

Laying It All Down

April 2022

One of the most disturbing things I have heard in my time working for Frontier Fellowship was when I was in Western Ukraine helping the Gypsy or Roma people establish indigenous churches in partnership with the Ukrainian Reformed Church. One of the pastors of the Ukrainian Reformed Church told me about his harrowing experience in a Soviet Union concentration camp during the time of Josef Stalin. He was arrested and put into the camp because he was caught sharing the Gospel with someone under the age of 30. He told me how the Soviet guards forced him and all the other Christian pastors in the camp to play periodically a game of Russian Roulette. Slowly over time, a number of pastors died of self-inflicted gunshot wounds. He never knew if his time would come as he pulled the trigger pointed at his own head at their command. Fortunately, he heard the gun click, instead of fire when he pulled the trigger. When this brave pastor told me his harrowing story 20 years ago, he also said that Ukrainian people would do anything, fight with all their hearts and souls, to prevent the Russians from ever ruling their country again.

As I hear reports of the war in Ukraine today, I marvel at these incredibly brave and skilled Ukrainian soldiers.

They are fearless and driven. They are fighting by risking their lives for their freedom. And I recall the words of that Ukrainian pastor that he and his compatriots would do anything to resist the Russians and their bankrupt ethics to rule over them again. Stalin's concentration camps in Ukraine had left debilitating psychological scars on an entire nation of innocent people. The soldiers today are largely



younger Ukrainians who have heard the horrors of their parents' past. They know that Russian President Vladimir Putin has refused to dishonor Stalin. Putin in fact emulates Stalin in many ways by identifying and often murdering his enemies in the same spirit just like Stalin did. The Ukrainian soldiers would rather die fighting than allow themselves to be ruled again by the iron and ruthless fist of Putin and all that he represents.

During this Holy Week we are reminded of the Last Supper when Jesus shared his parting words with his disciples before being arrested, falsely charged and crucified. At the time, his disciples were perplexed because they did not understand why Jesus needed to die. They were doing everything in their power to convince him to do otherwise. After all, Jesus was God, all powerful, and could perform miracles. However, Jesus insisted that he must die for them, their welfare and the salvation of the world. He told them, "This is my commandment: Love each other in the same way I have loved you. There is no greater love than to lay down one's life for one's friends. You are my friends if you do what I command." (John 15: 12-14)

Very few of us will be required to lay down our lives for the sake of our neighbors or friends. However, we are asked by Jesus every day to lay down our own self interests for the sake of others. The Ukrainian people today are reminding us of what it means to lay down one's life for the sake of others. In recent years, this spirit of self-sacrifice has nearly become dangerously lost in our American culture. Everyone seems to be fighting endlessly for their own self-interest,

their own political agenda, or their own self-worth, rather than serving causes greater than themselves. We need to recapture a spirit of self-sacrifice, empathy, and activate those most important muscles of love again. Daily, there are many ways we can practice sacrificial love by listening, helping, encouraging, and giving our full attention to others. If we begin each day in prayer and ask God to lead us to a person who needs our help or friendship, God will show us that person and give us the strength to serve their interests above our own.



Physical warfare is one thing, but so many of us today are engaged in spiritual warfare often without us even knowing. Too often we forget that this world is still dominated and ruled by Satan and his army of devils. However, as Easter reminds us, Christ's death, resurrection, and power have overcome the world and defeated these dark forces of Satan and sin. Nonetheless, Jesus asks us to be vigilant and prayerful lest we become overwhelmed by these evil tides. We need to be as obedient as soldiers, following the example of Jesus, sharing our love, presence, and the Good News with people in need. Jesus said, "When an evil spirit leaves a person, it goes into the desert, seeking rest but finding none. Then it says, 'I will return to the person I came from.' So it returns and finds its former home empty, swept, and in order. Then the spirit finds seven other spirits more evil than itself, and they all enter the person and live there. And so that person is worse off than before." (Matthew 12:43-45a)

Jim Macdonald, an old friend from college, attends one of my men's online Bible studies. Jim lives in Connecticut. Jim decided this week to donate one of his kidneys to his good friend, Bill, who had been receiving weekly dialysis, hoping for a new kidney, but waiting on a list averaging eight to ten years for a kidney replacement. Tomorrow morning, during this Holy Week, Jim and Bill will be having surgery together and Jim will be giving his friend the kidney he needs to live. Jim along with the rest of us in the Bible study have been inspired by Jesus' example and command to lay down our lives for the sake of others. Jim is inspiring us, too, offering a vivid example as to what it means to love our neighbors as ourselves. If we take time to notice, care, and pray, God will always reveal to us who needs our love, empathy, and attention.

The ultimate battle we face each day is whether we follow our own wills or the Lord's. Are we willing to trust God with control of our lives, or do we feel more comfortable trying to control ourselves? Jesus asks that we hand over our lives so that he can redeem them and give them back to us brand new. In fact, the Bible tells us that we will never discover our true selves and who we were created to be until we relinquish control of our lives to the Lord. Jesus pondered this very thing in the Garden of Gethsemane when he wrestled with the Father as to whether he really needed to experience a gruesome death on the cross for the sake of humanity. However, thankfully for the sake of the world, he concluded, "Your will, not mine," and proceeded to fulfill the mission of his earthly life by dying for all of humanity's sins.



I remember early in my Christian life during my mid-twenties, I did not understand what it meant to die to myself to have Christ live in me. Talk about losing control and sacrificial love, I did not want to become a vanilla flavored, Christian robot, not having much say in my daily life. I was not sure I was willing to trust God that much. Eventually I came

to understand that Christ washes us clean from sin, gives us new life, and sets us on a path of joy and infinite purpose we could never find on our own. By trusting God with our lives, inviting Jesus to live within us, we discover our unique gifts, personalities, and missions in life. It was only then did I come to realize what the Apostle Paul meant when he wrote to the people of Galatia, "My old self has been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me. So I live in this earthly body by trusting in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me." (Galatians 2:20)

The Ukrainian people are fighting for religious, political, and intellectual freedom. Please keep the Christian Ukrainian leaders in your prayers along with their countrymen as they continue their battle against the forces of darkness bearing down on them once again. Until the ways of Stalin and Putin are completely renounced, there will never be true freedom in their land or any other place.

In these times of trial which our world is certainly experiencing today, may we be reminded of these most comforting words Jesus shared with his disciples on the night before he was crucified, "...Here on earth you will have many trials and sorrows. But take heart because I have overcome the world." (John 16:33b)

Hallelujah and Amen!

Sharon, our children and I, wish you a most blessed and joy-filled Easter.