



# PREPARE TO STAND

Guidance for Christians  
In Times of Persecution

## Study Guide

By Brad Strait

Based on the Video Series

By Andrew Brunson

## AUTHOR'S INTRODUCTION

The *Prepare to Stand Video Series* has been created to help Christians prepare for difficulties which we believe lie ahead of us. History reveals that over the centuries, persecution has been a normal part of most Christian lives. Since Jesus was executed, his followers around the world have often suffered deeply for their beliefs. We are concerned that persecution for Christians is increasing in the world, and our focus is on preparing the hearts of Christians to be faithful to the end.



*Prepare to Stand* is simply a tool for Jesus' Church. In each 15–20-minute video, Pastor Andrew Brunson adds practical insights from his time of suffering for his faith in a Turkish prison, and from his life as a pastor in a non-Christian world. The videos are full of Andrew's no-nonsense answers for enduring adversities and persecution, learned the hard way. The videos are designed to be used on their own or with this *Study Guide*, as best fits each person or group. More about Andrew and his wife, Norine, can be found at [wavestarters.org](http://wavestarters.org).

This *Study Guide* pairs with each of Andrew's videos. After watching the video session, the guide opens biblical passages, powerful quotes, and current events to help us remember the main points and then go deeper. In creating this *Study Guide*, I have sought to reinforce Andrew's message, while adding new insights, teaching helps, questions for reflection, and action points.

Please use the resources as you like. In the *Study Guide*, Bible verses are offered in italics. Quotes are set apart for reflection. A right margin has been allowed for notes, should you desire. My hope is that pastors, church leadership, and individuals use the *Prepare to Stand Videos and Study Guide*—all free of charge—in their training and teaching. You are welcome to share them freely with others. Download them all at [epc.org/preparetostand](http://epc.org/preparetostand) and/or [frc.org/preparetostand](http://frc.org/preparetostand).

This Video Series and Study Guide could easily become:

- a leadership training class
- a personal Bible Study devotional
- a pastoral resource for a sermon series
- an eight-week small group study
- a class curriculum
- a youth group or family retreat



From my heart, I seek to be far more pastoral than prophetic in this series. I believe God has specifically called me to this project. Personally, I am wired as both a pastor and a Bible teacher. I am most happy in a pulpit, a Seminary classroom, or a waiting room—holding a hand and praying. The bottom line is that I am compelled to try to safeguard those whom Jesus loves. Honestly, I am neither fearful nor pessimistic about our ultimate future as Christians. This is because I trust Jesus with the future of his Church, and because I strongly believe his promises of endurance given to faithful Christians. God remains in charge. Jesus is alive and at work.

Even so, Andrew and I cannot turn our backs on the spiritual tsunami see rolling toward us. We feel strongly as leaders that God desires his people to heed the signs around them. We remember that Jesus was impatient with the religious leaders in his day, "*You know how to interpret the appearance of the sky, but you cannot interpret the signs of the times*" (Matt. 16:2-3). Jesus wants us all to open our spiritual eyes so that we can develop an outlook of readiness for the hardships which are nearing us. Our call is clear: "*so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand.*" (Eph. 6:13).

We pray that ***Prepare to Stand*** will help prepare those whom we love to endure the oncoming storm. With the amazing support from Samaritan's Purse, the Billy Graham Association, Family Research Council, and the Evangelical Presbyterian Church, we hope that this project reaches many people. We are grateful for all those who have come alongside us in this journey. *Soli Deo Gloria*.

Serving a Living Jesus with You, *Brad Strait*

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#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Rev. Dr. Brad Strait** is Lead Pastor at Cherry Creek Presbyterian Church in Englewood, Colorado, and the national Moderator of the Evangelical Presbyterian Church. He is a friend and prayer partner of Andrew and Norine Brunson. Brad holds advanced degrees in business, pastoral counseling, and theology. For over 30 years, Brad has taught classes in Leadership, Spiritual Formation, and Counseling at Denver Seminary, and he is a co-author of *Leadership Training Guide* (EPC Press, 2007, 2014, 2019).



Brad has travelled the world serving, teaching, and exhorting people toward a deeper relationship with the incarnational Jesus. He has worked with the poorest-of-the-poor from Delhi to Bangkok, from Juarez to Ethiopia. From marble halls to thatched roofs to garbage-dump villages, Brad has sought to share his passion for tangible love, joyous prayer, missional living, and world Christianity. Brad has been married to his wife, Cathy, for 41 years, and has three grown daughters, several imported sons-in-law, and a gaggle of grandchildren. You can learn more about Brad from his blog, [BradStrait.com](http://BradStrait.com).

## SESSION 1: RECOGNIZING THE DANGER

### WARNING SIGNS

Life is full of warnings, whether in the form of announcements or symbols. A yellow light. A flashing “Railroad Crossing.” A voice, “The doors are closing.” A bright sign, “This Lane Ends.” “Bridge Out Ahead.” A few years ago, I had a calcium heart scan. It became a warning—change your cholesterol numbers, Brad. I often will pull a Seminary student aside for a soft warning, “You know you dropped the ball on the last assignment. But we both know you can do better on the final paper. It’s due in three weeks; work on it.”

We need warnings. It is human nature to avoid or minimize unwelcome news. Pain is something we tend to avoid. Therefore, warnings that pain, conflict, judgment, or struggles are coming are often ignored. In the Old Testament, the Israelites almost always disregarded the messages the Lord sent to warn them. And they suffered significant consequences for it.

Still, as truth seekers and biblical leaders, we cannot avoid unpleasant truths. We see Andrew Brunson’s persecution in Turkey and think that this could never occur here in America. But are we right? We are called to ask honest questions, including: **“Will significant persecution come to those who follow Jesus?”** With a spiritual urgency, we believe the answer is clearly “yes.” Let’s begin looking at some apparent reasons why.

### A. HISTORICALLY, PERSECUTION HAS ALWAYS COME.

Except for rare seasons of peace, the history books show that followers of Jesus are always persecuted. From its founding, persecution has been associated with Christianity. Stephen models that within a few years of Jesus’ death, Christians were killed for their faith. All but one of the Apostles was executed. The world sent persecutions from Nero (AD 67), Domitian (81), Trajan (108), and a host of sequential Roman emperors. Beginning in the seventh century, Islamic leaders, the Ottomans, and the Arab-Caliphate persecuted the Church. In the late 1700s, the “Reign of Terror” following the French Revolution excised almost all Christian worship from France. Then followed much more modern persecution against Christians by Kangxi, Lenin, Stalin, Mao, Pol Pot, Hitler, and Franco. Today, we might add China’s Xi, North Korea’s Kim Jong-Un, and India’s BJP Party.

### Andrew’s Keys from Video 1

- SPIRITUAL URGENCY
- EXCLUSIVITY OF JESUS
- OBEDIENCE
- PREPARE TO STAND
- CHANGE OUR MINDSET
- THE LION IS WITH US

““They who wish to be exempt from persecutions must necessarily renounce Christ.”

■ John Calvin, 1550

“The Lord challenges us to suffer persecutions and to confess him. He wants those who belong to him to be brave and fearless. He himself shows how weakness of the flesh is overcome by courage of the spirit. This is the testimony of the apostles, and in particular of the representative administering Spirit. A Christian is fearless.”

■ Tertullian, c. 200

The Church's own authorities often attacked people of faith. John Wycliffe was burned in England with his commentaries on the Bible in 1384. In 1412, Joan of Arc was executed for "hearing directly from God in prayer," and in 1536 William Tyndale was executed for writing a modern language Bible. From 1621-1633, John Bunyan was imprisoned in England for preaching the gospel, and wrote much of *Pilgrim's Promise* in his cell. From inside and outside, persecution has come.

Persecution and Faith dance together, it seems. Hebrews reminds us about the life of faith: *"There were others who were tortured, refusing to be released so that they might gain an even better resurrection. Some faced jeers and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. They were put to death by stoning; they were sawed in two; they were killed by the sword. They went about in sheepskins and goatskins, destitute, persecuted and mistreated—the world was not worthy of them. They wandered in deserts and mountains, living in caves and in holes in the ground"* (Heb. 11:35-38).

## B. GLOBALLY, WIDESPREAD PERSECUTION IS OCCURRING NOW.

In unprecedented ways around the world, Christians are being jailed, beaten, or killed. In the west, after many years of a normative Judeo-Christian society, the world is quickly turning against people of the faith. In May 2019, the BBC News released a report titled *"Christian Persecution at Near Genocide Levels."* Under North Korea's *songbun* system, citizens are classified based on their perceived loyalty to the state. Christians belong to the "hostile" class, which limits their access to educational and employment opportunities, or sends them to reeducation camps. According to the US Commission on International Religious Freedom (2020 report), Christians in Burma, China, Eritrea, India, Iran, Nigeria, North Korea, Pakistan, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Syria, and Vietnam are persecuted.

"More than 70 million Christians have been martyred in the course of history. In the 21st century, roughly 100,000 to 160,000 Christians were killed *each year*; and about 1,093,000 Christians were martyred, worldwide, between 2000 and 2010."

■ The  
EstherProject.com

According to *Open Doors*, "Around the world, more than 340 million Christians live in places where they experience high levels of persecution, just for following Jesus. That's 1 in 8 believers, worldwide, and growing."

## C. IN THE WEST, WE ARE MOVING FROM A TIME OF A POST-CHRISTIAN SOCIETY TO AN ANTI-CHRISTIAN SOCIETY.

As the culture in the west, fueled by what Andrew defined as the "commanding heights of American culture"—the corporate world, big tech, art, media, entertainment, professional sports, schools and universities, and government bureaucracies—society has moved away from biblical values. Our Christian beliefs about God, faith, marriage, sexuality, and human life are

under increasing pressure. Christians are increasingly cast as narrowminded, intolerant, poisonous, or malicious. It is worthwhile to examine our society based on its treatment of Christians. A few years ago, the Catholic Church commissioned a study of practices used to attack any specialized, target group. This covered persecuted groups of all types from throughout history.

### The study identified five stages of persecution:

- 1) **Stereotyping of a target group so that they are seen as different than the norm.** This is applying an overly simplistic caricature of a group. People at this stage say, "All Christians are superstitious, hypocritical, self-righteous, repressed, and sexist."
- 2) **Vilifying the target group as harmful to others.** This makes bigotry permissible. We might hear, "Christians are against human dignity, in opposition to science, homophobic, and intolerant. Christianity is a negative force on the planet."
- 3) **Marginalizing the group's influence to the periphery of society.** The secularists comment, "Since Christians are harmful, faith (and Christmas trees) must be kept in private, and excluded from education, workplaces, social media, and political dialogue."
- 4) **Criminalizing the target group or their practices.** This includes litigation, legal injunctions, and rulings limiting religious freedom: "If you—a Christian—refuse to bake a cake/do a wedding for religious conscience reasons, we will punish or compel you."
- 5) **Persecuting the targeted group outright.** The group is a danger so it must be stopped. This includes fines, restrictions, incarcerations, or killings. Those in power believe, "Christians must be removed from our society, shut down, and punished."

### HOW DID WE GET HERE?

"The loss of the Christian religion is why the West has been fragmenting for some time now, a process that is accelerating. How did it happen? There were five landmark events over seven centuries that rocked Western civilization and stripped it of its ancestral faith:

- In the fourteenth century, the loss of belief in the integral connection between God and Creation—or in philosophic terms, transcendent reality and material reality.
- The collapse of religious unity and religious authority in the Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century.
- The eighteenth-century Enlightenment, which displaced the Christian religion with the cult of Reason, privatized religious life, and inaugurated the age of democracy.
- The Industrial Revolution (ca. 1760–1840) and the growth of capitalism in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.
- The Sexual Revolution (1960–present)."

■ Rod Dreher,  
*The Benedict Option*

#### D. BIBLICALLY, WE ARE REPEATEDLY WARNED TO EXPECT PERSECUTION.

*"If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first. If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own. As it is, you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates you." (Jesus in John 15:18-19)*

*"The seed falling on rocky ground refers to someone who hears the word and at once receives it with joy. But since they have no root, they last only a short time. When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, they quickly fall away." (Jesus in Matt. 13:20-22)*

*"Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? As it is written: 'For your sake we face death all day long; we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered.' (Rom. 8:35-37)*

*"In fact, when we were with you, we kept telling you that we would be persecuted. And it turned out that way, as you well know." (1 Thes. 3:4-5)*

*"But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us. We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed." (2 Cor. 4:7-9)*

#### QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION OR REFLECTION

- 1) Looking at the five stages of persecution, above, where do you think we are now in America?
- 2) Jesus said clearly, "No one comes to the Father but through me." (John 14:6). How do you feel about this? Why is the exclusivity of Jesus so difficult for our culture?
- 3) Why is trusting the Lion of Judah, Jesus, so key in persecution?

#### ACTION STEPS

- ✓ Talk with a Christian you know about what they see changing in this world. Ask them, "Is persecution against Christians possible in America?" Share what you have learned about persecution.
- ✓ Begin to pray regularly, "Lord, prepare me to stand."
- ✓ Read *Live Not by Lies* by Rod Dreher.

#### FOR DEEPER STUDY OR TEACHING—MARK 13, JESUS GIVES A CLEAR WARNING

As disciples, how are we to respond to the promise/warning of persecution? In Mark 13:9-20, Jesus speaks to his disciples about the coming persecution. While some of this was fulfilled in AD 70 when the Romans destroyed Jerusalem, most scholars agree that Jesus is warning all of those who would follow him throughout the coming ages. Let's examine this warning in detail.

**Text** Mark 13:9-20

<sup>9</sup> **"You must be on your guard.**

***You will be handed over to the local councils and flogged in the synagogues. On account of me you will stand before governors and kings as witnesses to them. <sup>10</sup> And the gospel must first be preached to all nations. <sup>11</sup> Whenever you are arrested and brought to trial, do not worry beforehand about what to say. Just say whatever is given you at the time, for it is not you speaking, but the Holy Spirit.***

<sup>12</sup> ***"Brother will betray brother to death, and a father his child. Children will rebel against their parents and have them put to death.***

<sup>13</sup> ***Everyone will hate you because of me...***

***but the one who stands firm to the end will be saved...***

<sup>20</sup> ***If the Lord had not cut short those days, no one would survive. But for the sake of the elect, whom he has chosen, he has shortened them."***

Examination

Jesus issues a clear warning, and a command be on your guard. The Greek word, *blepete*, means emphatically, "Take heed!" or "Watch out!" or "Be ready!" It is a call to vigilance. He then explains why.

"You (all of you) will be handed over..." (Note that *you* is plural here). Governments and authorities will question our beliefs and then punish Christians for those beliefs. Note that this persecution is widespread, both from Jewish and Gentile sources, both local and national, "on account of me (Jesus)." The answer is that the Spirit will reveal God's message as needed.

This persecution is also personal. Families will betray each other, and even seek to have Christian family members executed.

As a whole, the society—"everyone"—will hate us. Because of our connection to Jesus.

Here "stands firm" translates the ancient Greek word *hupomeno*, which literally means to "remain under." When trials and persecution occur, we cannot compromise to find an escape. To be "saved" from this persecution, we must be ready to endure—"to the end."

Thankfully, God, rather than our own strength is our source of endurance. God must intervene to keep the Christian church from being exterminated on earth—"no one would survive." His watchful eye and care follow us, the elect, through all the coming days.



## SESSION 2: OVERCOMING FEAR

### UNDERSTANDING OUR FEARS

Fear is a common part of human life, and one of our most powerful emotions. Studies show that almost one third of all people struggle with significant anxiety or phobias. Only in recent years has neuroscience begun to understand the detailed physiology of emotional states such as fear.

Researchers have found that if people feel unsafe, they seldom think soundly or respond well. Fear makes people struggle to act correctly or make good decisions. At stressful moments—when we are lost, confused, attacked, or at risk—we often give into fear. Lawrence Gonzales, in *Deep Survival*, a study on why people survive or die in times of crisis, writes,

“During a fear reaction...the brain and body help to trigger a staggeringly complex sequence of events, all aimed at producing a behavior to promote survival: freezing in place, for example, followed by running away...Only efficient preparation can diminish this panic response.”

I remember telling my young daughters, “If you get lost, go hug a tree. Stay put. I will come find you.” This was to keep them from running deeper into the Colorado mountains in a panic. When we become disoriented or unsafe, we act poorly.

Our decisions become clouded, and we make bad choices. This is true for the people of God:

- The spies in Numbers 13 see “giants” in the Promised Land and convince the Israelites to disobey God. This running away leads to 40 years of judgment, wandering in the desert.
- King Saul and his troops are “quaking with fear” before battle, and when Samuel doesn’t appear, Saul defies the Lord and brings the offering himself. His poor choice in the face of fear eventually ends his Kingdom (1 Sam. 13).
- David flees King Saul to live with the Philistines. He begins to raid villages as if he were a Philistine. (1 Sam. 29-30). And later, afraid his adultery will be discovered at Bathsheba’s pregnancy, David orders her husband killed to cover his sin (2 Sam. 11).
- Peter, for fear of persecution, denies the Lord three times (John 18).

### Andrew’s Keys from Video 2

- DON’T ACT OUT OF FEAR
- A HEALTHY FEAR OF GOD
- DEVELOP ETERNAL EYES
- A DESIRE FOR HEAVEN

“People will quite simply ignore the possibility that a particular disaster will ever strike them. Some people subconsciously believe that to prepare for disaster is to encourage it. ‘Don’t even think about it’—for fear that it may come to pass...But to experience humility is the true survivor’s correct response to catastrophe. A survival emergency is a Rorschach test. It will quickly tell you who you are.”

■ Lawrence Gonzales,  
*Deep Survival*

### HOW DO WE OVERCOME FEAR?

**First, we slow our rising panic.** We breathe deeply and choose to turn away from the problem for a moment. We hug a tree. Spiritually, we seek the unchanging Lord. 2 Timothy 1:7 reminds us: “For

God did not give us a Spirit of fear but of power and love and self-control." God reframes our earthly fear with his presence: "So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God" (Isa. 41:10). If we are ready for difficulties, we panic far less.

**Secondly, we cry out to the Holy One who is listening.** "Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you" (1 Pet. 5:7). Psalm 34:4 is clear, "I sought the Lord, and he answered me; he delivered me from all my fears." We decide to trust God. We remember that God loves us with a faithful, unending love, and so we can turn to him.

**Thirdly, we act in a healthy "fear" of the Lord.** Let me explain how the Bible uses the word "fear" in two ways. The first way speaks of emotional anxiety and panic, as above. We are told to resist this kind of negative, emotional fear. But there is another Bible use of the word "fear." We see this mentioned in Psalm 111:10, "**The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom; all who follow his precepts have good understanding.**" In the original Hebrew, this fear more closely denotes "awe-filled reverence" when it speaks of our relationship to God. It pictures a subject falling before an almighty yet good king in devotion. The Complete Word Study Dictionary notes that this kind of **fear** of the Lord is a positive quality:

This fear acknowledges God's good intentions (Ex. 20:20). It will motivate and delight even the Messiah (Isa. 11:2,3). This fear is produced by God's Word (Ps. 119:38; Prov. 2:5) and makes a person receptive to wisdom and knowledge (Prov. 1:7; 9:10). It is even identified with wisdom (Job 28:28; Prov. 15:33). This fear restrains people from sin (Gen. 20:11; Ex. 20:20; Neh. 5:9); gives confidence (Job 4:6; Prov. 14:26); helps rulers and causes judges to act justly (2 Sam. 23:3; 2 Chron. 19:9; Neh. 5:15); results in good sleep (Prov. 19:23); with humility, leads to riches, honor, and life (Prov. 22:4).

When we look realistically at our troublesome or fearful situation, when we suffer for our faith, we need to put our fear of God first. The Lord asks his people, "*Oh, that their hearts would be inclined to **fear** me and keep all my commands always, so that it might go well with them and their children forever!*" (Deut. 5:29). And in Joshua 24:14, we read, "Now **fear** the Lord and serve him with all faithfulness." We see this again in Isaiah 8:13, "*The Lord Almighty is the one you are to regard as holy, he is the one you are to **fear**.*"

We fear (with awe-filled reverence) him as the Holy One and the Just Judge. Cleverly, Jesus uses the word fear both negatively and positively to make his point in Matthew 10:28-31,

*"Do not **fear** (negative emotion) those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, **fear** (positive reverence) the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell. Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground outside your Father's care. And even the very hairs of your head are all numbered. So do not **fear** (negative emotion); you are worth more than many sparrows."* (emphasis added).

**The bottom line is this: God calls us to stop being overwhelmed by fear, and to fear (reverence) him.**

This is especially true when the society we live in seems against us. In Ezra 3:3 we see this modeled as the Israelites move back to faith in God, "*Despite their **fear** of the peoples around them, they built the altar on its foundation and sacrificed burnt offerings on it to the Lord, both the morning and evening sacrifices.*"

### We are to fear God and trust him.

It is a high call, and a difficult place to stand firmly on when the battle is joined. In our next session, we will look more at the spiritual battlelines.

#### QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION OR REFLECTION

- 1) What are the things that we, as westerners, fear?
- 2) How about you personally? What causes you anxiety?
- 3) How does awareness or warning of pain and persecution help us avoid panic?
- 4) Andrew challenges us to have *an eternal perspective*. Practically, what does that look like for you?

#### ACTION STEPS

- ✓ Write down some things you are afraid of in the area of persecution (e.g., losing friends, being fired from work because of my faith, being imprisoned, being tortured, my children being persecuted). Now simply give each of them to the Lord, praying, "Lord, if this were to happen—you and I will get through it together. I will trust you no matter what." Cross the items out one-by-one and tear up your list of fears.
- ✓ Pray, "Father God, put the fear of you into my heart so that I do not turn away from you (Jer. 32.40). Strike my heart with revelation of Your majesty, that I might live in awe before You (Is 8.13). Unite my heart to Your heart and Word (Ps 86.11) and cause me to delight in the fear of God (Is 11.3)"
- ✓ Read *Heaven* by Randy Alcorn or *Imagine Heaven* by John Burke.

#### FOR DEEPER STUDY OR TEACHING—PSALM 84, A LONGING FOR HEAVEN

The Christian life here on earth is one of longing. Jesus understood this: "*Foxes have holes, birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head*" (Matt. 8:20). Why did Jesus not settle down? Because "*for the joy set before him, he endured the cross*" and then sat down at his Father's right hand in his presence (Heb. 12:2). He knew this world was not his home. He was seeking an eternal home in heaven.

"If we find ourselves with a desire that nothing in this world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is that we were made for another world."

■ C.S Lewis

As C.S. Lewis noted, we were made for another world. We read about Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (Heb. 11:9-10) living as strangers in tents in the “promised land”:

*By faith he made his home in the promised land like a stranger in a foreign country; he lived in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise. For he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God.*

Notice that even though God had brought them to the land of Israel, they hungered for another place. A “city” built by God himself. Even after the Temple was built in Jerusalem, the Israelites knew its glory was just a glimmer of something more ahead. Psalm 84 reflects this longing, this sense that this world is not our ultimate home. Let’s look at this passage in a deeper way.

**Text** Psalm 84:1-12

**1 How lovely is your dwelling place, Lord Almighty! 2 My soul yearns, even faints, for the courts of the Lord; my heart and my flesh cry out for the living God. 3 Even the sparrow has found a home, and the swallow a nest for herself, where she may have her young—a place near your altar, Lord Almighty, my King and my God. 4 Blessed are those who dwell in your house; they are ever praising you.**

**5 Blessed are those whose strength is in you, whose hearts are set on pilgrimage. 6 As they pass through the Valley of Baca, they make it a place of springs; the autumn rains also cover it with pools. 7 They go from strength to strength, till each appears before God in Zion.**

**8 Hear my prayer, Lord God Almighty; listen to me, God of Jacob. 9 Look on our shield, O God; look with favor on your anointed one. 10 Better is one day in your courts than a thousand elsewhere; I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God than dwell in the tents of the wicked. 11 For the Lord God is a sun and shield; the Lord bestows favor and honor; no good thing does he withhold from those whose walk is blameless. 12 Lord Almighty, blessed is the one who trusts in you.**

**Examination**

The word “lovely” means more than beautiful. It means *beloved*, or *lovable*. *God is love*, so his dwelling place embodies love. The psalmist’s hunger for God’s courts of love is tangible—their body faints, and their heart and flesh sing in yearning. Oh, how envious the psalmist is of the birds who have built a home there! Being with God in his place is a consuming desire. How amazing it will be when we, too, can dwell in God’s heaven with him, praising him forever.

The Jews were called by God to seek him, coming regularly to Jerusalem on pilgrimages. But it was a temporary stay, and not fully satisfying. Even so, the psalmist pronounces a blessing on those who seek God. *Baca* means weeping in Hebrew. It is a blessing on those who hunger enough that they walk even through dry valleys of weeping. Even desert places and times of persecution will one day be filled with springs and pools. Note that the destination, *before God*, is a person as well as a place.

This last section, v. 8-12, is a prayer to reach heaven. *Shield* and *anointed one* speak about Israel’s King, whom God had appointed to guard and prosper the people. We, too, have a King and an Anointed One, Jesus, who leads us on our journey to the amazing “courts of the Lord.” Here, in the heaven we long for, the shortest time (*one day*) and the lowest role (*a doorkeeper*) is a blessing. God withholds no good thing from those who seek to obey and trust as they walk this journey!



## SESSION 3: GUARDING AGAINST THE OFFENDED HEART

### RECOGNIZING THE ENEMY

One of my main jobs as a pastor is to protect the flock of Jesus. I've grown to dislike TV news. Of all kinds. When we watch the news, we often feel like our Christian belief system is being brutally attacked by all sorts of groups. We are tempted to name the enemies with titles from politics, government, or media. We can become troubled at all the foes we see.

Christians, we need to remember that people—no matter their positions—are not the real enemy. Jesus said many counter-cultural things. Perhaps the hardest is in Matthew 5:43-48. He teaches that no matter what others do, we are not to demonize "them." As children of the Father, we are to pray for those who persecute us, and to show grace and love to all.

The Bible comes at our struggle another way. It teaches us that we, as believers, are engaged in a spiritual battle, *"not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms"* (Eph. 6:12-13). Eugene Peterson's Message version says it this way: *"This is for keeps, a life-or-death fight to the finish against the Devil and all his angels."*

The Christian walk is a battle, whether we like it or not, because we have a very real enemy. In Revelation 12:17, we see behind the curtain to the spiritual battle. *"Then the dragon was enraged at the woman (the church) and went off to wage war against the rest of her offspring—those who keep God's commands and hold fast their testimony about Jesus."*

The Dragon is enraged. Why are we surprised at this truth? Notice that the target is focused on people who keep God's commands, and who hold on to their faith in Jesus. The western world—including what Andrew earlier called "the commanding heights of American culture"—is increasingly hostile to followers of Jesus, because Satan has polarized some key beliefs:

- We believe Jesus has the right to ask obedience in how we live.
- We believe in the exclusivity of faith in Jesus as a means of eternal salvation.

Satan hates these things. Our enemy's hope is that under persecution we will surrender our obedience or our faith, or both. Peter clearly understands this spiritual battle. He writes to his Christian friends and brothers, *"Be careful—watch out for attacks from Satan, your great enemy. He prowls around like a hungry, roaring lion, looking for some victim to tear apart"* (1 Pet. 5:8-9, TLB).

### Andrew's Keys from Video 3

- OFFENDED AT GOD
- OVERCOMING OFFENSE
- FIGHT FOR OUR RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD
- LOCK BOX
- TESTING
- LEAN INTO JESUS

"The first step on the way to victory is to recognize the enemy."

■ Corrie Ten Boom

## TAKING OFFENSE AT GOD

Satan's plan is to create such pressure on the church that God's people turn away from the Lord. Satan wants people to see God as the enemy. Alone in his Turkish cell, Andrew was enticed to doubt God. To be angry at him. To doubt his goodness. When we are vulnerable, we can feel like God has failed us, deserted us, cheated us, or cast us away from his care. In our minds, we hear an ice-covered voice: "A good God couldn't allow this. Why is he punishing you? After all you've given up for him, God didn't come through for you, did he?"

Does God really love us? The attacks, pains, and aloneness can overwhelm us, and we, too, can question his presence or his character. We can cry out with King David:

- *"My life is consumed by anguish and my years by groaning; my strength fails because of my affliction, and my bones grow weak...I am forgotten as a dead man, out of mind; I am like a broken vessel. For I have heard the slander of many, crying, "Terror is on every side!" (Ps. 31).*
- *"Look to the right and see; For there is no one who regards me; There is no escape for me; No one cares for my soul." (Psalm 142).*

Anger, fear, resentment, and bitterness can rise inside us until we become hardened like God's people of Israel:

- *"Didn't we say to you in Egypt, 'Leave us alone; let us serve the Egyptians'? It would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the desert!" (Ex. 14:12).*
- *"Our offenses are ever with us...rebellion and treachery against the Lord, turning our backs on our God" (Isa. 59:12-13).*
- *"How long, Lord, must I call for help, but you do not listen? Or cry out to you, 'Violence!' but you do not save? Why do you make me look at injustice? Why do you tolerate wrongdoing?" (Hab. 1:2-3)*

**Testing is a part of spiritual growth. As persecution comes our way, will today's believers turn their hearts against God?**

### LEARNING FROM NORTH KOREA

"North Korea remains one of the most oppressive regimes in the world and among the worst violators of human rights. The government tightly controls all political and religious expression and activities, and it punishes those who question the regime. Genuine freedom of religion or belief is non-existent. Individuals secretly engaging in religious activities are subject to arrest, torture, imprisonment, and sometimes execution. Pyongyang's abuses are *"without any parallel in the contemporary world."* Thousands of religious believers and their families are imprisoned in labor camps, including those forcibly repatriated from China."

■ United States  
Commission on  
Religious Freedom, 2015

A few years ago, I lost two of my best friends just months apart. Both left young families behind. I wrestled with God over his allowing this, and my heart was torn apart. Even as a Christian leader, it took time for me to return to a place of peace. Pain is part of breathing on earth. When it comes, will we blame God? Or will we make it without becoming offended at God? What about if our children and friends suffer? Who will we hold responsible?

These are sobering questions. Jesus, as always, is truthful to his followers:

*"At that time many will turn away from the faith and will betray and hate each other, and many false prophets will appear and deceive many people. Because of the increase of wickedness, the love of most will grow cold..."* (Matt. 24:10-12).

**Sadly, hearts can grow cold in the dark.**

## OVERCOMING OUR OFFENSE

How do we avoid becoming cold hearted? How do we fight being offended at God? There are lessons to be learned from the struggles of ancient Israel, and from David's pain. The first might be this:

**God—because of His faithful love—is leading us, even when the way seems too hard, and our faith seems too weak.**

In Exodus 13:17-18 we read, *"When Pharaoh let the people go, God did not lead them on the road through the Philistine country, though that was shorter. For God said, 'If they face war, they might change their minds and return to Egypt.' So, God led the people around by the desert road toward the Red Sea."*

Sometimes the Promised Land is only discovered after the harshest desert road. We should remember that we are never out of God's reach. It is his love which secures and leads us. Even after all the wrong choices the Israelites had made, and how far they had wandered away from God, the Lord remains faithful, *"The Lord replied, 'My presence will go with you, and I will give you rest.'"* (Ex. 33:14).

*"Pain insists upon being attended to. God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our consciences, but shouts in our pains. It is his megaphone to rouse a deaf world."*

■ C.S. Lewis

**We must resolve to stand in faith when the times are darkest. We must choose to trust God and not give up. We must remain faithful.**

For Andrew, Isaiah 50:10 spoke into the darkest places of his difficulties: *"Let the one who walks in the dark, who has no light, trust in the name of the Lord and lean on their God."*

On my desk is a petrified, ancient starfish, given to me by one of my friends before he died. It reminds me that pain tries to turn our hearts to stone. We must resist, and trust God. Each day I

choose to have a soft heart, instead of one of stone. God is looking for people who, through times of testing, will overcome offense and prove their devotion and allegiance to Jesus. We must choose to turn toward him, if only in the smallest degree. We must run toward the Lord. "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." (2 Cor. 12:9).

## LEANING INTO THE LORD

When it comes to persecution, there are no earthly certainties. It is in these ambiguous moments when need to cling to our faith and turn toward the Lord. The prophet Habakkuk, urged by the Spirit, writes a song of resolution amidst persecution. Even though the people of Judah are about to be marched away into captivity in Babylon, he sings an honest song to the Lord. This is despite the promised chains (spiritual and actual) which lie ahead for those he loves. Can you imagine his melody amid his tears of the coming judgment and pain?

"The only true conqueror who shall be crowned in the end is he who continues until war's trumpet is blown no more.... Christian, wear your shield close to your armor and cry earnestly to God, that by His Spirit you may endure to the end."

■ Alistair Begg

*I heard and my heart pounded, my lips quivered at the sound; decay crept into my bones, and my legs trembled. Yet I will wait patiently for the day of calamity to come on the nation invading us. Though the fig tree does not bud and there are no grapes on the vines, though the olive crop fails and the fields produce no food, though there are no sheep in the pen and no cattle in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the Lord, I will be joyful in God my Savior. The Sovereign Lord is my strength; he makes my feet like the feet of a deer, he enables me to tread on the heights. (Hab. 3:16-19).*

Habakkuk chooses to stand in the darkness. He locks his doubts away. He resists the urge to blame God for the weakness he feels or the despair swirling around him. He simply declares his faith: "The Sovereign Lord is my strength." This is turning toward the Lord. The persecution remains and will get much worse for the Israelites. But Habakkuk knows he must run toward the Lord.

As Andrew insightfully observes, "What you do in crisis will define your life." We do not know how, when, or if our testing will start or end. Yet like biblical leaders of old, we choose to trust the Lord.

**Our answer is to lean into Jesus, and to trust him.**

God is still leading us, even when we are on the desert road. He is never the enemy. He is holy and just, and, yes, there are consequences for sin. But God remains present with us and good, even if we cannot see it. We are his kids. His blood (through Christ) is in our veins. He is faithful. "If we are faithless, he remains faithful, for he cannot disown himself" (2 Timothy 2:13). **Our job is to seek his heart.** More on this in the next session.



## QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION OR REFLECTION

- 1) In what ways are temptation and persecution similar?
- 2) What does it look like to “lean into Jesus”?
- 3) Are there practical ways we can prepare our hearts to remain faithful?

## ACTION STEPS:

- ✓ Has your heart become wounded toward God? Has offense taken root because of disappointment? Deal with it now by releasing it. Pray, “Lord, I confess the offense toward you in my heart that formed when you didn’t come through for me in \_\_\_\_\_. I choose to release this.”
- ✓ Then imagine your own “lockbox.” Are you willing to give up your “right” to have answers? Pray, “God, I don’t need answers to have a relationship with you. I will no longer insist on getting the answers to my questions.”
- ✓ Finally, decide: I choose to lean into Jesus, even when I don’t understand.

## FOR DEEPER STUDY OR TEACHING—REMAINING FAITHFUL EVEN IN SUFFERING

David, in the suffering of difficulties, chooses to remain faithful to his God. Look again at his desperate cries—and **then at his conclusions to trust God despite the darkness (in bold)**. Just like Andrew, David has no certainty that he will be saved or delivered. But he knows—like Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego—that God is worth following no matter the conclusion. It is David’s declaration of faith.

- *“My life is consumed by anguish and my years by groaning; my strength fails because of my affliction, and my bones grow weak...I am forgotten as a dead man, out of mind; I am like a broken vessel. For I have heard the slander of many, crying, “Terror is on every side!” (Ps. 31:10, 12-13).*

“God is not just showing up after the trouble and cleaning it up. He is plotting the course and managing the troubles with far-reaching purposes for our good and for the glory of Jesus Christ.”

■ John Piper

***“But I trust in you, Lord; I say, “You are my God.” My times are in your hands; deliver me from the hands of my enemies, from those who pursue me. Let your face shine on your servant; save me in your unfailing love.” (Ps. 31:14-16)***

- *“Look to the right and see; For there is no one who regards me; There is no escape for me; no one cares for my soul.” (Ps. 142:4).*

***“I cry to you, Lord; I say, “You are my refuge, my portion in the land of the living.’ Listen to my cry, for I am in desperate need; rescue me from those who pursue me, for they are too strong***

***for me. Set me free from my prison, that I may praise your name. Then the righteous will gather about me because of your goodness to me.*** (Ps. 142:5-7).

Read the Bible and you know that King David is a sinful man who often struggles against God's will. He often vents his frustration at heaven. David knows his weakness ("*my strength fails,*" "*they are too strong for me*") and can feel overwhelmed ("*I am forgotten,*" "*no one cares,*" "*there is no escape.*")

But David remains a person who continues to seek the heart of God and chooses to trust him. Even in the dark. "*My times are in your hands,*" he cries. You see where I am and what I am suffering. His prayers look beyond the pain: "*Listen to my cry!*" "*Rescue me!*" "*Set me free!*"

David, in faith, leans into the Lord. He remembers God's "unfailing love." He believes there is light in the darkness ahead: "*Then the righteous will gather about me because of your goodness to me.*"

So do Habakkuk and the Old Testament prophets. They cling to God even when the world is against them.

James writes,

*Take the old prophets as your mentors. They put up with anything, went through everything, and never once quit, all the time honoring God. What a gift life is to those who stay the course! You've heard, of course, of Job's staying power, and you know how God brought it all together for him at the end. That's because God cares, cares right down to the last detail.* (James 5:10-11, The Message)

Paul, urged by the Spirit, writes,

*You then, my child, be strengthened by the grace that is in Christ Jesus, and what you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses entrust to faithful men, who will be able to teach others also. Share in suffering as a good soldier of Christ Jesus.* (2 Timothy 2:1-3)

"Whenever the Church has been thoroughly distinct from the world, she has always prospered. During the first three centuries the world hated the Church. The prison, the stake, the heels of the wild horse, these were thought too good for the followers of Christ. When a man became a Christian, he gave up father and mother, house and lands, nay, his own life also....

But then was the age of heroes; that was the time of giants. Never did the Church so much prosper and so truly thrive as when she was baptized in blood. The ship of the Church never sails so gloriously along as when the bloody spray of her martyrs falls upon her deck. We must suffer, and we must die, if we are ever to conquer this world for Christ."

■ Charles Spurgeon

## SESSION 4: PURSUING GOD'S HEART

### A RELATIONAL FAITH

If we look to the time before time, before the dawn of Genesis and creation—we will find deep, intimate relationship. It is the intimate relationship of the Trinity. Together they create the universe. Together they exhibit and embody love. In this love, Jesus came in obedience to his relationship with the Father and died to create an eternal relationship with us. He pursued relationships and was fueled by relationships. To guide and protect us, Jesus sends the Spirit, called the *paraklete* in Greek, meaning “the one who walks alongside.” God the Father-Son-Spirit is relational.

If we look ahead into eternity, we also find intimacy. Almost all the biblical images of heaven are relational and communal. Some are about shared living: heavenly beings moving to and from in a Holy City, a gathering place of paradise, a royal city called New Jerusalem, a “sitting down with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob,” a place where Jesus will receive all his people to himself, and the Father’s house with many rooms. Other scenes are about shared celebration: a wedding banquet, a wondrous gathering from each of the twelve Tribes of Israel, a reunion of those who have died before, a returning to a long-lost home, and an all-included choir concert extraordinaire.

**From start to finish, Christianity is a relational faith.**

We often crystalize our relational God with this truth: *“But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.”* (Rom. 5:8).

*“Christ died for us...”* Not for a theology or religious framework. Our loving God desires that people connect at a heart level to him in this life. The Father sent the Son to die to accomplish this. “For us.” God has sacrificially pursued his relationship with us. But have we pursued our relationship with him? Whether we recognize it or not, as beings made in the image of a Triune and relational God, humanity hungers to relate intimately to our Creator. Most of us simply do not know how to find this intimate fellowship with God, yet deep inside we aspire to experience him in a deeper way. Consciously or unconsciously, we are seeking the heart of God.

### Andrew’s Keys from Video 4

- LOVE FUELS ENDURANCE AND PERSEVERENCE
- DETERMINE TO LOVE GOD
- LOVE OVERCOMES OFFENSE
- SIMPLE DEVOTION
- LOVE IS MORE THAN EMOTION
- INTIMACY COMES WITH TESTING
- CAN GOD TRUST YOU?
- NURTURE LOVE FOR GOD
- BE INTENTIONAL

“It would be wrong to think that since communion with God is the supreme aim of man, it will be granted only at some later time...

No, here and now it must be our constant and unceasing state.”

■ Theophan the Recluse,  
1860

## PAUL PRAYS FOR HIS FRIENDS

In my Colorado garden shed, I pin a list of people to pray for. As I tend the plants and pull the weeds in the summer, I pray for people. Have you ever noticed how Paul prayed for those he loved? Looking at his prayers we see he keeps repeatedly asking for something. For what?

It is remarkable that, in all his writings, Paul's prayers for his friends never ask God for changes in their circumstances. Their world was full of dangers and hardships. They faced persecution, disease, oppression, separation from loved ones, and death. Yet in these prayers we see no petitions for better government leaders, for protection from war or crime, for safe children, or even for daily food. Paul does not pray for the things we would usually have near the top of our lists. Why not? Paul, led by the Spirit, has a higher goal when he prays. In Ephesians 1:17 he writes: *"I keep asking that . . . you may know him better."*

### He prays that they may have more intimacy with God.

Paul knows that unless their hearts are connected to God, their ability to grow and safeguard themselves and others will struggle. This goes right to the heart of Jesus' command, *"Seek first the kingdom of God, and everything else will be given to you as well."* (Matt. 6:33). The Message translates it this way, *"Steep your life in God-reality, God-initiative, God-provisions. Don't worry about missing out. You'll find all your everyday human concerns will be met."*

*"By praying in this way, Paul was assuming the priority of the inner life with God. Most contemporary people base their inner life on their outward circumstances. Their inner peace is based on other people's valuation of them, and on their social status, prosperity, and performance. Christians do this as much as anyone. Paul is teaching that, for believers, it should be the other way around. Otherwise, we will be whiplashed by how things are going in the world."*

■ Tim Keller

*"To have found God and still to pursue Him is the soul's paradox of love...Come near to the holy men and women of the past and you will soon feel the heat of their desire after God. They mourned for Him, they prayed and wrestled and sought for Him day and night, in season and out, and when they had found Him the finding was all the sweeter for the long seeking."*

■ A. W. Tozer

## HOW THE GOSPEL SPEAKS TO BECOMING MORE INTIMATE WITH GOD

Dr. Bruce Demarest wrote, "Many believers are left struggling with a serious question: How do we live in nourishing communion with an invisible and holy God who is, nonetheless, 'with us'?"



The starting point, simply, is the Gospel of Jesus. The basic premise of the Gospel is that God himself desires to be connected, and so removes the barriers which estrange humanity from him. In Christ, in the Holy Spirit, and in his Word, God explicitly communicates and connects himself to people. Marvelously, God is working to establish a universe where human beings live in community with him and with each other. William Barry, citing writings from John MacMurray, calls this, "God's one action for the universe."

### Because of love, God pursues intimacy with us.

Scripture is full of examples. For example, God spoke with Moses and showed Moses a small portion of his glory, transforming Moses' face to radiance. God sent an angel to speak to Manoah and revealed himself in the flame. God speaks in dreams to the pagan Abimelech (Gen. 20), Jacob at Bethel (Gen. 28), and both Joseph in Egypt and Joseph in Nazareth. God allows Isaiah to hear his voice and see his robe from the throne of the heavenly Temple and even sends an angel with a coal from the altar to touch him. Clearly, God is a God of self-revelation. In Jeremiah 9:23-24 this truth becomes clear: *"This is what the Lord says: 'Let not the wise man boast of his wisdom or the strong man boast of his strength or the rich man boast of his riches, but let him who boasts boast about this: that he understands and knows me...'"*(emphasis mine). In Isaiah 49:13-16, we find:

*Shout for joy, O heavens; rejoice, O earth; burst into song, O mountains! For the Lord comforts his people and will have compassion on his afflicted ones. But Zion said, "The Lord has forsaken me, the Lord has forgotten me." "Can a mother forget the baby at her breast and have no compassion on the child she has borne? Though she may forget, I will not forget you! See, I have engraved you on the palms of my hands; your walls are ever before me."*

Spiritual intimacy is a gift from God's heart. He is like a mother to his people. We are his treasured possession. *"You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession."* (Ex. 19:4-5).

### LEARNING FROM IRAQ

"Mohammed and his wife are from Mosul, the largest city in Northern Iraq under ISIS control. He was a Sunni Muslim when, about ten years before our meeting, he had a dream in which Jesus Christ came and spoke personally to him. When Mohammed woke up, he made the decision to follow Christ—the One who would come and speak personally to him. At first, Mohammed's wife was very upset that her devout Sunni husband would become an apostate, an infidel. How could he turn his back on the true faith? But, about three months later, she had the very same dream Mohammed had described to her. Jesus came and spoke to her, personally. When she woke up, she made the same decision her husband had: she, too, would follow Jesus... Having been saved by Christ, Mohammed began to tell others in their neighborhood in Mosul. Their house was burned down. The family fled Mosul, eventually coming to this camp near Irbil. Since their arrival, Mohammed and his family have led people from two other families to Christ."

■ Todd Nettleton, *When Faith is Forbidden*, 2021

Over 400 times in the Bible the Jewish name for the "I AM" God is paired into an intensified, relational Hebrew title, *Yahweh Elohim*, "*The Lord your God.*" This is used by God during the giving of the Ten Commandments (Ex. 20:2) and repeated over 30 times by Moses as he quotes God in the Law passages of Leviticus. Jesus uses the Greek form of this title many times, including in the Great Commandment of Matthew 22:37-39: "Jesus replied: 'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' This is the first and greatest commandment." The Lord defines himself as both personal and possessive.

2 Peter 1:3-4 (Message) declares, "*Everything that goes into a life of pleasing God has been miraculously given to us by getting to know, personally and intimately, the One who invited us to God. The best invitation we ever received! We were also given absolutely terrific promises to pass on to you — your tickets to participation in the life of God after you turned your back on a world corrupted by lust.*"

## INTENTIONALLY PURSUING THE HEART OF GOD

Paul desires that Christians pursue God deeply. But how do we do this? It begins with making our deepening relationship with God our priority. By our choice to be intentional in our faith walk, no matter what, we grow closer to God. Especially in times of testing.

Saying you love someone is easy. Really loving them is much harder. Jesus teaches us that real love often requires sacrifice. "*Love each other as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends.*" (John 15:12-13).

"As a communion of three persons, God is a relational being. He is the originator of a personal relationship with us, and our high and holy calling is to respond to his loving initiatives. By loving God completely, we discover who and whose we are as we come to see ourselves as God sees us."

■ Ken Boa

If we love someone, it will often cost us. Real love makes us willing to undergo suffering for the sake of those we love. If we want to love God and pursue his heart, we must be ready for sacrifice. Andrew notes, "Love is what makes us willing to undertake risk and hardship, to carry burdens. A lover is willing to endure much for his beloved."

### Love fuels endurance and perseverance.

Do we have endurance and perseverance? David, after years under the stars seeking God, became a man after God's heart. Anna spent years waiting in the temple, in prayer and fasting, for the promised Messiah. John the Baptist dedicated his whole life to preparing for the coming of Jesus. Mary is willing to disappoint her sister and their houseguests to be with Jesus.

I wonder if we too often think faith should be quick and easy, like a drive-through restaurant? We have so many other things to get to, Jesus. People are counting on me. "*For everyone looks out for their own interests, not those of Jesus Christ.*" (Phil. 2:21).

I need to honestly ask, "Lord, is this me?" I wonder if we are willing to count the cost. Are we hungrier for God or for expediency? Are we, in our instant culture, more ready to check our hearts or check our watches?

### TO HANDLE PERSECUTION, WE MUST DETERMINE TO LOVE GOD

One of the turning points for Andrew in his Turkish cell was learning to worship God when it came as a sacrifice. He worshiped when there seemed to be little reason for praise. His singing and dancing to God was a "declaration to him in very difficult circumstances." It was an act of love. An act of surrender. An act of love toward God, "I love you Jesus!" Andrew learned that in torment, Christians need to cultivate a simple, loving devotion.

#### Pause. Lord, can you trust me to love you?

Love is an emotion. But it also expresses itself in other ways. In loyalty, commitment, surrender, worship, spiritual hunger, and perseverance. Deep love remains even when God is not easily found or experienced. Or when the costs of isolation and loss brings tears to our cheeks. Love becomes intimate love when it is willing to sacrifice for its beloved. Love becomes proved when we are tested. Andrew affirms, "There is an intimacy that only comes with testing."

In *Mere Christianity*, C.S. Lewis uses this wonderful example:

Imagine yourself as a living house. God comes in to rebuild that house. At first, perhaps, you can understand what He is doing. He is getting the drains right and stopping the leaks in the roof and so on; you knew that those jobs needed doing and so you are not surprised. But presently He starts knocking the house about in a way that hurts abominably and does not seem to make any sense. What on earth is He up to? The explanation is that He is building quite a different house from the one you thought of - throwing out a new wing here, putting on an extra floor there, running up towers, making courtyards. You thought you were being made into a decent little cottage: but He is building a palace. He intends to come and live in it Himself.

God is committed to our spiritual overhaul, not just our comfort. Is this not supposed to be true of all good parents—willing to allow their beloved child some pain and struggle so that their wisdom grows? Spoiled children often chase the wrong things. More on this next session.

"Lord, you are my Lord and my God, and I have never seen you. You have made me and nurtured me, given me every good thing I have ever received, and I still do not know you. I was created for the purpose of seeing you, and I still have not done the thing I was made to do. Come on then, my Lord God, teach my heart where and how to seek you, where and how to find you. Lord, if you are not here, where shall I find you?"

■ Anselm of Canterbury, c. 1060.

## QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION OR REFLECTION

- 1) What can we learn from the fact that God is relational by nature, a “God with us”?
- 2) How does a person who is “pursuing God’s heart” look? What can we notice in their life?
- 3) How do we “bring a sacrifice of praise” to God? How might persecution effect this?

## ACTION STEPS

- ✓ Who is your closest friend? What makes a friendship work? Write a list. (Time together, transparency, joy, etc.?) Look at your list. Which of these do you regularly share with God?
- ✓ Right now, take one step toward God, for he is the perfect parent and friend. Read Deut. 31:8 and Psalm 131.
- ✓ Pray, “Father, pour out your love into my inner self by the Holy Spirit, that my heart may overflow in love back to you. Allow me to comprehend Jesus’ love for me and to abide in it and stay connected to it (Jn. 15:9). I also ask that you impart your love for Jesus into my heart (Jn. 17:26). I ask for grace to love you with all my heart, soul, mind, and strength (Mk. 12:30).”

## FOR DEEPER STUDY OR TEACHING—WHY ARE GOD’S PEOPLE TESTED?

It might bother us, but God allows painful tests to come into our lives. Without giving up his sovereignty over all things, he uses the broken and hardhearted nature of the world’s powers to refine his people. 1 Peter 4 is clear:

*12 Dear friends, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that has come on you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. 13 But rejoice inasmuch as you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed. 14 If you are insulted because of the name of Christ, you are blessed, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you. 15 If you suffer, it should not be as a murderer or thief or any other kind of criminal, or even as a meddler. 16 However, if you suffer as a Christian, do not be ashamed, but praise God that you bear that name. 17 For it is time for judgment to begin with God’s household; and if it begins with us, what will the outcome be for those who do not obey the gospel of God? 18 And, “If it is hard for the righteous to be saved, what will become of the ungodly and the sinner?” 19 So then, those who suffer according to God’s will should commit themselves to their faithful Creator and continue to do good.*

Psalm 66 is another clear example of this. Let’s examine it deeper.

***8 Praise our God, all peoples, let the sound of his praise be heard; 9 he has preserved our lives and kept our feet from slipping.***

***10 For you, God, tested us; you refined us like silver. 11 You brought us into prison and laid burdens on our backs.***

***12 You let people ride over our heads; we went through fire and water, but you brought us to a place of abundance.***

***13 I will come to your temple with burnt offerings and fulfill my vows to you—14 vows my lips promised and my mouth spoke when I was in trouble. 15 I will sacrifice fat animals to you and an offering of rams; I will offer bulls and goats.***

***16 Come and hear, all you who fear God; let me tell you what he has done for me.17 I cried out to him with my mouth; his praise was on my tongue.***

***18 If I had cherished sin in my heart, the Lord would not have listened; 19 but God has surely listened and has heard my prayer.20 Praise be to God, who has not rejected my prayer or withheld his love from me!***

In this worship song, the psalmist calls the people to praise God, for he has kept his people from destruction and falling. Israel then, and the Church now, have many reasons to praise the Lord. For God has rescued us from slavery, guided us through the desert, enabled us to defeat our enemies, empowered us with his presence, and given us a future inheritance.

Still, it is God who tests us. God is IN the punishment, ALLOWING the pain, although not the source of evil. When his people disobey, he disciplines us. Like a careful craftsman, he put us “through fire” to remove our impurities. Here this includes prison, burdens, subservience, and persecution.

The psalmist has endured the test. He responds by pursuing the Lord and engaging in worship to fulfill the promises he has made in his grim times. He brings what is biblically asked of him, and he brings the best—“fat animals”—that he has. It is a heart sacrifice of praise. His message or endurance needs to be shared! It is not about the testing, but on the results which flourished in chains. His mouth and tongue, like Andrew’s, surprise him by breaking out in praise. “Praise be to God!” “I love you Jesus!”

It has been a time of refining. Sin has been identified and confessed instead of cherished. His prayers (like ours) are answered. God has not—even through suffering—rejected his prayer (or ours) or withheld his love. Amazing!

## SESSION 5: BUILDING PERSEVERANCE

### THE PURSUIT OF HAPPINESS

In Luke 21:24-36, Jesus uses one of his last times with the disciples to warn them of the struggles.

*34 Be careful, or your hearts will be weighed down with carousing, drunkenness and the anxieties of life, and that day will close on you suddenly like a trap. 35 For it will come on all those who live on the face of the whole earth. 36 Be always on the watch and pray that you may be able to escape all that is about to happen, and that you may be able to stand before the Son of Man. (emphasis added.)*

In this video, Andrew noticed that the sins mentioned—partying, drunkenness, the anxieties of life, a heavy heart—come on the people of God “suddenly like a trap.”

When pressures come, we may not see them coming. We can be so entwined with pleasure seeking that the trap catches us unaware. Pleasure can be defined as, “A source of enjoyment or delight taken for amusement, diversion, or worldly enjoyment.” Perhaps in the hope of a temporary escape or diversion, Christians will buy into a godless value statement of America, a lie from the pit:

**“You, and your happiness, are most important!”**

The lie of self-focus. We see it all around us, in movies, songs, and advertisements. “You deserve a break today”—from fast food. “Choose happiness”—it is inside a soft drink. “Walk tall”—get worth from a larger credit line. Andrew suggests that “the pursuit of pleasure or self-fulfillment is for many people their controlling value.” A good friend paid for an upgrade on a long flight for Cathy and me. I may never be able to sit in the dungeon trusses of economy again.

**Science, medicine, and psychology all agree: pleasure is both addictive and distracting.**

During the days of suffering ahead, some Christians will run away to pleasures to try to avoid the full costs. They might binge shop on Amazon. They might drink too much. They will change their words and ways to have a good relationship with society, in hopes of avoiding pain or conflict. They will simply do whatever is asked of them to take care of themselves and their families. But notice what Luke 21 above says, “For it will come on all those who live on the face of the whole earth.” Ultimately, there is no place to hide. “All those” living on “the whole earth.” There is no way to just “get along” without renouncing Jesus. Even that won’t be enough. Therefore Jesus, who knows exactly what is

#### Andrew’s Keys from Video 5

- MORE PRONOUNCED IN AMERICAN VALUES
- NOT WHAT I FEEL BUT WHAT JESUS WANTS
- BUILD PERSEVERANCE
- A DECISION OF OUR WILL
- A PERSISTENT DECISION
- BUILDS SOMETHING IN ME
- LEARNING TO PERSEVERE
- BE FAITHFUL IN THE SMALL THINGS

“There is no man upon the earth who isn’t earnestly seeking after happiness, and it appears abundantly by the variety of ways they so vigorously seek it; they will twist and turn every way, ply all instruments, to make themselves happy men.”

■ Jonathan Edwards,  
1720



coming, wants his beloved people to “*be able to stand before the Son of Man.*” The only escape is to be securely with Christ and protected by our faith.

**The life of faith is built not on what I feel, but on what Jesus wants.**

## THE SOURCE OF CHRISTIAN HAPPINESS

You may ask, “Doesn’t God want me to be happy?” Well, ultimately, God is working for eternal happiness in our lives. And there are many blessings and joys we have been given in this life. But happiness is not promised in the Bible for our lives in this world and is never one of Jesus’ core values. He knows that our experience in life is always mixed. *“I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world.”* (John 16:33). Peace comes—but not from having relief from hardships. Peace comes despite difficulties; we take heart by focusing on Jesus and his ultimate victory.

When Jonathan Edwards was 18 years old, he preached his first sermon, entitled, *Christian Happiness*. It was a reflection on Isaiah 3:10, *“Say unto the righteous, it shall be well with him: for they shall eat the fruit of their doings.”* The thesis of the sermon was simple, and powerful: **Christians should be happy.**

Why should Christians be happy? For Edwards, it was not about circumstances, but rooted in three eternal truths:

1. **Our bad things will turn out for good.**
2. **Our good things can never be taken away from us.**
3. **The best things are yet to come.**

**Our real happiness and security are in heaven.**

## A DECISION TO PERSEVERE

*“Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me; yet not my will, but yours be done.” An angel from heaven appeared to him and strengthened him. And being in anguish, he prayed more earnestly, and his sweat was like drops of blood falling to the ground.”* (Luke 22:42-44)

### LEARNING FROM ETHIOPIA

The gospel was first brought to Ethiopia in the first century, and Ethiopia has a Christian majority. Freedom of religion is guaranteed under Ethiopian law, and the national government generally works to protect the rights of Christians.

None-the-less, many Ethiopian Christians still face persecution today. “The rise of other religions and recent political unrest have created opportunities for large attacks on Christians and churches throughout the country... Many believers have been killed. Still, evangelical churches in Ethiopia continue to plant new churches and send missionaries to difficult areas.”

■ Voice of the Martyrs,  
2022

“While other worldviews lead us to sit in the midst of life’s joys, foreseeing the coming sorrows, Christianity empowers its people to sit in the midst of this world’s sorrows, tasting the coming joy.”

■ Timothy Keller

The journey to the cross required great persistence, even for Jesus. Even an angel could not remove the grief and agony. Yet he did not quit. **His only surrender was to God's will.**

Jesus' example should once again shout to us about persistence: *"For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinners, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart."* (Heb. 12:2-3).

**For Jesus, perseverance included a decision of choice to relinquish his will to God's will. As Christians, we follow his example.**

In prison, isolated and unsettled, Andrew was forced to the breaking point. There, he had to make a choice. Quit or press into Jesus. His answer came at a cost, without relief. It was his decision point: "Jesus, I will run after you, no matter how I feel. And if I can't run, then I will crawl."

Remember this truth: **The life of faith is built not on what I feel, but on what Jesus wants.**

What if Jesus has a good plan that requires his people to go through persecution? What if Jesus wants our holiness and refining more than our happiness? Could it be that what Jesus desires comes at a cost for us? Could suffering make the people of God more like Jesus?

**Perseverance is grown in the daily, repeated process of surrendering to God's will.**

Perseverance, like all resolutions, is not a once-for-all decision. It is birthed in doggedness and determination, one moment at a time, one step at a time. Sometimes the words come as echoes of faith, sometimes as whispers in exhaustion, and other times with dancing in obedience—"Your will, not mine!" Perseverance requires continual surrender to God's plan.

**Perseverance builds something in us.** Maturity and holiness come at a cost, it seems. God orchestrates places where we can learn to persevere and grow up. Difficulties can force us to trust God more. Consider the wanderings of Israel. The exile of David. The prison time of Joseph. James 1 notes that perseverance is a process, starting with *"trials of many kinds,"* then moving into

#### LEARNING FROM CANADA

Since July 2005, when the courts redefined marriage in the Canadian state, a steady stream of criminal and administrative law has been used to penalize Christians for their beliefs.

In 2018, Trinity Western University, an evangelical university in British Columbia, lost its battle in Canada's Supreme Court to open its law school, after some Canadian law societies objected that the university was discriminatory. This was for asking students to agree to respect the Biblical view of human sexuality and to abstain from sexual relations other than heterosexual marriage during school involvement. While the Supreme Court recognized that its final ruling violated religious freedom, it argued that it was 'proportionate and reasonable' to do this to ensure access to the University for self-identifying LGBTQ students.

In early 2022, the Canadian legislature made it a criminal act to try to use conversion therapy to change a person's sexual orientation. The bill undermines Christian beliefs that people are created male and female, stating such beliefs are, "based on and propagate myths and stereotypes about sexual orientation and gender identity, including the myth that a person's sexual orientation and gender identity can and ought to be changed."

■ Christian Concern, 2022.

perseverance, and finally perseverance finishes in maturity. Skip the heat and you miss the finished, perfected and tempered steel. Sadly, if we fail to gain perseverance, we also may give up our faith, or be trapped in immaturity.

### QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION OR REFLECTION

- 1) Where do you see the cultural battle for our hearts and minds? Where in you?
- 2) Look at Jonathan Edward's three truths, above. How do these result in a Christian's happiness? Which is hardest for you to grasp or believe?
- 3) Living in this decision: "not what I feel but what Jesus wants" is hard. How do we do it?

### ACTION STEPS

- ✓ Reflect on a time you endured something hard. An examination, a sporting event, a relocation, a loss? What skills did you need? What helped you through?
- ✓ Talk to a friend about what you have learned from life about the skills necessary to endure dark times. And listen to their thoughts, too.
- ✓ Pray, "Father, strengthen my inner man with endurance, that I may do your will with zeal and diligence. Direct my heart into the endurance and love in which Jesus walked. Give me strength to fulfill all your purposes for me, and to live free of compromise that I would walk blamelessly in body, soul, and spirit, and be able stand before you victorious, in full obedience. Amen."

"Christianity doesn't deny the reality of suffering and evil. Remember after Jesus came down the Mount of Transfiguration, He told His disciples that He was going up to Jerusalem—that He would be executed and that He would triumph over death. Jesus was not the least bit confident that He would be spared suffering. He knew that suffering was necessary. What He was confident of was vindication.

Our hope, our acceptance of the invitation to the banquet, is not based on the idea that we are going to be free of pain and suffering. Rather it is based on the conviction that we will triumph over suffering....

Christian hope stands firm and serene, confident even in the face of the gas chamber, even in the face of terminal cancer. However serious we believe Good Friday is, we are confident that Easter Sunday lies ahead of us. And what if we do die? Jesus died too, and if Jesus died we believe that now He lives, and that we shall live too."

■ Brennan Manning,  
*The Ragamuffin Gospel*

### FOR DEEPER STUDY OR TEACHING—DEMAS, LACKING SPIRITUAL ENDURANCE

In AD 60-62, the Apostle Paul is imprisoned in Rome. A Roman citizen, he is under guarded "house arrest" and is allowed visitors. In the last chapter of Colossians (Col. 4:7-15) there are at least eight believers with Paul who are mentioned. Six of them send their greetings to the churches in the Colossae valley (Col. 4:10-14), five of them will send their personal greetings to Philemon at

Colossae as well (Phil. 23, 24). Two other brothers, Tychicus and Onesimus, will take the letters back to Paul's recipients (Col. 4:7-9). John Mark (the writer of Mark's Gospel), and Dr. Luke (the writer of Luke and Acts) are with Paul. We meet a new person, Demas, who is listed as being with Paul, too (Col. 4:14).

Two gospel writers are obviously helping while detailing Paul's accounts. But the greetings provide little about Demas. He is listed with the Greeks, Luke and Epaphras, in contrast to the three Jewish believers, Aristarchus, Mark, and Jesus Justus. This seems to indicate that Demas was a Gentile believer working in ministry with Paul.

Demas is also listed in Philemon 23-24, where he is a fellow laborer with Paul:

*"Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, sends you greetings. And so do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas and Luke, my fellow workers."*

The word "fellow worker" (in Greek, *sunergos*) has the idea of a teammate and co-worker. One Greek scholar writes that the "word implies that two people are working closely together as partners, sharing work and responsibility. There is even the suggestion of equality in the word co-worker... Demas was a close confidant of Paul, sharing the Apostle's vision of winning the world for God."

In 2 Timothy 4:9-10, we find one final mention of Demas. It is a tragic one.

*"Do your best to come to me quickly, for Demas, because he loved this world, has deserted me and has gone to Thessalonica."*

The word Paul uses for Demas' love here is *agape*, enduring love. Paul does not tell us what aspect of the present world system Demas loved. It might be money, or comfort, or family. It could be a fear that he, too, would be identified with Paul in persecution. Notice that Paul does not vilify nor attack him. He does not rage against his weakness. Without going into detail, Paul (under the leading of the Spirit) simply offers Demas' life as a warning to potential wayward believers. And to us. Perhaps Demas never really believed or will be saved as one through the fire (1 Cor. 3:15). Still, we are left with a warning: some "Christians" fall away, at least from our perspective. Using the same word, *agape*, John wrote to believers in Asia. It is a stern reminder.

*"Do not love the world or the things of the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world – the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life – is not of the Father but is of the world. And the world is passing away, and the lust of it, but he who does the will of God abides forever" (1 John 2:15-16).*

## SESSION 6: AVOIDING DECEPTION

### THE SOURCE OF DECEPTION

In speaking of the coming days of trouble, Jesus warns his followers, *"Watch out that no one deceives you."* (Matt. 24:29). Obviously, deception of the disciples is possible, and Jesus wants them to not be caught off guard. The word for "watch out" in the Greek is a command. Jesus is emphatically saying: Pay attention! See clearly! Keep watch! What is it we are to watch for?

#### How could deception creep into the church?

Honestly, as an evangelical pastor and a Seminary professor, I am most comfortable looking for bad biblical doctrine and poor teaching. I try to search my own heart for how I might be deceiving myself. I pray often that the Lord would give me eyes to see right from wrong, and to show me how to lovingly lead others in the narrow way. But I seldom think about watching out for a real Deceiver. Washed in my left-brained tradition, I can forget what Jesus so clearly knew—the battle is a spiritual one against a clever foe, Satan. A foe who is always dishonest, always untruthful, and always double-dealing.

#### Deception has been one of Satan's favorite tools forever.

It is his nature. He *"masquerades as an angel of light"* (2 Cor. 11:14). He *"blinds the minds of unbelievers"* (2 Cor. 4:4). In Revelation 12:9 we read, *"And the great dragon was thrown down, the serpent of old who is called the devil and Satan, who deceives the whole world..."*

Deception of the world is what our Enemy does. Jesus reveals the core of Satan's nature as he rebukes the religious leaders of his day: *"He was a murderer from the beginning, not holding to the truth, for there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks his native language, for he is a liar and the father of lies."* (John 8:44)

#### Why are we so slow to grasp that deception and lies are major tools used against God's Church and Kingdom?

### Andrew's Keys from Video 6

- WEDGE ISSUES
- CULTURE OF SELF-FULFILLMENT
- PRESSURE TO COMPROMISE
- APPROVED CHURCH
- BUILD COMMUNITY
- GUARD THE WORD
- CHOOSE TO SAY WHAT GOD SAYS
- BE ON GOD'S SIDE

"There always is this fallacious belief: 'It would not be the same here; here such things are impossible.' Alas, all the evil of the twentieth century is possible everywhere on earth."

■ Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, 1974

### A CULTURE OF SELF-FULFILLMENT

The biggest lie sown into today's American soil is that everyone can discern their own truth. No truth is absolute but that which is found internally. Truth is relative and wrapped in personal

experience and perspective. Each must do what feels best for them. It is not a new lie from our enemy. In Judges 21:25, we see God's people swirling downward until, "*the people did what was right in their own eyes.*"

Sociologist Carl Truman, in *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self*, writes, "When it comes to how we think of ourselves, we are all expressive individualists now, and there is no way we can escape from this fact. It is the essence of the world in which we must live and of which we are a part ...that message is being preached from every commercial, every website, every newscast, and every billboard to which people are exposed on a daily basis."

## THE OVERWHELMING PRESSURE TO COMPROMISE

In such a culture so misled, the Christian message of submission to a God-directed path is not only "odd" but almost incomprehensible. Christians believe that truth is an external thing to follow, created by God and written down for us in the Bible. This makes no sense to an America which has lost its faith in all externals (like schools, institutions, traditions, government, history, churches, and police). Self-actualization and happiness trump everything. Self is supreme, and if you disagree, then you are the enemy.

In such an environment, there is intense pressure to bend to the culture's way. Those who don't agree are met with anger and disdain. As pressure grows, the Church of Jesus has always faced a choice. Often in history, the church divides when under pressure. Some churches become "more acceptable" to the society by watering down beliefs and compromising biblical values. Andrew notes that a compromising mindset can sound godly, "If I avoid certain issues, I can protect my ministry—which is bearing fruit." They can become "approved" by following the society's edicts. The commanding heights of our culture will applaud these progressive churches, while vilifying those who do not fit their narrative. None-the-less, history shows that compromising churches eventually lose their purity and their witness.

In contrast, churches which do not compromise always face tougher sanctions and more persecution. To survive, they are often forced to meet secretly. The first century church met this way. We see this throughout history and around the world. This remains the way many of our brothers and sisters are worshiping today. The BBC estimates that 100 million Christians in China celebrated Easter in 2017, most meeting secretly in rural homes and city apartments. Open Doors estimates that in 2021, half a million Christians were meeting secretly in North Korea. Today, in Iran, the underground church now may contain one million believers. As persecution grows, the true church continues to thrive.

"Does the church have a future in our generation? I believe the church is in real danger...We are facing present pressures and a present and future manipulation which will be so overwhelming in the days to come that they will make the battles of the last forty years look like child's play."

■ Francis Schaeffer, 1970



## KEEPING OUR FOCUS TO AVOID COMPROMISE

I have often told my children, "Keep the main things the main things." Living the Christian life in an anti-Christian world can be demoralizing, and the fallen nature of this world can lead to great pain. In this video, Andrew offered several main things which are necessary for Christians to endure persecution and hardship.

### **We must build a community of like-minded believers.**

As society embraces deep-seated individualism, fewer Christians are intricately connected to a faith community. A 2017 study by Barna concluded that less than one out of every five Christians believes that spiritual maturity requires a connection to a community of faith. To survive when a culture opposes us, we need believers around us. We need to be accountable, prayed for, and encouraged by friends who see the world through biblical eyes. When we have deep relationships with those who know the hope of Christ, we can give each other comfort and speak words of life and hope (2 Cor. 1:3–7; Rom. 12:15). Hebrews 10:24–25 says, *"And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near."*

"Our relationship with each other is the criterion the world uses to judge whether our message is truthful - Christian community is the final apologetic."

■ Francis Schaeffer, 1970

The Bible has no concept of individual spirituality. Christianity is not something personal or private, with nothing to do with others. This is, again, a modern way of thinking. The Bible often reminds us that we need each other. For example, God saw that it was not good for Adam to be alone and made Eve as a companion (Gen. 2:18–25). Two or three are better than one (Eccl. 4:9–12). Jesus prayed that His followers would "be one," even as the Trinity is one (John 17). To follow as his disciples, we are to love God and love each other (Matt. 22:34–40). Jesus said that his followers would be known by their love for one another (John 13:34–35).

In Christ, we are made to be children of God (John 1:12). That makes us members of a large family, with Jesus as the big brother of many siblings (Romans 8). The New Testament is filled with commands on how God's kids are to treat one another, written in the plural "you." In the American south, it could be translated as "all y'all." Clearly the Christian life is meant to be lived in human relationship.

### **We must guard the Word.**

Our community must be built around God's Word. The requirements of the Bible have become offensive in our society, and to many groups we interact with. The Bible clearly calls us to a certain identity, to obedience in public and private, to fidelity in marriage, and to the exclusivity of Jesus. Many people want to downgrade its authority and dilute its teachings. Andrew notes, "I have seen many people drift away from their faith because they are surrounded by the wrong circle of friends. Friends who are not committed to the authority of the Bible."

You cannot have Jesus and renounce the Bible. Jesus believed in the Bible and built his life and teachings around it. Jesus repeatedly cited Jewish scripture to settle a debate. He would make his point by stressing *"it is written"* followed by an Old Testament citation. Jesus believed in the equivalence of "Scripture says" with "God says," and he shows the highest view of the Old Testament when he affirmed, *"the Scripture cannot be broken"* (John 10:34). Unrecognized on the road to Emmaus, he speaks to two disciples who are forlorn at his death. His answer to their grief is sharing the Messianic truth of the Old Testament: *"And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself"* (Luke 24:26-28). Jesus built his life around the truths of the Bible. If Jesus based his message and ministry on the Bible, have we, as his followers, any other choice? We must hold tightly to the thing which has defined the orthodoxy of the Church for 2000 years.

### We need to say what God says.

I confess that I sometimes find this a difficult part of my life. I genuinely love meeting new people. Every person is valuable and has something to offer me. Every person adds something. The Lord has used serving alongside Catholic nuns, Hindu lepers, Senators, gay scholars, evangelical mentors, and soap-box preachers to teach me key things.

As a peacemaker, I work hard to build bridges and find common ground with every individual I meet. Jesus was comfortable around everyone, even those that seemed ungodly and wayward. I know I am imperfect. Therefore, I always seek to be respectful and kind, and give people a great deal of grace. I know I need to earn the right to speak into people's lives. I know that those I meet carry many wounds, and that the journey to faith is a long and varied one marked by enduring love.

But in my bridge building, I cannot agree with things that are against my faith. I cannot call "right" what God calls "wrong." I cannot be inauthentic to the Lord I serve. God determines what is true, not man. The world is changing quickly, and there is little graciousness left in our culture. When we speak out about what we believe, even kindly and with gentleness, there is little room for our biblical positions. A few years ago, someone threw a fire-bomb through the window of the "judgmental" church I was serving at because we didn't agree with having a pornography store on our block. Later, a blog I posted about a young woman's miracle went viral, bringing with it a storm

"Jesus did not let any institution interfere with his love for individuals. Jewish racial and religious policies forbade him to speak with a Samaritan woman, let alone one with a checkered moral background; Jesus selected one as a missionary. His disciples included a tax collector, viewed as a traitor by Israel, and also a Zealot, a member of the super-patriot party. He praised the countercultural John the Baptist. He met with Nicodemus, an observant Pharisee, and also with a Roman centurion. He dined in the home of another Pharisee named Simon and also in the home of an 'unclean' man, Simon the Leper.

For Jesus, the person was more important than any category or label. I know how easy it is to get swept away by the politics of polarization, to shout across picket lines at the 'enemy' on the other side. But Jesus commanded, 'Love your enemies.'"

■ Phillip Yancey, *What's So Amazing About Grace*

of threats and attacks about a God who heals some and lets others die. The cancel culture of anger is real, and growing in America, not just in Iran or China.

**We must say about ourselves what God says. We must say about good and evil what God says. We must say about God what he says about himself.** Andrew notes:

If you do this, it will put you at odds with the mainstream of our culture. It will put you at odds with the progressive church. Even many evangelical church leaders are hesitant to speak truth... The Bible says that God will judge people and punish sin. Many will say this is a message of hate, which twists God's character, because he's a God of love who doesn't judge. But I must say what God says about himself. I don't have to understand. I don't have to defend God. What I must do is come into agreement with him.

#### QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION OR REFLECTION

- 1) Deception is defined as "the act of causing someone to accept as true or valid what is false or invalid." What examples of deception do you see today?
- 2) One outlook on community is, "When I get close to people, I get hurt." Is this true? Why?
- 3) How, in practical ways, do we guard the Word?
- 4) To be on God's side requires a choice. How and when must we make this choice?

#### ACTION STEPS

- ✓ Look back at our "LEARNING FROM" boxes about persecution around the world. Place yourself as a Christian in each country (North Korea, Ethiopia, Iraq, Canada). Honestly, how would you fare ?
- ✓ Pray for new strength for yourself and for all Christians around the world to stand up with courage.

#### LEARNING FROM AMERICA

"There was a 'neutral world' roughly between 1994–2014 in which traditional Christianity was neither broadly supported nor opposed by the surrounding culture, but rather was viewed as an eccentric lifestyle option among many. However, that time is over. Now we live in the 'negative world,' in which, according to Aaron Renn, Christian morality is expressly repudiated and traditional Christian views are perceived as undermining the social good...

Tough choices are increasingly before us, offense is unavoidable, and sides will need to be taken on very important issues. Recent events have proven that being winsome in this moment will not guarantee a favorable hearing.

One important example came in 2017. When the Kuyper Center for Public Theology selected Tim Keller as the recipient of the 'Kuyper Prize for Excellence in Reformed Theology and Public Witness,' many students, faculty, and alumni of Princeton Theological Seminary (which is where the Kuyper Center holds its annual conference) protested. Though Keller had spent decades cultivating a thoughtful and compassionate approach to public witness, many simply could not abide Princeton honoring someone who transgresses progressive orthodoxies on sex and gender. The award was rescinded."

■ James R. Wood, *First Things Journal*, 5/6/2022

- ✓ Pray specifically, "Father, give me insight into Your Word, will, and ways. Help me to align myself with your Word and to build relationship with others who also want to live according to your truth."

## FOR DEEPER STUDY AND TEACHING—GOD'S USE OF DREAMS TO WARN HIS PEOPLE

At Pentecost, Peter recites the Prophet Joel when he says, *"In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your young men will see visions, your old men will dream dreams. Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days, and they will prophesy."* (Acts 2:17-18).

The biblical God is one who cares for his people. To get their attention as difficult days approach, he promises he will *"pour out my Spirit on all people."* Notice that Joel and Peter, both led by the Spirit moving in them, see a widespread movement of God as the last days approach. Spiritual wisdom—through prophecies, visions, and dreams—stream to both the old and young, and both to men and women. God is sending a widespread warning to awaken his church and to warn his people to be ready. It is happening now around the world.

In the video, Andrew mentioned a dream I have had. I think I might be one of Joel's "old men." I certainly qualify as old. For my whole Christian life, God has spoken to me in normal ways: primarily through Scripture, prayer, worship, and the wisdom of wise Christians. Remember, I am a reformed evangelical who believes we best hear God in the pages of his Word. Personally, I have never heard God's auditory voice. I dream often, and most of my dreams have more to do with pizza than God. But, in an unexpected way, God has given a few dreams which stand apart in my soul. Each were so vivid that I could remember every detail and every moment, even until today. They feel exceptional, very different, and far more clear than normal dreams I have had. I have studied dreams in the Word. The Bible is filled with dreamers. I have heard, I believe, from God in my dreams. I am reminded of Job 33:14-16,

*"For God does speak—now one way, now another—though no one perceives it. In a dream, in a vision of the night, when deep sleep falls on people as they slumber in their beds, he may speak in their ears."*

For many years, only my closest family, friends, and mentors knew of my special dreams. Recently, as I have shared these dreams with other wise scholars and devoted Christian leaders, there seems to be a consensus that God is speaking. They have encouraged me to find truth in the dreams, simply asking me to listen to the Lord's voice, and share them when I feel led. I share them when pressed by the Spirit, when I am asked, or when I have them anew. People react or interpret them as they will. I know I am an imperfect receiver of God's Spirit. I hold them loosely.

"The Bible indicates that God revealed His will to selected people through dreams or visions in Scripture... God may communicate through dreams or visions even today, but we need to carefully check any such guidance we receive with Scripture and godly counsel to be sure it is from the Lord."

■ Billy Graham

Andrew shared about one of my dreams in this video. In this dream, he and I, as directed by Jesus, are building a wall of sand to protect us from a massive tidal wave which we can see on the coast. Let me add some details from my journal:

A large black-green tidal wave is at the shoreline, a tsunami ready to strike. It is massive—perhaps twice the size of the 80-foot cliff where a church and a town are perched. As they meet inside the church, people and the town are unaware that they are so near destruction. The huge wave literally “hangs in the air.” Not quite frozen, it is defying gravity, splashing, and swirling dark waters, as if almost alive, but not yet falling on the people. And then I understand. The Lord is holding the dark wave back. He is keeping the evil away. His power has paused the wave to avoid the destruction for a moment...

Seeing the wave in the distance now, I heard a voice say to me, “You must build a tower of sand to be protected, and to guard my Word, for soon the wave will be released.” It seemed odd—sandcastle walls seem unable to stand against such a wave. But we began piling up sand into a tower, like kids on a beach, and it grew more and more solid around us. It seemed to me that the wall was the community of Christians, one grain upon another. The dream has us waiting inside this hand-built tower for the wave, at peace.

In 2004, I served as a grief counselor with a medical team on the coast of India, attending to those caught in the destruction of the Indian Ocean Tsunami. I cried with many, many families who had lost their children in the wave. I can’t help but remember beach after beach covered with broken treasures and children’s flip-flops. I know firsthand what devastation a Tsunami can cause.

Andrew and I, with many other Christian leaders, believe a spiritual Tsunami is off the coast, rolling toward America. Thankfully, God cares about his people. He wants us to survive the coming wave of persecution. The Pentecost passage from Joel continues a few verses later (Joel 2:32): *“And everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved; for on Mount Zion and in Jerusalem there will be deliverance, as the Lord has said, even among the survivors whom the Lord calls.”*

So, what do we do when we sense darkness, persecution, or trouble ahead? When we feel the heat? We share as the Lord leads, we pray for wisdom, we strengthen our souls, and we continue in faith as life unfolds. 1 Peter 4:19 is clear: *“So then, those who suffer according to God’s will should commit themselves to their faithful Creator and continue to do good.”* Quoting from Rod Dreher, **we stagger onward rejoicing:**

We live liturgically, telling our sacred Story in worship and song. We fast and we feast. We marry and give our children in marriage, and though in exile, we work for the peace of the city. We welcome our newborns and bury our dead. We read the Bible, and we tell our children about the saints... We work, we pray, we confess our sins, we show mercy, we welcome the stranger, and we keep the commandments. When we suffer, especially for Christ’s sake, we give thanks because that is what Christians do. Who knows what God, in turn, will do with our faithfulness? It is not for us to say. Our command is, in the words of the Christian poet W. H. Auden, to “stagger onward rejoicing.”

## SESSION 7: SOME BENEFITS OF PERSECUTION

### A QUICK REVIEW

In the final session, Andrew reviews the main keys of *Prepare to Stand*. He has previously discussed four dangers or temptations in times of persecution:

- 1 **We respond in fear**
- 2 **We become offended at God**
- 3 **We pursue pleasure as an escape**
- 4 **We are derailed by deception**

Andrew has also discussed six keys to helping us endure hardship and persecution with a healthy soul:

- 1 **Talk about persecution**
- 2 **Develop fear of God**
- 3 **Pursue the heart of God**
- 4 **Build perseverance**
- 5 **Build community**
- 6 **Guard the Word**

### TEN UNEXPECTED BLESSINGS WHICH COME FROM SUFFERING

Andrew then moves to list the concrete blessings which God grows in us in challenging times. 1 Peter 3:14 contains this promise: "*But even if you should suffer for what is right, you are blessed.*" What are these blessings?

- 1 **We grow closer to Jesus as we suffer for him.**

It seems counterintuitive that suffering for someone can pull you closer to them, but it often works this way. Andrew noted that as he endured pain for the name of his Lord, his love became more committed. He was willing to take more risks for him. He could endure more, for his love carried him more. There is no such thing as pointless pain in the life of the child of God. We grow in hard times. How this has encouraged and strengthened so many Christians in the valleys of suffering and pain! Proverbs 10:25 promises,

*When the storm has swept by, the wicked are gone, but the righteous stand firm forever.*

### Andrew's Keys from Video 7

- TEN BLESSINGS OF PERSECUTION
  - 1 CLOSER TO JESUS
  - 2 DEEPER INTIMACY WITH GOD
  - 3 PURSUE GOD MORE
  - 4 RELATE TO THE HEART OF JESUS
  - 5 BEAR GOD'S NATURE
  - 6 MORE SENSITIVE TO SIN
  - 7 MORE PERSEVERANCE
  - 8 ON DISPLAY FOR BELIEVERS
  - 9 ON DISPLAY FOR NONBELIEVERS
  - 10 ETERNAL REWARDS

"There is an acute difference between knowing about God and knowing God...It is difficult for sensual creatures to enjoy fellowship with One who cannot be seen, heard, tasted, touched, or smelled. God remains beyond my senses. How then, can I ever relate to Him with intimacy? My heart longs for fellowship with Him! I long to hear His voice as the sound of many waters and to catch one glimpse of his refulgent glory...What I crave is a relationship with God that is both intimate and personal."

■ R.C. Sproul



## 2 We gain a more confident intimacy with God.

Pain and difficulties help us define who we are at the core. The word intimate is derived from the Latin word *intimus*, which means “inmost.” According to the Webster’s dictionary, it broadly means, “inmost, essential, most inward, internal.” To be intimate with someone is to share the deepest parts of them. Intimacy with God, then, is the experience that someone knows God and is known by God in the inmost ways. In this relationship, we experience God’s companionship, love, and acceptance. With the psalmist we say, “*for me it is good to be near God*” (Psalm 73:28). We realize God’s promise: “*Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you*” (James 4:8).

## 3 We pursue God more.

Andrew insightfully knows, “Pressure makes us run after God as never before.” Psalm 42 is about the soul’s hunger arising from difficulties, “*As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you, my God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When can I go and meet with God?*”

When our realities become harsh, we either run from God or to God. Suffering is often used to help us know God better. As we gain closeness, we bear more of God’s nature. We see others, and Jesus, better.

## 4 We relate to the heart of Jesus.

Get drenched together in a thunderstorm, get lost in a strange town, or share tears at a funeral. You develop a new bond at these times. In the same way, sharing in suffering draws us closer to a Jesus who was willing to die for us. Paul says it this way,

*I want to know Christ—yes, to know the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, attaining to the resurrection from the dead. (Phil. 3:10-11)*

Paul already knew Christ as his savior. But in the Greek, *to know* means “a knowing by experience.” Paul desires to experience Christ fully—from his highs of resurrection power to his lows of suffering. As we join in the painful costs of faith, as Jesus did, we understand him better. Andrew has found that, “I love Jesus even more now because I suffered for him.” In the same way, Paul knows that suffering will draw him closer to his Lord. In Romans 8:17 he speaks relationally about this shared connection with Jesus, “*Now if we are children, then we are heirs—heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory.*”

Andrew learned something from prison. “God had been answering my prayers in ways I did not notice.” He began to see that he was sharing many of the things Jesus experienced, and so he could relate more to Jesus. “Shared experience strengthens friendship,” explains Andrew.

Jesus was fully human. He grew hungry and weary (Matt. 21). Part of why the Son took on a fully human nature was to share the path of suffering which is a fallen humankind’s destiny. Hebrews 4:15-16 speaks of Jesus sharing our weaknesses: “*15 For we do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—*

yet he did not sin." Jesus faced more persecution than we ever will, and never renounced his Father. He understands each of our sufferings. As we endure, submit, and cling to God in *our time of need*, we also understand Jesus more.

## 5 We bear more of God's nature.

2 Peter 1:4 tells us, "Through these he has given us his very great and precious promises, so that through them **you may participate in the divine nature**, having escaped the corruption in the world caused by evil desires".

God is making us more like his Son (Rom. 8:29), that we may share more of Jesus' *divine nature*. Suffering changes our heart. Brokenness makes us more sensitive to the frailty of others. We become more like Jesus, gentle and humble of heart.

"We want to avoid suffering, death, sin, ashes. But we live in a world crushed and broken and torn, a world God Himself visited to redeem. We receive his poured-out life, and being allowed the high privilege of suffering with Him, may then pour ourselves out for others."

■ Elizabeth Elliott

## 6 We become more sensitive to sin.

In this video, Andrew reflects on how imprisonment changed him. "Suffering made me more sensitive to sin and concentrated my mind and heart on living for God." 1 Peter 4:1-2 tells us,

*Therefore, since Christ suffered in his body, arm yourselves also with the same attitude, because whoever suffers in the body is done with sin. As a result, they do not live the rest of their earthly lives for evil human desires, but rather for the will of God.*

As we suffer, God begins to purify us. This makes sin more abhorrent to us. God is purifying his Bride, the Church. While we remain imperfect, the focus on resisting evil and seeking God trains us to reject sin. We find it easier to live for God. Andrew calls this, "A deep and long-lasting reorientation of the heart."

## 7 We gain more perseverance.

James 1:2-4 reads, "Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything."

Finding joy in the coming days may be difficult. But God has a plan to grow us to maturity. I may dislike it sometimes, but I know God cares more about our maturity than our comfort. Andrew observes, "Every time we flex the muscle of perseverance, we become stronger and more determined." As we grow in perseverance, we are more able to face grim times, and to help others make it through safely. Andrew quotes the message of God to Jeremiah: "If you have raced with men on foot and they have worn you out, how can you compete with horses? If you stumble in safe country, how will you manage in the thickets by the Jordan?" (Jer. 12:5). God allows hardship, so we are stronger for whatever lies ahead. Suffering helps us become more effective in resisting evil.

## 8 Persecution puts us on display for other Christians.

A psychological study found that an individual will give in to the crowd if they feel alone—even if they think the crowd is wrong. But if there is just one other voice which holds to the right answer, this individual becomes 90% more likely to stand against the crowd. To hold to what they believe is right. Have you considered that Pastor Andrew, by God's choice, gained an international audience for the Gospel through his persecution? It came at an excessive cost: he gained it separated from those he loved behind bars under the threat of a life sentence in a Turkish prison. Unsought, Andrew became an encouragement, a voice for the right answer, for other Christians suffering unknown in darkness around the world. A voice helping us all stand against the multitude's madness. Persecution puts us on display for believers to see. We become a part of God's great cloud of witnesses, most who suffered severely for their faith. In prison, Andrew understood, "If they did it, I can do it, too!" Our faith becomes a light for other believers to see.

## 9 Persecution puts us on display for nonbelievers.

We also become God's exhibition for non-believers, too. They may despise or misunderstand us, but they cannot help to wonder how we can endure. The greater the cost of our faithfulness, the deeper their confusion. They may begin to wonder about the reality of God we trust. They may ask themselves, "What am I missing?" Look at the quote from one of Christianity's archenemies, Karl Marx. In a private letter to a friend, even Marx wondered if there was a "a religious reality"—a real God—whom he could not destroy. Our faith is a light to unbelievers, a city set on a hill. We are children of Light. Prepare yourselves and your family to be ready for display. To be ready to shine the light of Christ in the darkness.

## 10 Suffering focuses us on our eternal rewards.

Those who endure suffering for our faith will be greatly rewarded for eternity. I know few Christians who follow Jesus to get heavenly rewards. But we must remember, God has always rewarded faithfulness. Our endurance and faith produce great honor for God and his name. Peter knows this. *"In all 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 the proven genuineness of your faith—of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire—may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed."* (1 Peter 1:6-8)

"The child of God is often called to suffer because there is nothing that will convince onlookers of the reality and power of true religion as suffering will do, when it is borne with Christian fortitude."

■ F.B. Meyer

"When all the political foundations of religion are wiped out, when the organization and the institutional structure of the church are destroyed, then normally religious faith, the Christian faith, would have to disappear. But it is not out of the question that the Christian faith will survive anyhow. This would mean that there is a religious reality that does not depend solely on the sociological and the institutional; and under these conditions, we would have to heed this reality, which is not in the category of traditional religion."

■ Karl Marx, 1843

"In this you greatly rejoice..." We are filled with joy, as is Jesus, who is pleased with those who prove their faithfulness. Daniel looks ahead to a time of some of the greatest suffering ever. He sees clearly how a future enemy will be looking for people to devour, to destroy, and to kill. In Daniel 11:31 we find hope, "but the people who know their God will display strength and take action." Andrew comments,

If you know your God, you will stand firm. And God is certainly interested in our standing firm. But he actually wants us to go beyond this. *God's people will stand firm and take action.* We are meant not only to survive intensive pressure, but we are meant to carry out assignments for God.

We—God's people—will display strength and act. This is a life with no regrets. Where we are dedicated to being faithful. To being obedient. To being on display as Christ's light. To loving others tangibly. To standing. Our reward will be great. We will be the pure Bride of Christ—a Bride who has suffered and proven her love and allegiance. This is a Bride worthy of her Beloved. Remember the goal: "Therefore put on the full armor of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand. Stand firm then..." (Eph. 6:13-14)

#### QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSION OR REFLECTION

- 1) This video series has focused on creating deeper knowledge and intimacy with God to help endure whatever comes. Honestly, how well do you feel you are doing this?
- 2) Some say we can be, "Too heavenly minded to be of earthly good." Do you agree? How does this fit with an eternal perspective?

"The old, hard totalitarianism had a vision for the world that required the eradication of Christianity. The new, soft totalitarianism does too, and we are not equipped to resist its sneakier attack..."

Today? The Western world has become post-Christian, with large numbers of those born after 1980 rejecting religious faith. This means that they will not only oppose Christians when we stand up for our principles—in particular, in defense of the traditional family, of male and female gender roles, and of the sanctity of human life—but also they will not even understand why they should tolerate dissent based in religious belief. We cannot hope to resist the coming soft totalitarianism if we do not have our spiritual lives in order."

■ Rod Dreher,  
*Live Not by Lies*

#### ACTION STEPS

- ✓ Examine your heart. In what ways do we sometimes put our faith light "under a basket" instead of on a stand? Why could God desire that the basket be removed—brought into the open—even by painful times?
- ✓ Look again at Andrew's list of ten blessings of persecution, above. Confess your fears in prayer and ask God for clear opportunities to shine.
- ✓ Pray, "Father, I thank you that you are the perfecter of my faith. Help me to have your perspective on all things."

**Text** 2 Corinthians 4:1-12

**1** *Therefore, since through God's mercy we have this ministry, we do not lose heart. 2 Rather, we have renounced secret and shameful ways; we do not use deception, nor do we distort the word of God. On the contrary, by setting forth the truth plainly we commend ourselves to everyone's conscience in the sight of God.*

**3** *And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing. 4 The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel that displays the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.*

**5** *For what we preach is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake. 6 For God, who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of God's glory displayed in the face of Christ.*

**7** *But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us.*

**8** *We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; 9 persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed.*

**10** *We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body. 11 For we who are alive are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that his life may also be revealed in our mortal body. 12 So then, death is at work in us, but life is at work in you...*

**Examination**

*Therefore* relates back to the last verse in the previous chapter. "And we all, who with unveiled faces contemplate the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory..." We are being made like him. For this reason—his unchanging mercy toward us—we do not lose heart as Christians. We do not give up in tough times. We stand firm. We hold on.

Instead, we live life in the open and without shame. We are not deceived nor deceivers, and we do not distort God's Word, but set it forth plainly. How people react (good or bad) is in the sight of God. We are under his watchful eye.

The battle is spiritual—for *the god of this age*, Satan, has *blinded the minds of unbelievers*, and sought to *veil the gospel* that Jesus is Lord so that *they cannot see the light* which displays God's glory in Christ. Blinded by deception, only God can unveil their eyes.

Our message in persecution is not about our own strength or obedience. We are simply servants, telling people about Jesus. For the Creator God—who made the universe—*made his light shine in us*. We now reflect his glory, as we seek more intimacy with God and pursue the heart of Jesus. We have *God's glory displayed in the face of Christ* in jars of clay, disposable paper cups, to make this clear: It is Jesus' glory, not ours.

Paul pulls no punches. We are *hard pressed on every side*. Life is full of hardships and persecution. But we survive. We don't despair. We are always aware that Jesus has not abandoned us. He will keep us from destruction. We always carry Jesus' sacrifice inside us, the Cross. We share about his sacrificial death so that others may have *life at work* in them. Death nips at our heels, but it produces life in others. If we stand firm, we are fulfilling God's plan—reproducing spiritual life in those around us.

## SESSION 8: QUESTIONS WITH ANDREW AND NORINE

Beyond the final teaching, Andrew and his wife took time to speak about where they have been and what they have learned. To answer questions. It is a kind of encouraging, “after-action” report. I clearly hear their passion and their humility. I resonate with their hunger to serve God at any cost. I hope you have been as blessed by this video series, and by them, as I have. Soli Deo Gloria!

### QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION OR REFLECTION

- 1) What answers from Norine and Andrew spoke to you?
- 2) Are there questions you would have liked them to answer?
- 3) How has the **Prepare to Stand** series influenced your thinking?

### ACTION STEPS

- ✓ Ask God honestly, “What must I do now to help other Christians prepare to stand?”
- ✓ Should you forward this link on? Share it with your pastor or leadership team?
- ✓ Pray, “Lord Jesus, I place my full trust in you. You will protect your church. But as things become more difficult, help me become more steadfast and bolder. Give me the words, the opportunities, and the favor to live my life aloud for you. May I never give up! Amen.”

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