

On War's 3rd Anniversary, Seeing Hand of God in Ukraine Ruins

Just a week ago, I stood in the ruins of what was once a high-end, beautiful hotel in Odesa, Ukraine. And I couldn't help but think that just one week before that, I had been sitting in my comfortable home watching a news report about a rocket striking a hotel in Odesa.

Now I was there, in what remained of that very hotel. I marveled at how a rocket had reduced this opulent, grand old place to ruins. It struck me then so powerfully that it doesn't matter if it's the humble home of a single mother with small children, the shack of an elderly woman struggling to survive the frigid winter or a high-end hotel—war does not discriminate. It comes for everyone and for everything.

It was my fourth trip to Ukraine. I came as chairman of the board of the International Fellowship of Christians and Jews (The Fellowship), which has been on the ground in Ukraine for years—decades in fact—delivering aid to the poor and downtrodden, the neediest of the needy, the most isolated of Jewish people in the world.

Today, Ukraine is marking a grim anniversary. Three years ago, on Feb. 24, 2022, the war started. And it drags on today. Yael Eckstein, our president and CEO, was there a week before it started—she saw all too clearly what was coming and wanted to be sure The Fellowship was prepared to serve its people.

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The objective of the latest mission was both to inspect and measure the devastation and decimation of the land and its buildings, and to bring comfort and hope to those vulnerable Jews whose lives have been forever changed by this conflict. It seemed like every elderly Jewish woman I spoke with during this trip had the same story: She lost her father in World War II and lost her grandson in this Russian-Ukrainian War.

But amid all the suffering was something truly remarkable: In this country ravaged by three years of war, I saw the hand of God in the ruins.

When I arrived with The Fellowship team in Odesa, we went to a space where a rocket had fallen into the earth leaving a crater the size of a school bus. On both sides of that crater were tall buildings riddled by shrapnel. But we heard about a room several stories up in one of those buildings that miraculously had not been decimated. And what was unique about that one room was the Torah. The Scriptures were sitting there, planted on a windowsill. The Word of God had not been destroyed.

Our final visit was to a 90-year-old woman who was entirely stooped over so that when she stood or tried to walk, you couldn't see her face. But when she sat down, we could speak, looking each other in the eye. In that place that seemed so forgotten, so forlorn, so forsaken, she made me laugh. She said, "I heard there was an American looking for old Jewish women, and I prayed, 'Lord don't let me die before he gets here.'"

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Someone had given her a Bible that included pictures. It was in Ukrainian, and there's no way I would've known what it was had it not been illustrated. When she opened it, it landed in

Genesis 28, where Jacob dreams of a ladder reaching to heaven. On one page was an illustration of Jacob lying in a dark space with his head upon a stone. On the other page was an open heaven with angels, ascending and descending.

We looked at this together, and she said to me, "That's who you are ... You're an angel sent from heaven to bring blessings to an old Jewish woman on earth." And then she started speaking words of blessing over my life and over my generations, and she said, "When I see my God I'm going to tell Him about you."

Three years of war. We read in the Bible, our book, that there is nothing new under the sun. So it is with war—wars come and wars go. But so many people, like the dear woman I met, can't flee the war—they have no choice but to remain. Their poverty remains too, and their hurt, and their anguish at all they have lost.

But we will remain too, to bring food and other life-sustaining supplies that they will need. To let them know they are not forgotten. And we will do so with the assurance that also comes to us from that very book: The grass withers, the flower faces, but the word of our God will stand forever" (Isa. 40:8, ESV). May we continue to pray for peace and provide aid that will fill the needs of all of God's suffering people trapped amid this dreadful conflict.

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Bishop Paul Lanier serves as chairman of the Board of Directors for The International Fellowship of Christians and Jews. He founded Hope Community Church in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, in 1990 with his wife, Debbie.