

After Soleimani's Death, Iran's Christians Brace for War and 'Tsunami' of Gospel Opportunity

"We need some aggressive thieves like Zacchaeus and killers like Paul, and we need to take them and polish them."

These are the words of Lazarus Yeghnazar, a devout Iranian Christian, in a Jan. 9, 2020, interview with *Christianity Today*.

Yeghnazar started the nonprofit 222 Ministries International with his wife, Maggie, in 1991, as part of their work to advance Christian evangelism in Iran. They have a valuable, well-informed perspective on the situation in Iran, especially in recent weeks since Iranian military leader Qassem Soleimani was assassinated by a United States' drone strike on Jan. 3, 2020.

Soleimani was an influential, powerful political figure, and his death will have continued international ramifications. *Christianity Today* sought Yeghnazar's opinion on what the fallout might mean for Iran and the nearly one million Christians there.

Yeghnazar maintains that one day soon, there will be outright war on Iranian soil. "When it comes," Yeghnazar said, "It will create a tsunami of disaster and a tsunami of opportunities."

To Yeghnazar, it is most crucial to focus on leadership development in order to be ready for the evangelism opportunities war will bring.

Yeghnazar stated, "If I say to you, 'Here is \$5 million. You

have two choices on how to spend it for the kingdom: You can lead 5,000 people to Christ, or you can develop 10 apostle Pauls.' What would you do? I would not even blink. I would spend it on Pauls every time."

Yeghnazar isn't looking for the rich and influential of society either, but the "aggressive thieves like Zacchaeus and killers like Paul;" raw and zealous Christians to bear the gospel message.

Yeghnazar's perspective is unique, or at least less intuitive than other options. He could also have made it his goal to evangelize a wide swath of the population, as many people as possible, in order to ensure gospel dissemination. But he didn't.

It's reminiscent of a biblical leader who was also preparing a group of people for a difficult future. This leader gathered a few similarly raw, zealous people around him and prepared them, first, to carry his message.

This leader was, of course, Jesus. Jesus spoke to large crowds, but He also spent most of His time alone with His disciples. Only after He was gone did the disciples spread out around the Mediterranean Sea and beyond, starting churches with the gospel charter Jesus had given them.

It is on such unexpected people whom Jesus built His church. Yeghnazar seems to have caught his vision from Jesus: Train up a few faithful followers and send them out.

Christianity is growing faster in Iran than it is almost anywhere else in the world. "More Iranians have become Christians in the last 20 years than in the previous 13 centuries put together," remarked Mark Howard in an article for The Gospel Coalition. However, Yeghnazar also sees that the church in his country lacks a strong leadership structure to sustain it through a crisis.

In 2020, Yeghnazar and his team hope to gather a community of Christians who are equipped to lead the Iranian Church through whatever the future brings.

“One day, Iran will open,” Yeghnazar said. “The way we behave as Christians when that happens will determine the future of the church in Iran.”

“Don’t go after numbers,” Yeghnazar continued. “How deep is the growing church? How committed is the growing church? Because that tsunami will come, and if the seeds have not gone deep in the hearts of the believers, it will wash away. Then we will sit down and lament, ‘Oh, there was no revival after all!’ No, that is not it. We will have lost the opportunity that was before us.”

We can join Lazarus Yeghnazar and 222 Ministries International in prayer for this, for strong leaders to help God’s kingdom to come and His will to be done in Iran and across the globe.
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