

Expect and Train for Persecution

BY C. ANDERSON

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“2021 was a demanding year. I can’t anticipate what 2022 will bring, but of one thing I’m certain: **God will be with us in whatever comes our way.**” These words slipped across my lips this morning as I sat around our kitchen table drinking a steaming cup of coffee with a friend who had come by for an unexpected chat.

The past two years were filled with transitions and uncertainty. It makes it hard to look forward to the new year with a typical goal-setting model. It’s more difficult than before to project what the year may bring. The past two years make us cautious about planning too far in advance, especially if your ministry normally involves international travel.

Yet, as I reflect and consider, I see that the past two years have been some of the most fruitful years ever.

Despite the pandemic, through online Disciple Making Movement training, I’ve impacted people in countries where I’d previously had little to no influence. For those who pressed forward amid the virus situation, many would say the same. God’s kingdom has been growing and expanding. New movements have been catalyzed. Our Lord was not hindered by what happened in our world. He has used it to advance and grow His kingdom in unusual, new ways.

The theme of this issue is Essential Elements for Catalyzing Movements. As I pondered that theme, together with the beginning of a New Year, a particular practice came to mind. It’s one we don’t often consider and don’t particularly like to talk about.

This practice has to do with training disciples to expect persecution. They must be prepared to expect it, endure it, and grow through it. Those who prepare people for persecution are not surprised by it. Instead, they face it boldly and with biblical understanding.

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Preparation for Hardship Starts Early

Preparing people for persecution starts before they become Jesus followers. This has to do with how we present the gospel. Some people share Christ this way: “Become a Christian. You will have joy and peace. All the difficult things in your life will become easy.” On a visit to Africa this past year I trained a group of disciple-makers to share their three-minute testimony. In their first attempts, it often went like this. “Before Jesus my life was hard. After Jesus my life is easy.” This is not the gospel. It is not even true!

We need to be genuine about the cost of following Christ. Our presentation is not a “bait and switch.” We are not to “market the gospel.” Instead, we call people to embrace the truth of Christ’s message and to repent, to a complete change of mindset and lifestyle. This is far more attractive than a gimmicky, freebie Christianity.

We must lead people to embrace the only path that leads to God, though hard and costly. We share the message that Jesus and His kingdom are like the pearl of great price, worth giving up everything to find. That is the gospel message of Jesus (Matt. 13:45-46).



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The cause of Christ is worth dying for. His truth is worth selling all we have in order to gain. This must be our message and what our lives also demonstrate.

Share New Testament Stories and Scriptures About Persecution

As we study the movements of Jesus and Paul in the New Testament they are full of instances of persecution. This is an easily observed pattern found in the book of Acts.



Persecution → Growth → Persecution → Growth. The church grew, and it was persecuted. Likely, the more the movements we start grow, the more we will be persecuted. The converse can also be true. The more we are persecuted, the more we grow.

Why not create a story set with New Testament stories of persecution? Include Discovery studies on what Jesus said about persecution as well. Jesus promised persecution would come. Study those passages with those you are training as disciples. Here is a sample of verses and stories you could use, or you may want to create your own.

- Acts 4:1-4
- 2 Timothy 3:11-12
- Acts 7:51-56
- John 15:19-20
- Acts 8:1-4
- Matthew 5:10-12

Movements that grow rapidly will encounter seasons of great persecution. It is normal if the movement grows exponentially. Training every disciple to understand that this persecution is expected, from the beginning, is biblical.

Share Current Examples of Persecution

Let me share the story of one of our online DMM course trainees. There are many stories you can find from Voice of the Martyr's website or magazines as well. As you share these kinds of stories with those you are training, they will not only pray for those who are persecuted but begin to see it as an honor to be considered worthy to suffer for Christ's sake.

A few months ago, we had just begun the beta run of our next-level Disciple Making Movements online course. The new course is called, "Moving Forward in Disciple Making Movements." It is a follow-up to the Getting Started in Disciple Making Movements course (find out more at courses.disciplemakersincrease.org). In 2021, this was my "one thing." It was the one task I knew God was calling me to complete this past year.



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When working with my team to create the curriculum, we knew we must include a module on both suffering and persecution. This isn't what we usually lead with when casting vision for DMMs! It's important, though, that anyone truly pursuing a movement, understands that suffering and persecution are part of the package.

When we recorded the videos for the module, as a Westerner who has only faced limited or indirect forms of persecution, I knew we needed to include a guest video. I asked my friend from Bangladesh

who lost his inheritance, family property and was excommunicated from his village to share something for us to include.

What I didn't know was that just a week after we started the cohort, one of our students would be arrested. This brother works in a Southeast Asian country where Christian activities and proselytizing are prohibited by law. He and his wife were arrested together. As they were taking him to prison, he managed to send a quick Whatsapp message to our group. "Please pray! We are being arrested."



The group of trainees from Australia, India, Angola, Kenya and Nigeria began to do just that. Immediately, others posted on the group assuring him of their fervent prayers. Scriptures were sent to encourage and prayer was mobilized internationally. After some days, the word came that they had been released but may be asked to leave their locality and perhaps the country. The trainee in my course is an ex-pat while his wife was a local.

Again, our community prayed and stood with them. A legal case was brought against this brother and his wife. Again, we prayed. Others around the globe interceded for them as well.

In the midst of this, the team's determination to obey Jesus' commands was strengthened. They continued to boldly share Jesus, realizing more than ever the cost involved in doing this. Finding a Person of Peace, they prepared to baptize her. The trainee again asked the WhatsApp group for prayer. "Please pray for the upcoming baptism. We realize that if we are caught, our punishment will be far greater than it was before."

Finally, joyous news was posted on our group. The case has been dropped! "We are free to stay here

with no restrictions, at least for the coming months.” Praise God! He had answered prayer. They then went on to share about the upcoming Christmas gathering. They planned to share a Creation to Christ presentation to 40 people.

It was just at this time that we came to that module in the course—the one on persecution. This is what he wrote to the group as he reflected on the material presented. “I needed this lesson. Thank you! The verses below tell me that suffering for Jesus’ name is a blessing, an honor and a privilege to rejoice. “They left the council *rejoicing* because they had been *considered worthy* to suffer dishonor for the sake of the Name. And every day both in the temple courts and from house to house, they did not stop teaching and proclaiming the good news that Jesus was the Christ.” [emphasis mine] (Acts 5:41–42).

Glory be to God for all He has taught this trainee. May we all learn and be inspired by his words and attitude.

Pray for Others Who Are Persecuted

Another key practice that can help prepare disciple-makers for persecution is to pray for the persecuted church around the world. In the movements we begin, we need to be outward-focused from the very beginning. We also want to help new believers see that they are part of a large, global family we call the Church (capital C). When some in that body suffer, we join with their suffering and we pray and give. This is the New Testament model.

As we pray for them in their troubles, we do not pray with pity. We do not ask God to remove them from their troubles, but to give them the courage to stand firm in the midst of them. We pray for boldness to continue to proclaim the name of Jesus. In Ephesians 6:20, Paul penned these words while in chains for the gospel, “Pray that I may declare it fearlessly, as I should.” He wanted prayer, not for deliverance but boldness. When we pray in this way for those being persecuted, we too are strengthened for the time it may come our way.

Persecution is not something we desire. It is something we are promised. When trouble comes, Jesus tells us not to be afraid. He said, “In this world, you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world” (John 16:33).

In summary, how do we train disciples to both expect and prepare for persecution?

- 1) We adjust our evangelism and invitation model.
- 2) We share New Testament stories and Scriptures about persecution in our discipleship process.
- 3) We tell current stories of persecution.
- 4) We train disciples to pray for the persecuted Church around the world.

How many of these are you currently doing?

Discuss these four points with your team or leadership group. Take a step forward to begin this best practice as a normal part of training and multiplying disciples.

Persecution is not something we desire. It is something we are promised. When trouble comes, Jesus tells us not to be afraid. He said, “In this world, you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world” (John 16:33). May our love, loyalty and worship flow to the One who overcomes. Nothing we go through can ever be greater than what He has already accomplished for us. He is worthy. May we also be counted worthy when called upon to suffer for His name. ❏