Suffering and Trials (4:12)

I Peter 4:12 reads, “Beloved, *do not be surprised* at the fiery ordeal among you, which comes upon you for your testing, as though some strange thing were happening to you” (emphasis mine). Peter’s use of “do not be surprised” urges his readers not to see suffering as strange or a sort of anomaly in the Christian life—but to understand the presence of pain and suffering as occurring under the watchful eye of God (Sproul 2019, 148). Indeed, Christians are to expect trials and tribulation. Peter uses the expression “fiery ordeal.” The historical significance of the burning of Rome helps us understand the context of persecution that believers from Asia Minor faced. Believers experienced trials and persecution in the first century. Christians were challenged to overcome trials and trust in the Lord amidst difficult times.

The “fiery ordeal” mentioned in 4:12 reflects the refining fire described in 1:7, and this theme reappears in 4:17-18. The idea of rejoicing during trials in 4:13, with a view toward the ultimate fulfillment of joy, picks up the same theme from 1:6-7 (Jobes 2005, 282-283).

Peter had experienced a paradigm shift regarding his perspective on suffering and trials. He once told Jesus to avoid suffering on the Cross (Matthew 16:21-23; Mark 8:32-33; Luke 9:21-22). Now, he realized that suffering is part of the life of every believer. He told the believers, “Do not be surprised” or consider “strange” if one experiences trials and difficulties. Peter reassures the believers that persecution is not something “strange” or “foreign” to their existence as Christians.

What is happening is exactly what Christ foretold (Matt. 5:11-12; 10:34; Mark 13:9-13; John 15:18-20) (Davids 1990, 164).

Rejoice Amid Suffering and Trials (4:13a)

“But to the degree that you share the *sufferings of Christ*, keep on rejoicing, so that also at the revelation of His glory you may rejoice with exultation” (4:13, emphasis mine).

The contrasting conjunction “but” introduces an appropriate Christian response to suffering. “To the degree” or “to the extent” implies a measure. Those who have suffered more for the sake of the gospel and Christ will rejoice all the more at his glorious coming. Believers are called to partake in the sufferings of Christ. Jamieson et al. suggest that “we [who] are partakers of Christ's sufferings by faith enter into realizing fellowship with them; willingly for His sake suffering as He suffered. with exceeding joy—Greek, ‘exulting joy’; now ye rejoice amidst sufferings; then ye shall exult, forever free from sufferings (1 Pe 1:6, 8). If we will not bear suffering for Christ now, we must bear eternal sufferings hereafter” (Jamieson et al. 1997, p. 511).

Only in Christ Jesus can believers rejoice continuously regardless of the circumstances. The Apostle Peter highlights the importance of “keep on rejoicing.” Napuku states that “Peter’s idea of rejoicing in suffering to share in the glory of Christ seems to draw from a Jewish worldview (Dan 7:20–23; Joel 2:2, and Rev 2:10). The future consummation of triumph and glory for Christians, just as Christ triumphed and was glorified, inspires reason for rejoicing in suffering” (Napuku 2022, 145). As believers, we can be assured that God is glorified through our trials and suffering. Jesus overcame all our suffering and pain on the Cross. If we suffer with Jesus, we will be glorified with him (Rom 8:17).

Believers “Share” the Sufferings of Christ (4:13b)

What a privilege for believers to be participants in the sufferings of Christ! Believers are refined and strengthened in the Lord:

The believer's life is incorporated into Christ's; Christian existence is life “in Christ” (3:16; 5:10, 14). Without any “mystical” elaboration, and without developing it in explicit Pauline terms, 1 Peter has accepted this Pauline understanding and vocabulary, including the vocabulary of participating in Christ's sufferings by virtue of being “in Christ” (cf. Rom 8:17; 2 Cor 1:5; 4:10; Phil 3:10; cf. 2 Tim 2:11-13; Heb 11:26; 13:13) (Boring 1999, 156; see also Penner 2004d and Wright 2011).

How can we as believers rejoice in the midst of suffering and trials?

Jesus has promised that he will be with us all the time. Because of what he has done for us on the Cross, we can have hope and strength in the midst of trials. Guzik explains that we can share the sufferings of Christ because he suffered first and understands our pain. “We can only partake of Jesus’ sufferings because He partook of our humanity and sufferings. He became a man and suffered so that our suffering would not be meaningless. It is good to share *anything* with Jesus, even His suffering” (Guzik 2018, 5). According to Barclay, “Persecution is a sharing in the sufferings of Jesus Christ. When people have to suffer for their Christianity, they are walking the way their Master walked and sharing the cross their Master carried” (Barclay 2003, 297).

The joy that comes from recognizing the sharing of suffering between Christ and believers is just a glimpse of the greater joy Christians will experience when Christ's glory is fully revealed (4:13), and their faith is finally vindicated (Jobes 2005, 166-167).

Rely on the Ministry of the Holy Spirit Amid Suffering (4:14)

The first epistle of Peter 4:14 states, "If you are *reviled* for the name of Christ [the Messiah], you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you" (emphasis mine).

When the Holy Spirit works in some individuals' lives to draw them to Christ by slowly breaking down their natural barriers, then God's glory is attractive to them (Baker et al. 2004, 157-158). Consider the words of the Apostle Paul in 2 Corinthians 2:15-16: "For we are a fragrance of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing; to the one an aroma from death to death, to the other an aroma from life to life. And who is adequate for these things?"

Baker et al. propose that we "should realistically consider ourselves 'blessed' because the Spirit of glory and of God rests on us. Realism tells us, in other words, that this is the natural result of a phenomenon of glory and its effect on those that, at that moment, at least, are resistant to God." (Baker et al. 2004, 164).

The next section examines how believers of Muslim backgrounds live out 1 Peter 4:12-14.

1 Peter 4:12-14 and Muslim Background Believers

1 Peter 4:12-14 is relevant to believers of Muslim background because they face challenges like those experienced by first-century believers. Persecution has increased in recent decades in different regions in North Africa, the Middle East, and South and Central Asia. Amid the trials and persecution, Muslim background believers are persevering in their faith; they are willing to pay the price to follow Jesus. Muslim background believers in different contexts are an inspiring example for believers in general.

There are several similarities between first-century believers and MBBs. Early Christians experienced pressure and persecution from the authorities, families, and the local community. Believers met at house churches, and their faith was strengthened by prayer, worship, and teaching of the Scriptures. Today's believers have only partial access to the Word of God. That is why we need to continue praying for the translation of the Bible in different dialects and languages so that every people group can have access to the Word of God in their own language. Many believers were murdered for being Christians. In the last decades, there has been an increase in violence and kidnapping, and many Christians have been incarcerated for the sake of the Gospel.

To What Extent Are Muslim Background Believers Living Out 1 Peter 4:12-14?

Here are some of the ways Muslim background believers demonstrate living out 1 Peter 4:12-14:

1 Peter 4:12

"Beloved, *do not be surprised* at the fiery ordeal among you, which comes upon you for your testing, as though some strange thing were happening to you" (4:12, emphasis mine).

1. MBBs expect suffering as part of their obedience to Christ by focusing on prayer, intercession, and facing the realities of spiritual warfare.

The power of prayer and intercession. Believers from Muslim backgrounds pray daily because they constantly deal with the consequences of spiritual warfare. They highly value the intercession of other believers on their behalf. They do not ask for persecution to stop or disappear; instead, they ask for boldness and perseverance in their faith and new opportunities to share the gospel with others without Christ. They do not complain about their sufferings and challenges. Instead, MBBs ask for endurance and perseverance amongst persecution. *Ali* shared with me the fact that “in their community of Muslim background believers, they are also interceding for believers in other contexts because they understand the cost of persecution and suffering.” (These are stories from several believers from Muslim backgrounds from North Africa. I have used pseudonyms for confidentiality).

The reality of spiritual warfare. MBBs constantly face the realities of spiritual warfare as they exercise their faith in their communities. Persecuted believers become wiser in dealing with the attacks from the enemy. They start to think and then act because every action might be costly (Ephesians 6:10-20; 1 Peter 5:8-9).

“When we think about the Great Commission and Global Mission (Matthew 28:18-20), we see the clash of two kingdoms, the kingdom of light and the kingdom of darkness (John 1:5; 2 Corinthians 4:6). There are still 42% of people groups in different contexts that need to have access to the gospel, and the enemy is actively working to prevent it. The spiritual resistance is real” (Cashin & Cuartas 2023, 25-26).

The following story reflects the power of prayer and intercession:

One night, around two o'clock in the morning, *Baballah* was confronted. Two armed men forcefully pushed their way inside his home and tried to enter the room where he and a friend were praying. The gunmen shouted before opening fire through the closed door.

Baballah prayed earnestly for safety and rescue. “I was praying seriously to God, lifting my hands and pointing to the door where the armed men were forcefully pushing,” he recalled. God answered. “After opening my eyes, the armed men were nowhere to be found. I felt that God answered my prayer and did a miracle.” It was the first time in his life that *Baballah* felt the power of prayer in the name of Jesus Christ. (*Global Christian Relief* 2023a).

1 Peter 4:13a

“But to the degree that you share the *sufferings of Christ...*” (emphasis mine).

2. MBBs walk boldly and confidently, experiencing God in powerful ways as they share Christ's sufferings.

Muslim background believers are bold in sharing their faith and are willing to follow Jesus regardless of persecution. Followers of Christ have the confidence to share the gospel with friends, neighbors, relatives, and authorities amidst persecution and trials. Some of them are already tired of hiding their faith in Christ. There is a very strong commitment to Christ. From the beginning of their conversion to Christ, new believers are challenged to follow Christ regardless of the social, economic, and religious consequences. The story of Hamid clearly illustrates the importance of sharing Christ even with our enemies. “As a member of Pakistan's tiny Christian minority, Hamid

was treated poorly by Muslims in his community. By God's grace, however, today Hamid loves and shares Christ with his persecutors (The Voice of the Martyrs 2021).

The testimonies of believers who live in Christian minority countries express the faithfulness of God and the strength to walk daily with a sense of hope (Romans 8:24; 12:12).

Perseverance and endurance during trials allow them to grow spiritually and encourage believers in other ministry contexts. "Adversity can become our best friend if we are willing to grow and learn in the process" (Cuartas 2009, 71-72).

The following is a testimony of a female believer from a Muslim background who experienced difficult challenges with the community leaders and her own husband, but despite the trials, she remained faithful in Christ. *Shamai*, suffered great persecution. The Imam gathered several local residents and demanded that she renounce her faith in Jesus. The sister's husband was frightened and demanded she renounce her faith in Christ. He threatened and beat his daughter. *Shamai* chose to remain faithful to Christ amid these challenges. Together with four children, she moved to another city. (One of our leaders shared the story via email on August 30, 2024).

1 Peter 4:13b

"Keep on rejoicing, so that also at the revelation of His glory you may rejoice with exultation" (emphases mine).

3. MBBs rejoice in God's promises and recognize the importance of studying the Word of God.

High value on the Word of God. MBBs treasure the opportunity to read and study the Word of God in their own language and dialects (Matthew 24:35; Hebrews 4:12). In most of these communities, the new believers are encouraged to spend time with the Word of God and memorize key Scriptures to share them with others without access to the Bible. The importance and power of the Word of God is illustrated in the following story:

Sadou from Burkina Faso was raised from childhood to make and sell Islamic charms. One day, he read a Christian brochure in his native Fulani language and asked a Christian for a Bible. "I was so curious as a Muslim," he said. "What is this faith? And as I read it, I realized that Jesus is pure." He eventually came to faith in Christ. A Muslim offered him \$6,000 to return to Islam, but Sadou refused. He now attends a school designed to help Fulani Christians grow in their faith (The Voice of the Martyrs 2024b).

1 Peter 4:14

"If you are reviled for the name of Christ [the Messiah], you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you (emphases mine)."

4. MBBs experience different kinds of rejection but rely on the Holy Spirit.

Daily dependence on the Holy Spirit. Due to the constant persecution and pressure at different levels, MBBs acknowledge the need for daily dependence and direction from the Holy Spirit (Acts 4:31; 1 Peter 1:10-12). Some of the followers of Christ are often dealing with their persecutors.

This story shows us the importance of the Holy Spirit in the life of the believers:

Michel grew up in a Muslim family in Burkina Faso, never having heard about the Christian God. But when his father became greatly sick, his family was willing to try anything to have him cured. They heard that if a Christian pastor prayed for him, he'd be healed. So, one Sunday, they went to church. During the service, the pastor preached about sin and how everyone is a sinner—that Jesus is the only One who can save from sin. Pastor Michel says, “The Holy Spirit convicted me, and I decided to give my life to Jesus.” Days after Pastor Michel accepted Christ into his heart, his father was completely healed (*Global Christian Relief*, 2024a).

Concluding Remarks

This article has examined the motif of “suffering” in Peter's first letter, focusing on 1 Peter 4:12-14. Several missiological lessons regarding suffering amid challenges can be applied to global missions. The article also examined how Muslim background believers live out 1 Peter 4:12-14.

These three verses in I Peter are appropriate to MBBs because they experience challenges like those experienced by first-century believers. Amid trials and persecution, MBBs are persevering in their faith; they are willing to pay the price to follow Jesus. To overcome persecution and trials, MBBs emphasize the importance of prayer, memorizing the Scriptures, and depending daily on the ministry of the Holy Spirit.

MBBs are a great example for Christians around the world. The following encouraging words of John Wesley are appropriate for concluding this study: “If we suffer persecution and affliction in a right manner, we attain a larger measure of conformity to Christ, by a due improvement of one of these occasions, than we could have done merely by imitating his mercy, in abundance of good works” (Emory 1853, 525).

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