

From the Ashes of War

Early in the morning of Feb. 24, 2022, a phone call abruptly awakened me. I glanced at the blurry screen to see the time: 5:30 a.m. The name on the caller ID was my pastor's. I fumbled in the dark, trying to answer, brushing away an uneasy feeling that something was terribly wrong.

Tapping the green button, I immediately heard my pastor's voice, firm but hushed.

"It's started. They're bombing Kyiv."

A wave of emotions flooded over me. My wife and I sat up in bed. Shocked, we had no idea what to do. The piercing wail of air sirens blasted through the streets of this city—sirens that had been silent since World War II.

Our hearts raced. We weren't groggy anymore. We scrambled to pack our bags. Within a few hours, we left our apartment and drove to the missions base in the next city.

There was no way I could have adequately braced myself for the nonstop chaos that confronted us in the weeks and months ahead. Within hours after the war in Ukraine started, the YWAM Ternopil missions base was transformed into a refugee rescue center. Millions of Ukrainians were headed west, and many of the fleeing civilians flooded into our city. Here was our opportunity to join God in His supernatural work among us—and because we took that opportunity, we watched Him do great things.

When the new refugees arrived at our base, they were hungry and frightened. They just wanted a place to sleep and recover. In a few days, most of them would continue west in their evacuation into western Europe.

Air sirens continued to blast—unwelcome reminders that the

Russian invasion was real. Our phones rang constantly with calls from people who needed help or wanted to help us.

During air alarms, strangers rushed to the basement of our building, huddled together on mattresses thrown on the ground, waiting for the sirens to cease. Everyone's eyes were glued to their phone screens to follow the latest developments on the defense of Kyiv and other major Ukrainian cities under siege.

Testimonies Amid Ukraine's Trails

When my wife and I finally had some quiet moments, people shared their stories with us. In one instance, we heard of a group that took cover in a two-story building. One among them was a follower of Jesus, and during the bombing, he faithfully prayed for the protection of his companions.

While the frightened group waited, a rocket broke through the house, exited through the wall and landed in the yard without exploding. Every life was spared. After seeing this and other instances where this man's prayers were answered, the group began sharing with others how God had miraculously protected them.

We heard another story of a family caught in an area that was being heavily bombarded by artillery. They too began to ask God for His protection. When a missile came crashing into the house, it didn't detonate. Everyone in the house survived.

Many similar testimonies continue to surface amid the mayhem of this horrific war. Certainly, God's hand has been at work.

More incredible moments have left a lasting impression on Ukraine's people. In the first days of the war, before any international government agencies or private relief groups were able to initiate a large-scale rapid response, churches all across Ukraine responded to the cry for help. Because they knew their city well and were connected to other Christian groups, they quickly initiated logistics and emergency

efforts, and as a result, countless lives were saved.

Within 48 hours after the war began, churches throughout the country were transformed into refugee centers, bomb shelters and warehouses for food and medicines. Vans and buses were mobilized on evacuation missions, often driven by deacons, ushers or church volunteers. If anyone needed help, they were almost sure to find it at any local church.

Panic hit the country, but as the terror and chaos escalated, those seeking help were welcomed into churches where they experienced an environment of genuine care among Ukraine's Christians. An unprecedented collaboration, unseen before the war, arose among various denominations, one of the greatest displays of the love of God in the body of Christ I have ever witnessed.

Everyone worked together to do whatever they could to help as many people as possible. As millions of Ukrainians made their way westward, searching for safety in Poland, Latvia or Germany, most people encountered a Christian group offering a helping hand along the way. Because of this, hundreds of thousands saw Jesus' love and heard the gospel.

Prayers in a War Zone

When it became known that Russian forces had almost reached Kyiv, locals responded with an immediate evacuation effort to rescue people stranded in cities already under active siege or in the direct line of an impending attack. Since few Ukrainians own cars, people had difficulty evacuating on their own. Hearing about the need for vehicles, churches in different countries rushed to the Ukraine/Poland border with buses and vans.

Volunteers drove on dangerous roads to war zones while being covered in prayer. Those who stayed behind prepared to receive refugees. One evacuation team later described to me their need to stay sensitive to their surroundings and to avoid any roads

they sensed weren't safe. They traveled off-road and through farm fields on alternate routes to reach bomb shelters full of people waiting to escape the explosions.

The situation now grew even more dangerous. Russian forces were targeting evacuation vehicles, and some brave believers lost their lives when their vans were bombed. Their colleagues later saw the charred vehicles, a testimony to the selflessness of Ukrainian Christians who gave their lives in this war.

Still more horror stories emerged from the crisis. Some of our friends posted accounts on social media about missionaries and volunteers killed while they were helping refugees escape. Yet even this did little to stop the determination of this army of courageous believers in Jesus.

One group of volunteers was headed back from a rescue mission when they drove across a bridge over a river. Minutes later, they heard the roar of a missile hitting and destroying the bridge.

As our van drove into a heavily militarized Kyiv to reach a church where people were waiting for rescue, we could sense the grim atmosphere of doom hanging over the once-bustling city. Soldiers stood among military posts. Dozens of destroyed cars littered the area. Slowly, we grasped the reality of Putin's invasion.

I could hardly wrap my mind around the desolation of my home city. When we pulled up to the church, tired groups of quiet civilians shuffled to the waiting vans. Families hugged their fathers and sons goodbye; most men of fighting age stayed back to defend the city.

As we prepared to leave, I asked those in my van to pray for God's protection. After we prayed, I shifted gears and prepared to exit the parking lot.

Suddenly, a young boy in the back of the van let out a high-pitched sob. "I want Papa!" he screamed.

My heart broke. I couldn't say anything; I only listened to his distraught mother trying her best to comfort him.

As refugee centers in the west filled, the people arriving from the war zones refused to sit idle. At our base, people wasted no time looking for ways to assist. They helped prepare food, cleaned the floors and bathrooms, and loaded vehicles with food and supplies. Each day was filled with activity.

Once they arrived, most people realized they were in a Christian community. In the evenings during worship gatherings, some would come to hear a short sermon. When leaving the center for points farther west, many politely thanked the Christians for their help. Others poured out gratitude when they found out everything was free and payment would be refused.

Moments like these encouraged us to keep us going, even as news reports of the Russian attacks continued. One night, after our meeting with evacuation drivers, a young man asked me, "How can I be saved?" After he heard the gospel, he believed in Jesus and prayed for forgiveness of his sins. Within days, we set up a small inflatable pool and baptized him.

Miracles in the Midst of Tragedy

A heartbreaking scenario was taking place on Ukraine's borders daily. Men who brought their families to the border held their wives and kids in long embraces before sending them to safety in Europe, unsure when or if they would see their loved ones again.

The women then had to travel on their own with their children while preparing to face the uncertainties of war. Many of them armed themselves with pepper spray and kitchen knives. As they

got ready to cross the border, they threw the prohibited items away, leaving a growing pile of crude weapons scattered by the fences.

At these same border crossings, missionaries came from all over the world to aid this unending wave of people. Weary travelers received hot meals and heard the gospel. As they patiently waited in long lines, thousands of refugees received personal prayer and responded to the message of Jesus, often breaking down in tears when someone shared about God's love and comfort.

A small number of volunteers also took posts in cafes and other gathering places to keep a covert watch on any suspicious activities. God allowed them to stop a number of sex traffickers posing as volunteers from abducting young women who were looking for help.

By September of this year, almost 7 million Ukrainians have fled to Europe seeking refuge since the start of the war. Having lost everything, they have been facing the challenge of navigating life in a new country. One of the greatest difficulties refugees face is the loss of the community they have grown to love back home. But along with this, the hardship they have experienced has awakened an acute awareness of their need for God's help. Hearts that were once closed have begun to open, and people are now willing to listen to someone share about the need for prayer and trust in God.

All of this has created a rich environment of spiritual openness. As a result, new churches are being planted in countries where Ukrainians have taken refuge. Prior to the war, many of these nations had little or no spiritual community for Ukrainians. Due to the language barrier and cultural differences, integration into the churches already established in their hosting countries hasn't been easy.

But as horrible as it is, this war has opened a door for

passionate believers to gather people together and form new spiritual communities among refugees dispersed in various nations in Europe. I have been at a water baptism in Denmark and have seen reports of the same happening in the Czech Republic. In these nations, and certainly in others as well, the gospel is spreading, certain proof that God can work all things together for good.

As this spiritual awakening continues in Europe, cities in Ukraine are also seeing a renewed movement of evangelism among those traumatized by the upheaval of war. Centers that have been steadily providing food packets to displaced families in their cities have taken a step further to build a deeper connection with them. Small prayer groups and Bible studies are growing at an explosive rate as people's hearts are opening up to hear about how to have a relationship with God.

In one southern city, I have witnessed people who initially came to a local church to receive food packets but now are attending gospel meetings. Hunger for God's Word has been steadily growing and bearing fruit.

In regions north of Kyiv, which was liberated from Russian forces in April 2022, aid efforts have been redirected. Multiple groups have already joined hands to adopt these communities to prepare them for the difficult winter months ahead.

Already over 100 homes have been provided, and many more are underway. All of this is happening only a few months after the same streets were ravished by the devastation and death of war.

In all of this, we continue to trust that greater things are still ahead for us. This war has taught me that life is not as much about what I can build, but about what I can *give*. We often become paralyzed when we face things we don't know how to handle. Yet when we feel too timid to move forward because

we don't know how, the example of Jesus shines brightly from the pages of Scripture, leading us through what we have never experienced.

The task ahead in Ukraine is monumental, but it becomes feasible when I consider the fact that God does His work through His glorious church. His kingdom does not depend on me, and that is a cause for peace and joy. I have seen in these last few months that His hand is visible in all He does—even when I don't see it at first. In the midst of Ukraine's war, I have discovered that His love always overpowers the rage of Satan's darkness.

Dennis and Anya Melnichuk are missionaries living in Eastern Europe with a vision of a missions movement for the unreached peoples of the world with the gospel. They lead Awakened Generation and have extensively ministered both in the United States and internationally. To learn more, or to donate to help the Ukrainian church, go to .