

Use Psalm 46 As a Weapon as You Pray for Ukraine

My new friend Serhii Pantonenko doesn't speak much English, but when he shared his story with me last weekend I could understand his pain. Like so many other Ukrainian refugees who have come to the United States in recent months, Serhii is weighed down by despair.

"When the war started we realized that our religious freedoms would be gone," says Serhii, who served as a youth leader in his church. "But spiritually it was good for us. We learned how to trust God."

I met Serhii at Grace Church, a Ukrainian Pentecostal congregation in Erie, Pennsylvania. Serhii is one of dozens of Ukrainian refugees who have made the Erie church their new home in the past few months.

A native of Nova Kakhovka, in the Kherson region of southern Ukraine, Serhii, 31, got used to bombings. One night, when Ukrainian forces blew up a stash of Russian weapons, all the windows within a three-mile radius blew out. He eventually lost his job as a journalist, and then Russian forces confiscated the Pentecostal church he had attended most of his life.

The Russians took over Nova Kakhovka 18 months ago. Serhii's pastor had to flee to Europe because he worried that he might be arrested. Today, the church building is still occupied by Russian soldiers, and the remaining congregants meet in the basement of another building.

Another young man I met in Pennsylvania, Myroslav Malyshev, 22, was working in an information technology job when the war started. Like Serhii, who is his cousin, Myroslav eventually had to flee to America to find safety. It wasn't an easy

transition.

“Every day there was an explosion. It was depressing,” says Myroslav, who also led youth meetings in different apartment buildings after the occupation began. “But I am very happy that I found a church here in America.”

“It’s easier to breathe now that I’m here,” adds Serhii. “There’s no constant fear. But I sometimes struggle with guilt. Did I betray the people I left behind? Both of my parents are still in Ukraine.”

Approximately 280,000 Ukrainian refugees have settled in the United States since the Russia-Ukraine war began on February 24, 2022. While in Erie I also interviewed a Pentecostal pastor from the Donetsk region, in Eastern Ukraine, which is currently occupied by Russian forces. His church is now closed, and church members who are still there are meeting secretly in homes.

“This is a spiritual conflict,” the pastor told me. “The Russians want to return to being the Soviet Union.” The pastor, his wife and their three children are now safe in the United States, but they grieve for those they left behind.

Serhii noted that Russian soldiers have tortured Ukrainian citizens, sometimes with electric shocks, “and some people will not even say what was done to them because it was so shameful,” he says. In one nearby city, Russian forces shot a pastor and his son. Just last weekend, a Pentecostal pastor named Nikolai Tatishvili was killed when Russian soldiers shelled his house in the Kherson region.

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“The Russians put back the statue of Lenin in our city, which had been removed after the Soviet Union collapsed,” Serhii

said. "The spirit of the Soviet Union is still alive."

Last Sunday, when I spoke at Grace Church in Erie, I called all the recent immigrants from Ukraine to the altar so I could pray for them. I first read Psalm 46, which is also known as "Luther's Psalm," because it was Martin Luther's favorite. It was the basis for his popular hymn, "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God."

The psalm is a powerful reminder that God is our refuge when the world is shaken by wars and disasters, and when the devil is attacking the church. It includes these words: "The Lord of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our stronghold ... He makes wars to cease to the end of the earth" (v. 7, 9).



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This is the hope we have when we face wars, political conspiracies, crime waves, pandemics, economic instability, natural disasters and persecution. We can rest in faith, and we can sleep soundly at night, because we know that Jesus is the Lord of Hosts—a mighty warrior who will one day defeat every enemy.

Our Ukrainian friends need to know this truth especially during this diabolical invasion. Please pray for them. But remember that Psalm 46 is for us all. As you face your own battles with fear, anxiety and doubt, take up Luther’s psalm and use it as an invincible weapon to crush Satan’s head.

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