

PROVIDENCE WORKING THROUGH DISPLACEMENT

Why Did God Allow War to Come to Ukraine?

“Now those who were scattered went about preaching the word.”

— Acts 8:4

I recently met a pastor in Rivne, Ukraine, while teaching a seminar on sermon preparation. Despite the language barrier, the men at his table were remarkably engaged—almost borderline rowdy.

As I explained that a sermon should have an introduction, a body, and a conclusion, I asked the pastors to draw a snowman to illustrate the three parts. This particular pastor insisted that his snowman should have legs. I found that curious. Why would a snowman need legs? Yet he was determined: his snowman needed legs

The pristine white church, with its high ceilings, echoed with laughter. Although we did not speak the same language, we immediately began forming a friendship.

During lunch, while enjoying homemade pastries and tiramisu, he asked whether I knew the word Shibboleth and understood its biblical significance. Through the translator, I told him that I did. In Judges 12:5–6, the Gileadites used the pronunciation of “Shibboleth” to identify fleeing Ephraimites.

Because of the rapidly growing fellowship between us, he wanted to teach me a Ukrainian word that soldiers use to distinguish Ukrainians from Russians. He patiently pronounced it for me while I stumbled repeatedly over the syllables. I may have attempted the word fifty times and pronounced it correctly only once, but he welcomed me as a brother anyway.

Later, during a pastoral-care dinner, we left the building ahead of the others, some of whom remained upstairs in the restaurant, finishing dessert and grabbing selfies with ministry partners they had not seen for some time and might not see again. He and I wandered outside and stood together in a bustling parking lot. Leaves rustled in the evening air. Horns sounded. Patrons entered and exited the restaurant. Conversations rose and fell around us.

Then he asked me a poignant question.

“Why did God allow war to come to Ukraine?”

Everything fell silent.

Explaining why a snowman does not need legs—or why a sermon’s conclusion does not need additional information—is relatively easy. But we were no longer discussing sermon preparation. We were dealing with the heart of a concerned and heartbroken pastor.

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“If God asked us to send missionaries to Africa, we did,” he continued. “If God asked us to send missionaries to Moscow, we did. If God asked us to send missionaries to Poland, we did. So why did God bring war to Ukraine?”

“Well,” I began, leaning heavily upon the help of the Holy Spirit and carefully avoiding the easy answers that often sound hollow in the presence of genuine suffering, “we must trust the providence of God.”

In that moment, God brought to my mind the imagery of Deuteronomy 32:11. Moses described the Lord as an eagle that “stirs up its nest,” hovers over its young, spreads its wings, catches them, and carries them.

“This is God stirring the nest of history,” I told him.

Through the translator, I explained as best I could what God’s providence and sovereignty mean in such a painful moment. Providence does not make war good. It does not excuse the wickedness of aggressors, diminish the suffering of victims, or remove the responsibility of those who commit evil. Providence means that even when human beings act wickedly, God remains sovereign. Evil may be active, but it is never autonomous. War may disrupt the lives of God’s people, but it cannot disrupt God’s purposes.

God is using even this terrible war for the furtherance of His glory and the sending of additional witnesses throughout the world.

This is precisely what He has done before.

Following the death of Stephen, “a great persecution” arose against the church in Jerusalem, and the believers were “scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria” (Acts 8:1). Yet their displacement did not silence their witness: “Now those who were scattered went about preaching the word” (Acts 8:4).

Acts 11 returns to these displaced believers:

“Now those who were scattered because of the persecution that arose over Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia and Cyprus and Antioch” (Acts 11:19).

Persecution drove them from their homes, but providence directed their steps. They departed as displaced believers and arrived as deployed witnesses. Their scattering eventually contributed to the birth and growth of the church at Antioch. That church would become the great missionary-sending church of Acts 13, commissioning Barnabas and Saul for the work to which the Holy Spirit had called them (Acts 13:1–3).

What persecution scattered, providence planted.

Ukraine is presently experiencing everything war brings with it: conscription, displacement, separation, depression, trauma, and death. Some men have left the country, leaving churches without pastors, homes without fathers, and communities without many of their young men. Others remain under the constant threat of being called into military service.

Families anxiously wait for news from the front. Men who have served return home carrying wounds that cannot always be seen. Some struggle with survivor’s guilt, while others bear the emotional burden of never having served on the front lines. Post-traumatic stress, grief, uncertainty, and exhaustion contribute to an emotional drain that can spiral into hopelessness.

Driving through the Ukrainian countryside, one can be overwhelmed by the beauty of sunflower and wheat fields, only to encounter cemeteries dotted with Ukrainian flags. Each flag marks the grave of someone slain in the war.

The pain of the flags became palpable as we heard the story of a mother sitting beside the grave of her recently killed son. She struck up a conversation with a stranger simply because she wanted another opportunity to speak his name and remember his life. The sight was enough to tear the heart from one’s chest.

Yet these things have not extinguished the spirit of the saints or stopped the growth of Christ’s church.

In fact, this modern diaspora—this painful scattering of Ukrainians—has carried believers into other parts of Europe. Wherever they have gone, many have preached the gospel, gathered believers, and planted churches. The church continues to stand in Ukraine under the threats of conscription, displacement, trauma, and death. At the same time, the gospel is spreading through Ukrainians who now live beyond their country’s borders.

The church is suffering, but it is still standing.

The church is scattered, but it is still speaking.

The church is grieving, but it is still growing.

I am concerned not to speak casually about the suffering of others. I would never reduce the death of a son, the grief of a mother, the trauma of a soldier, or the heartbreak of a pastor to a convenient sermon illustration. War is evil. Death is an enemy. Grief is relentless.

Nevertheless, God is real.

The God who caused the gospel to advance through the scattering of the Jerusalem church is still working through the displacement of His people. The war did not create the mission of the church, and the war cannot cancel it. Borders may close, homes may be abandoned, and congregations may be scattered, but the Word of God is not bound (2 Timothy 2:9).

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I cannot claim to know every purpose hidden within the sovereign counsel of God. Some answers remain veiled from us. But the witness of Acts teaches that displacement does not mean divine abandonment. Sometimes God stirs the nest so that His witnesses will be carried to places they might never otherwise have gone.

The scattering of the saints becomes the spreading of the gospel.

If the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church, then persecution is often the wind that scatters that seed. Stephen fell, the church scattered, and the Word spread. Stephen was buried, but the gospel was not. Persecution scattered the saints, providence planted them, and the Word multiplied. War is not persecution in precisely the same sense, but God is again working through displacement. What violence intends to bury, God causes to bear fruit. What war displaces, providence deploys. What suffering scatters, God plants for the advancement of the gospel and the glory of His name.