From Persecution to Purpose: Malik's Journey of Faith and Resilience in the Face of Adversity

The life story of Djiboutian Malik, who faced severe persecution in his homeland and even from his own family after converting from Islam to Christianity, is one of hardship and trials, but also of God's protection and blessing.

Reflecting on his journey with ALICT and the relationships he has built through his association with the organisation, Malik's heart is filled with gratitude, especially towards Johan Horn, the executive head of ITL/ALICT, as well as his team and the entire ALICT family.

Malik was born in Djibouti as one of six siblings—five brothers and one sister. He is the oldest brother and the second oldest child, with his sister being the firstborn. His parents are still alive; his father is a retired soldier.

He grew up in a strictly religious environment. "I even completed the Quran when I was seven years old," Malik recalls. Like his father, he was deeply committed to his faith and strictly upheld its teachings.

Malik was a natural leader among his siblings, teaching them the Quran even while he was still learning it himself. By the age of seven, he had already memorised the Quran and could recite it. His upbringing was focused on learning, discipline, and being a devout Muslim, leaving little room for the typical joys of childhood.

However, he believes the discipline he gained was beneficial when he joined formal schooling at the age of seven. "I already had discipline from learning the Quran at home, so I had a strong foundation. I immediately became the class monitor, even though I was very young."

It was a fulfilling time for him. He led prayers for the other children and helped his younger brothers, especially when they got into fights with others. "I often had to step in to negotiate and bring peace between them," he recalls.

Malik quickly earned a reputation as a leader. "People called me Sheikh, even though I was very young," he remembers. This was due to his deep knowledge of the Quran, his intellect, and his ability to mediate conflicts and teach others.

In high school, his leadership qualities continued to be recognised. "Whenever I joined a new class or environment, I was often appointed as the monitor." In this role, he was entrusted with significant responsibilities in the classroom.

Besides his leadership roles, Malik excelled academically, consistently achieving top marks. His academic excellence earned him numerous awards throughout his schooling.

At the time, Djibouti was peaceful, with no conflicts threatening the nation. As a result, Malik's father’s military duties posed no danger to the family.

Djibouti gained independence from French rule in 1977, before Malik’s birth, after 110 years of colonisation. He recalls hearing from his father and other elders that some of those who voted for independence later regretted it. "Today, many wish to be part of France again."

The French left a lasting legacy in Djibouti, especially in education, where French became the country’s lingua franca. "Today, we speak French, and that’s a benefit. I can easily travel and teach anywhere in the Francophone world."

Malik is disheartened by the current state of Djibouti’s politics. What was once a democratic nation, he feels, has become a dictatorship. "It used to be free, but now it’s difficult for anyone who truly wants to engage in politics," he says, adding that tribal divisions further complicate matters.

After school, Malik pursued a degree in drama in 2004 and earned a degree in literature in 2006, specialising in both Arabic and French literature. He became captivated by drama, particularly the way different scenes are crafted to build a storyline leading to a climactic ending. He started attending classes.

Due to his strict religious upbringing, Malik kept his involvement in drama a secret, even from his family. "After two years, when I received my degree, they saw me on TV because I was cast in a role for a TV play." His father was shocked.

Around the same time, another drama was unfolding in Malik's personal life. A friend of his was infatuated with a young woman, the daughter of a prominent figure. However, the relationship turned sour, and his friend ended up being arrested.

Disillusioned, Malik left for Egypt to take part in a drama production, which turned out to be a success. After two weeks, a friend helped him secure a job, which he focused on for a while.

Malik then became involved with the same woman who had caused trouble for his friend. As the relationship grew serious, Malik was summoned for a discussion with her father. Unwilling to commit, he decided to end the relationship, which led to significant problems. Her father was furious, and Malik had to flee to the Red Sea.

For six months, tensions remained high, and during that time, Malik had to go into hiding to avoid being found. He remained patient, sleeping near the ocean while the police and army searched for him. Fortunately, his father, who was in the defence force, had contacts in other departments and was able to keep him informed.

This event, however, did not sever his friendship with the woman, and to this day, they maintain a bond of mutual respect.

Regarding her father, it took some time, but eventually, a good relationship also developed between him and Malik.

As a young man, Malik grappled with profound life questions. His primary concern was about life after death and how one could be certain about what would happen to their soul. He sought guidance from a sheikh, among others, but was not satisfied with the answers he received, which drove him to continue searching.

"I was well aware of the foundation they had," he explained. "It was essential for me to engage in discussions with these people to find the truth—the truth that would set me free. It was important for me to attain that freedom, but I didn't get it from anyone. In fact, some even responded by saying, 'We will kill you if you continue this disturbance by asking too many questions.'"

Though he hadn’t initially considered Christianity as a source for answers, his path crossed with that of the priest, and they began to talk.

Malik now believes that God was preparing him to hear the Good News and reached out to him through the priest. “I understand many things now, having matured in the Word of God. Looking back, I can see how far God has brought me and why.”

The priest provided him with many answers, and their conversations gave him clarity. “What helped me was my knowledge of ‘the other world’—the Muslim world. It made it easier to understand how the priest processed my questions and provided answers.”

Around that time, Malik also met three other Christians who greatly impacted his life—one was a German, and the other two were brothers from Ethiopia. Through his interactions with the priest and these three individuals, he eventually decided to commit his life to Christ.

His primary need and prayer were to know more about Christ. However, the decision to give his heart to Christ, and convert from Islam to Christianity, was monumental and came with significant consequences.

“Initially, I thought that when you follow Him, things would become easy because, where I came from, life had not been easy. But I soon realised the true cost of following Him—that my family and everyone around me would hate me and push me aside. In the end, the only One who would love me was Him.”

A major help during this time of searching for truth was immersing himself in Scripture. “I spent a lot of time at the beach reading the Bible. I would go there, sit, and dream because I couldn’t take the Book home with me. I’d read the Bible, hide it, and go to church discreetly, keeping the Holy Book hidden.”

Reading Scripture filled him with hope. “The Bible gave me hope and clearly showed me why Christ came to earth. Yes, the more time we spend with Scripture, the more opportunities the Holy Spirit has to open our spiritual eyes.”

Malik knew well the sacrifice that came with the significant step to give his life to Christ. “Because I read a lot, I knew that Christ said a king shouldn’t go to war without first counting the cost. If you want to build a house, you need to assess if you can finish it. If not, don’t even start. So I was aware of that. I said, ‘I understand, and I’m willing to make the sacrifice rather than stay on the outside.’”

Malik faced a period of hardship. “If I hadn’t gone through all of that, I wouldn’t be able to stand strong today. Looking back, I truly praise God for it.”

Malik even had to prepare himself for potential threats to his life. He carried a knife for protection, expecting that people might come to kill him. He also made a clay grave for himself. The knife symbolised his determination to remain steadfast in his faith. “I didn’t want to deny Christ out of fear. I wanted to hold on to my Saviour, knowing that the thinness of the knife blade symbolised the small distance between my present life and being with Christ forever.”

For those who leave the "true faith" and become Christians, the only punishment is death. Despite this awareness, with the help of the Holy Spirit, he found the strength to make that choice.

Malik began sharing the Gospel. By the time he reached ALICT, he had already engaged in discussions with 25 to 30 people. He also started a discipleship journey with them. Many of these individuals have grown in their faith and continue to stay connected, teaching others and leading fellowships.

Malik led most of them on this discipleship journey with Christ. However, a few of them did fall away, unwilling to stand firm for Jesus. “One man said, ‘I'm losing my wife, I'm losing my children. I can't do it.’ That was his decision.”

Some even betrayed their Christian brothers. “Some of them brought the police to our fellowship.”

One particularly tragic case was that of a man named Abdi. He was betrayed by a friend who pretended to be a Christian. This friend accompanied Abdi to his family, whom he had already alerted to Abdi’s conversion. When Abdi’s family confronted him and asked if he had become a Christian, he said yes, and they shot him.

The situation for Christians in Djibouti remains extremely difficult. Believers meet in secret, with one group gathering in a house that belongs to someone who no longer lives in the country. They are forced to hide their Bibles in this building because they cannot carry them in public. Each person enters the building one by one to avoid attracting attention and leaves the same way. “No one must notice that there’s a meeting. You have to be quiet, and you cannot sing loudly.”

Malik first heard about ALICT while he was in Ethiopia in 2009. A man he didn’t know visited his school, and they went out for coffee. “He said, ‘Malik, I want to give you this opportunity to participate in ALICT,’” and handed him the documents and application forms. “I asked, ‘Do I have to pay for this?’ and he confirmed that I would. I said, ‘OK, I’m trusting God, let’s do this together.’ We submitted our applications, and by the grace of God, everything worked out well.”

For Malik, being part of the ALICT programme in 2011 was an incredible experience. “What really stood out for me was getting to know all these people, my brothers and sisters in Christ. Where I came from, it was not easy to find other Christians.” He found it special to form bonds with these fellow believers, people he could turn to for help, prayer, or any kind of support.

Another highlight was the fellowship, as well as the opportunity to practice his English, which wasn’t very strong at the time. “It was wonderful to talk to them without feeling shy...”

The experiences he had there changed his life. “The person who arrived and the person who left were not the same.”

Malik thoroughly enjoyed his time, particularly the servant leadership. One memorable event was climbing a mountain in Bonnievale, which was a real challenge for him. He took it upon himself to guide a blind brother, Ayub, up and down the mountain. “That was a challenge, but also a blessing,” he said, recounting how they did this in temperatures as low as minus six degrees Celsius. “Coming from Djibouti, which is a very hot place, it wasn’t easy for me.”

There were many sessions on topics like project management and community development, which Malik found highly relevant to his life. “I enjoyed learning how to truly serve. Everyone was serving—there was no one acting like they were the boss. That was a revelation for me.”

When he returned to his country, Malik was prepared to use a skill he had acquired from a missionary doctor from the United States: making eyeglasses to help people with their vision. It took him 16 months to master this skill. He called his business Eternal Vision, with the goal of using part of the income for business and part to serve the community. “It worked for a while, but then my family started demanding a

larger portion of the income.” Additionally, taxes strained the business, and Malik eventually had to close Eternal Vision. He then started another venture, Miracle.

On the positive side, his business allowed him to travel quite extensively and share the gospel. The fact that his business was called Miracle also helped, as people would often ask about the name, giving him the opportunity to testify about his faith.

Malik always held deep respect and love for his family, especially his mother. He continually prayed for them, hoping they would one day become followers of Christ, and come to know the freedom and salvation found in Him.

“The good thing is that my sister and two of my brothers left the country. My sister is in America, and my brothers are in Sweden.” Their experience in the West opened their eyes and helped them better understand what had happened to Malik, and why he had changed so much.

One day, he felt God leading him to speak to his parents and share the gospel with them. That evening, he called Johan Horn from ALICT in South Africa, asking for prayer as he prepared to visit his parents the following day. They prayed together, asking for God's protection and for Malik's words to be blessed. During the events of the next day, he would also be continually in contact with Johan, who prayed with him and encouraged him.

The next morning, he had a very difficult conversation with his parents. “When I shared with them, my mother simply said, ‘OK.’ My father, however, asked whether I was no longer following Mohammed. I told him no.” He explained that he had become a believer, a disciple of Christ. “I said I wasn’t just a Christian; I was a follower of Jesus.”

The male members of the family were called in while Malik was locked in a room. Malik was given one last chance to make a final decision. When he didn’t recant, it resulted in a brutal beating. “It was very, very bad. I remember it clearly because, while they were beating me, I had this image in my mind of Jesus saying, ‘If you deny Me before men, I will deny you before My Father.’” It was only through the power of God that he managed to endure this ordeal.

During this time, Malik was in constant telephonic contact with Johan, who supported him and prayed for him. ALICT managed to transfer some money to Malik, and he moved to Ethiopia, where he stayed for a while with another ALICT brother, Vesvatsyon. Later, he moved to Kenya, where he stayed with Eugene and Doris.

At one point, he decided to face the danger and return to Djibouti. He had to do so in secret and remain hidden to continue serving the church. However, he was eventually caught, transported to the border, and forced to leave the country for Ethiopia.

Then he received the devastating (fake) news that his mother had died. He went back home for the funeral, only to find himself facing an even worse nightmare. Upon arriving at his parents' house, he was met by people who seized him and charged him in court. He was on the brink of receiving a 20-year sentence, but his mother managed to persuade the judge to allow him to leave the country instead. Consequently, he returned to Ethiopia.

He is very grateful that the situation turned out this way and continues to praise God for it. He often reminds his mother of what happened at that time and thanks her for her intervention, expressing his desire for her to come to Christ.

His mother had developed a more open attitude towards his faith. However, in the Muslim world, women are generally seen as having no authority beyond what is granted by their husbands. “Because my mother depends on my father, she cannot make decisions for herself.”

She also mentioned to Malik that, at her age, she could not make such a significant change or leave her faith. “Nevertheless, as a mother, she is very open to the choices I have made. She knows me well.”

He is also amazed by how his father’s heart is changing and his increasing openness, which he attributes to the times he has helped his father. “Today, he has great respect for me and even defends me against criticism from others.”

During his previous illness, his father had asked Malik to pray for him. “I prayed for him, and he recovered. Truly, the hand of God is at work.”

After fleeing again, Malik ended up in Kenya, where he served at a child evangelist fellowship, responsible for that entire region, including Somalia and the coast, while working from Kenya.

He attempted to start a similar ministry in Djibouti, but it proved challenging. “Children are a very sensitive issue. It wasn’t easy, so I had to stop that ministry. However, I shifted my focus to making disciples, engaging with people, and creating doubt in their minds.”

In Kenya, he stayed with Doris and Eugene, also from the ALICT group, and became part of their family. He had a special time with them and their children. He still returns to Kenya from time to time to teach, particularly among the Somali Kenyans.

Malik is very grateful for the care and support he received from the broader ALICT family. He has been involved with the organisation for many years and hopes to return to South Africa one day to express his thanks in person.

In the meantime, he did return to Djibouti once more but received a serious warning. This time, it was his father, who had had a change of heart, advising him to leave the country as his uncles would otherwise kill him.

Malik received a scholarship to study at a Bible college in Hawassa, Ethiopia, from 2015 to 2019. He graduated in 2019 and then continued with his Master's Degree in Theology. When COVID-19 hit, he returned to Djibouti, which gave him another opportunity to start teaching fellowship with Christ in his home country, partnering once again with organisations sharing the same mission.

Meanwhile, he had met a special Somali woman and married her. They have a son. His wife "loves him more than he loves himself", and he considers her a blessing. "She is the greatest blessing in my life. People say I am fortunate to have a Somali wife who loves me. But sometimes, when I look back at all the fleeing and hardships I endured, I feel I deserve some kindness in my life, and I am very grateful for it.

"The major lesson from my life journey is that we are called to follow Christ, and we will pay a price for it. So, we must keep following Him. No matter what the situation is, we have an Advocate who stands with us. I love what Jesus said when He gave us the Great Commission with the promise: 'I will be with you till the end of the world.'"

"And I see through my life that He is with me. I still see it, and I will continue to see it in the future. Because I believe, as Paul said, if I live, I live for Christ; if I die, I die for Christ. So, both are beneficial for me."

He is clear about his calling: to make disciples. "For me, it is important to see people in my country, Djibouti, come to Christ." He is currently working with specific groups in Djibouti, Ethiopia, and Kenya, teaching them about discipleship and walking with them on this journey. His experience has shown that doors are opening wherever he goes, allowing him to engage in discipleship and fulfil the Great Commission—the calling God has placed on his life.