

STRUCK DOWN, BUT NOT DESTROYED

The Resilience of the Church in Ukraine

“We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed.”

—2 Corinthians 4:8–9

One of the things that struck me most during my recent trip to Ukraine was the resilience of its people—particularly of Christ’s church.

Our journey carried us from Lviv to Kyiv, from Kyiv to Rivne, from Rivne to Lutsk, and then back to Lviv. Along the way, Ukraine unfolded before us in remarkable beauty. Grape vines lined the roads, while plum and apple trees planted in private yards stretched their fruit-laden arms over fences and into the streets. Charming country cottages sat behind carefully trimmed hedges and well-tended roses. Beyond them, fields of wheat and sunflowers rolled across the countryside, giving little indication that this peaceful land was living under the shadow of war.

The cities possessed a beauty of their own. Cobblestone streets wound past historic theaters, ancient castles, and stone buildings that seemed to have grown directly out of the pavement. After a brief shower, the whole city of Lviv appeared to glisten. Coffee shops nestled inside old buildings and spilled onto the sidewalks, their tables branching into the streets. Ancient Orthodox churches still conducted services in the middle of the day, their bells and prayers sounding over the bustle of modern life. Street photographers captured the likenesses of passing strangers, hoping to earn a few hryvnias. At the same time, patrons crowded into McDonald’s until the lines and conversations spilled through the doors and onto the sidewalks. Everywhere we looked, old and new, sacred and ordinary, stood side by side.

Through this beautiful and burdened country, we traveled from city to city conducting conferences on sermon preparation and providing pastoral care. It was an extraordinary privilege to sit with Ukrainian pastors and their wives and listen as they opened their hearts. Behind the charming cottages, crowded cafés, ancient churches, and glistening streets were people carrying the crushing weight of war; a war threatening their families, testing their churches, and tearing at the cultural fabric of the country they love.

The scars of war repeatedly interrupted the beauty. We drove past homes torn open by drones, apartment buildings rendered uninhabitable by missile strikes, and newly rebuilt bridges that the invading Russian army had destroyed. Ukraine’s determination to rebuild was visible beside

Russia's attempt to ruin: shattered buildings stood as reminders of what war had taken, while reconstructed bridges testified that the Ukrainian people were still standing, still rebuilding, and still moving forward.

We went to teach them, but their faithfulness taught us.

The words of the apostle Paul repeatedly came to mind:

"We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed" (2 Corinthians 4:8–9). Paul does not deny the pressure. He does not minimize the pain or pretend that faithful believers are unaffected by suffering. They are afflicted, perplexed, persecuted, and struck down. Yet none of those realities is ultimate. Affliction does not crush them. Perplexity does not drive them to despair. Persecution does not mean they have been abandoned. Being struck down does not result in their destruction.

That is biblical resilience.

Christian resilience is not the ability to avoid being struck. It is the grace to remain faithful after being struck. It is not the absence of grief, fear, or exhaustion. It is the sustaining power of God within fragile people who continue to believe, worship, preach, and serve despite what they have suffered.

I saw that kind of resilience in Ukraine.

A Pastor at the Front

During one dinner, I sat beside a pastor who told me about the difficulties of shepherding his congregation during the war. His ministry did not stop at the walls of his church. He traveled to the front and visited hospitals where wounded soldiers were being, quite literally, mended back together.

There, among broken bodies and traumatized minds, he conducted Bible studies, shared the gospel, prayed with soldiers, and ministered to them as faithfully as he could. He carried the Word of God into places filled with wounds that surgeons could see and others that only God could fully know.

While this pastor was ministering to the suffering of other families, war entered his own.

His wife's brother went missing. Several months had passed, and the family had received no word from him. They did not know where he was, what had happened to him, or whether he would ever return.

The pastor was attempting to hold out hope to wounded soldiers while carrying an unanswered grief within his own family. He ministered to people waiting for news while he and his wife were also waiting for news. He prayed with families living with uncertainty while that same uncertainty sat at his own table.

He was afflicted, but not crushed.

He was perplexed, but not driven to despair.

A Question in the Parking Lot

Another pastor asked me a question that I have not been able to forget.

We were standing outside a restaurant following an evening of pastoral care. Inside, pastors and their wives were finishing dessert, taking pictures, and enjoying fellowship with ministry partners they had not seen for some time—and might not see again for some time.

Outside, this pastor looked at me and asked, “Why did God allow war to come to Ukraine?”

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

This was not a theoretical question posed in a classroom. It was the cry of a shepherd trying to interpret the suffering of his people through the sovereignty of God.

His question revealed that resilience does not mean possessing all the answers. Paul said that believers could be “perplexed.” There are moments when God's people do not understand what God is doing. Faith does not eliminate every question. It gives us somewhere to stand while we ask them.

The Ukrainian church is standing there now—between what it knows about God and what it cannot understand about the war.

It is perplexed, but not driven to despair.

A Shepherd for Fifteen Widows

We heard the prayer request of another pastor who was deeply concerned about the fifteen widows in his congregation. Many had lost their husbands because of the war. He wondered how the church would find the resources to care for them faithfully.

What made his concern even more remarkable was that he had never expected to occupy his present position. He had not been the senior pastor. He had not even been the next person in line. In fact, he had not officially been on the pastoral staff. But after the loss and departure of other leaders, he stepped forward to fill the gap.

He did not receive the position because he had carefully planned a path toward it. War created a vacancy, grief created a responsibility, and love compelled him to serve.

Now he carries the responsibility of preaching to a wounded congregation, leading a disrupted church, and caring for fifteen widows whose husbands will not return.

The war has exposed a painful shortage of pastoral leadership. We were told that when the full-scale war began, an estimated 30 percent of pastors left the country. It was not necessarily the case that pastors departed at a higher rate than other men.

Some who left may have held conscientious objections to military service; others were likely attempting to protect their families. Whatever their reasons, their departure created significant vacancies in the churches they left behind.

Some congregations called younger ministers into leadership before they expected to serve. Others looked to lay leaders or men who had never imagined becoming pastors. Some churches waited for someone to be provided.

The gap was enormous, but the church did not disappear.

Unexpected shepherds stepped forward.

Men who had not sought a position accepted a responsibility. Believers who had never expected to lead began serving because the church still needed preaching, widows still needed care, families still needed prayer, and the gospel still needed to be proclaimed.

They were struck down, but not destroyed.

A Translator Taken to War

God blessed our team with an extraordinary group of translators. One of them was a man named Serhii. He was around fifty years old, fluent in several languages, and exceptionally skilled at communicating our words to the Ukrainian pastors.

Serhii did more than translate vocabulary. He understood people. He knew how to engage a room, carry the tone of a speaker, and help two groups separated by language experience genuine fellowship. He possessed a servant's heart and was willing to assist us in any way he could.

While traveling home from one of our events, Serhii was stopped by the police and questioned by military officials. When they determined that he was eligible for military service, he was taken to a training center and prepared for deployment.

The man who had spent the previous days translating sermons for pastors was suddenly being trained for war.

Our hearts remain with him. We are praying for him and trusting God to care for him. Serhii is well educated, extensively traveled, and deeply aware of the world around him. But his ultimate confidence does not rest in his education, experience, or abilities. His trust rests in the providence and sovereignty of God.

His circumstances changed in a moment, but his God did not.

He may have been taken from the conference, but he has not been taken from the care of Christ.

He is struck down, but not destroyed.

Pain Written on Their Faces

Ukraine's mandatory military mobilization hangs over men, families, and churches. Pastors are concerned about their congregations, but also about their own wives and children. Congregants worship while carrying the weight of sons, brothers, fathers, and pastors who have been sent to the front.

You can see it on their faces.

They worship passionately, with their eyes focused upon God, but pain still rests heavily upon their brows. Their worship is not the worship of people who have escaped suffering. It is the worship of people who have brought their suffering into the presence of God.

Some have sent sons to the front.

Some have sent brothers.

Some have sent fathers.

Some churches have sent their pastors.

Their singing is not evidence that they do not hurt. Their singing is evidence that their hurt has not silenced their faith. Tears and trust occupy the same sanctuary. Grief and praise rise from the same hearts.

They are afflicted, but not crushed.

The Gospel Travels with Them

Many Ukrainians have been separated from their families, homes, churches, and country. Yet something remarkable has happened wherever Ukrainian believers have gone: they have carried the gospel with them.

They have preached Christ, gathered believers, and planted churches across Europe. This resembles what happened in first-century Jerusalem. After Stephen's martyrdom, persecution scattered the believers throughout Judea and Samaria. Some remained, but many were forced to leave. Yet "those who were scattered went about preaching the word" (Acts 8:4).

Acts 11:19 tells us that these scattered believers traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch. Their displacement became the means by which the gospel entered new places. They lost their homes, but they did not lose their witness. They left Jerusalem, but they did not leave Jesus behind.

The same pattern can be seen among Ukrainian believers. War has displaced them, but it has not disarmed their witness. They carry the gospel across borders, into unfamiliar cities, and among people they might never otherwise have met.

Some have remained in Ukraine and strengthened the churches there. Others have been scattered across Europe and planted new congregations. Whether staying or going, they continue to bear witness to Christ.

What war displaces, providence deploys.

The Source of Their Resilience

The resilience of the Ukrainian church must not be romanticized. These believers are not made of iron. They are not untouched by fear, trauma, exhaustion, or grief. They are jars of clay — fragile human vessels carrying a treasure that does not originate within them (2 Corinthians 4:7).

Their resilience is not rooted in Ukrainian determination alone. It is rooted in the sustaining life of Jesus Christ.

Paul explains that believers carry “in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies” (2 Corinthians 4:10). The power that sustains the church under pressure is the resurrection life of Christ working through ordinary, breakable people.

This is why the church can bend without breaking.

This is why pastors can grieve and still preach.

This is why congregants can weep and still worship.

This is why displaced believers can lose their homes and still plant churches.

This is why a pastor can minister to wounded soldiers while waiting for news of his missing brother-in-law. This is why an unexpected shepherd can care for fifteen widows. This is why a translator taken into military service can continue to trust in the sovereignty of God.

The church in Ukraine is not resilient because the war is bearable. The church is resilient because Christ sustains His people through the unbearable.

Ukraine's churches have been afflicted, but they have not been crushed.

They have been perplexed, but not driven to despair.

They have been attacked, but they have not been abandoned.

They have been struck down, but they have not been destroyed.

The church is wounded, but it is worshiping.

The church is grieving, but it is growing.

The church is scattered, but it is speaking.

The church has been struck down—but by the grace of God, it will not be destroyed.