



The Bilyaks in Ternopil, Ukraine

1st Quarter Report, 2024

January

16th trip to Donbas

This time, my plan was turned inside out. I usually begin by ministering to civilians. I unhooked my trailer and cargo for civilians from my car, and then I ministered to the military. This time, the Lord directed the plans so that the meeting with civilians was optimally scheduled for Sunday, the last day of my stay in Donbas. This had its advantages and its difficulties. I had to unload some of the cargo designated for civilians at the hotel where I was staying. I asked to be given a place in the technical room, where the maids wash and iron clothes. After doing that, I had space in my car so that I could buy something for the military. Another problem was to plan the purchase of bread for civilians so as not to lose a day for serving the military. But to buy 150 loaves of bread, you need to come to the bakery in the afternoon, but not in the evening. This is one of the reasons why I leave home at 3 am. An early departure is what allows me to arrive on time for bread. But what if you meet with the military on this day? After all, the military usually cannot adapt to my schedule. I adapt to their plans... The Lord took care of everything. Sasha, a brother from our church, was able to be at the meeting that day from early morning until lunch, which gave me time to buy bread.

My trip began at night from Tuesday to Wednesday. I was on the front line every other weekend, every other Sunday. Today, Monday, I am returning to Ternopil. As soon as I arrived at the hotel, it was Wednesday. The first thing I did was unhook the grocery trailer, put an anti-theft lock on it, and returned to that trailer on Saturday.

I asked the hotel workers to give me space for the boxes and partially unloaded my car. This didn't give me very much space, but I was able to use this space to purchase some useful items for the military. I went to the huge Metro supermarket and bought fruit, chocolate, cookies for the military... My car was again filled. For the next 4 days I met with soldiers. It seems that with each subsequent trip the circle of my military contacts is growing.

As I said above, Christians are more emotionally stable because they have hope. Some of them told me stories of amazing salvation. On Sunday, after 3 meetings with civilians, we met with a believing brother and his unbelieving friends. He has been serving since the first days of the war. This is the father of one of our sisters from church. He was recently injured. It was not a complex wound. However, due to his wound, he could not leave the battlefield himself and he had to hide under a burnt armored personnel carrier (armored vehicle), between the burnt wheels. He said that he saw a drone that tried to fly over him, but the Lord saved him. For almost a day, being wounded, he waited for evacuation, not knowing who might come for him, or whether they would come at all, or whether he would be captured... In the end, he was saved.

I noticed that the guys don't talk about the end of the war, but simply dream of going on vacation to get at least a little rest.

On this trip I had 5 meetings with military personnel. I made purchases at the supermarket 5 times, bought gifts, conveying love from Christians to the military. Such trips have already become a quick thing. First, I need to go in time between sirens, because during alarms the supermarket is closed, and second, I already know where everything is and how much I need.

The standard load for the military includes:

- 2-3 boxes of apples.
- 5-7 boxes of cookies.
- 25-50 chocolates.
- A few boxes of juice or soda.
- Several kilograms of lemons and a kilogram of ginger.
- 4-5 sticks of dry sausage, which can be stored without refrigeration.
- Several kilograms of hard cheese.

During each meeting, the Lord gave the opportunity to share the Word of God with the guys and pray with them. The following thought came to mind: perhaps it's worth holding Communion next time, because some of them have not been able to attend church for a long time and have not taken Communion...

On the last full day of my ministry, we were in Konstantinovka. I did this together with my friend, Pastor Alexander from Bakhmut. This is a large city on the outskirts of the front line. Behind it is the city of Chasov Yar, which has been almost completely destroyed, although it is still controlled by Ukraine. Then Bakhmut, a city unsuitable for life, destroyed by war, there are Russians in it. Konstantinovka is also quite torn apart by the war. There were 17 schools in this city before the war. Only 2 schools out of 17 remained intact. The rest were destroyed by the arrival of powerful missiles. They destroyed houses, businesses, gas stations, and shops. Some houses now have a roof of plastic sheeting. This means that the owners are trying to preserve the building at least partially with hope that in the future they will restore and repair it. There are houses that cannot be restored. There are very active days, when the earth moves from explosions, and there are days that are more or less calm. We found ourselves there on one of the calm days. We heard explosions, but nothing serious. There are churches of God in this war-torn city. We contacted one of these churches, an island of grace in this city. In 2023 alone, this small church baptized 14 people. When the war began, and the city froze from the proximity of the front line, buses and other public transport stopped running here. Schools and shops were closed...

The ministers of this church organized meetings in 3 different districts of the city. These are houses that don't have signs saying, "House of Prayer" or "church." They don't need this because people bring other people. Once, at our church council in Ternopil, a discussion arose about the fact that the door handle to our room was quite scratched and worn-out and looking. I remember that discussion every time I open the doors of the house where this church meets. I specifically went out into the street, turned on the camera and, with the camera, went into the church to show the door of the building, where 14 people had been baptized in a year. Now they don't have time to paint doors, they don't have time to paint door handles, floors... People are the priority. At the very first location, the first address where we arrived, I noticed that the outer windows were covered with sheets of plywood (OSB). Later, when I looked, I saw that the house

opposite had a temporary roof made of plastic sheeting. Locals said that the incoming shell had been recent, but the Lord saved everyone. I asked about the people—was anyone among the believers injured in the shelling? Only one sister received light scratches from the shelling. For them this is a great testimony of God's love and protection. At all 3 locations we held full-fledged worship services, sang, preached, and then distributed food boxes, bread, hygiene, calendars... These people did not come for boxes of aid; they came to worship God. Pastor Evgeniy had not told them that there would be aid available. He told me that if people knew that there would be food, then we would distribute all 140 packages at the first address.

Friends, thank you for your prayers and support of the ministry in Ukraine. Without you, we would not be able to survive ourselves and, moreover, we would not be able to help others.

Please continue to pray for us and support this ministry financially, if possible.

Your brother,
Vitaly Bilyak from Ternopil

February

The life of the church during the war has undergone many changes. We can say that the church is different now than it was before the war. Whatever that means. The first thing that catches your eye is uncertainty. Uncertainty on many points. It's difficult to make long-term plans. Constant sirens and threats of shelling call into question whether we will meet next time. The uncertainty of men is a separate issue. On city streets we constantly see police patrols with employees of the TCC (recruiting office) handing out summonses for mobilization to men. Thank God, our brothers are all here, but there are no guarantees for the next day.

The church has changed regarding ministries. We minister to children and adults, the



poor, displaced, addicted, frontline civilians, and the military. At the same time, we try to support each other and build leaders, prepare people for baptism...

One of the new ministries is a ministry to the wounded in the hospital. A group of our brothers and one sister ministers weekly to military personnel undergoing treatment in Ternopil. This sister, Luda, is quite effective because her husband

was seriously wounded at the beginning of the war and has been left disabled because of this. She spent months in hospitals with her husband. Our ministry to the wounded does not cover even a tenth of this need. I hope that the ministry of other churches will compliment this work. Every week, this group ministering to wounded soldiers and officers of the Ukrainian Armed Forces buys goodies and fruits and with these gifts goes to one of the many departments of one of the many hospitals where wounded soldiers lie. The purpose of all these visits is to support the wounded, share their suffering and, of course, share the good news, the Gospel, with them. As you can imagine, the people in a hospital constantly change. Someone recovers and returns to the front, while others remain disabled for life and return home, or continue rehabilitation in other institutions.

Most of these people are strangers to us. Occasionally someone calls me on the phone from other cities in Ukraine asking me to visit, help, and support a wounded friend.

Over the past month, our Sunday services have been constantly attended by military personnel from the hospitals where our brothers and sister Luda serve.

This situation brings some context to our ministries. For example, recently, on my last trip to the front line, I came under drone fire in Kherson. I will write about this separately in the next letter. In short, I have absolutely no damage, not a scratch on my body, but my car is full of holes. I understand that this is a miracle of God, that this is mercy from the Lord. I



want to tell the church about this. I go to the pulpit, start my story, look into the hall, and there sits a military man from the hospital. I understand that my “unique” case, in which I remained completely preserved, is the everyday life of these guys on the front line. What does my story about God’s mercy to me mean to them if they did not receive such mercy and were wounded? What does this story mean to them when their friends and brothers were killed and died in their arms? This is the new context for the ministry of the church. We must not diminish God’s miracle and His greatness where we see it, and in doing so, give hope and share the Gospel with those people who have gone through the hell of war, or are still going through it now.

Friends, please pray for the ministry of the church in Ukraine. For wisdom when we preach the Gospel, so that the Lord will give the necessary words. For understanding when you just need to silently support, and when you need to speak...

Please pray for the preservation of our church leaders so that the Lord will use ordinary men and women for His glory during this difficult time.

March

Undoubtedly, the event that happened on March 10, 2024, will remain fixed in my memory for the rest of my life. In my Google calendar, I wrote down this event so as not to forget in the following years: my 2nd birthday. In one children’s song there are these words: “...and what a pity that birthdays come only once a year.” I really can’t say that. On March 10, I came under fire, and, by the grace of God, I not only remained alive, but did not receive a scratch. It was a drone attack in Kherson.

This was my 17th trip to the front line. Like all my trips, it was accompanied by the prayers of many people whom I asked to pray. Kherson is a relatively unusual place of ministry for me, since most of my trips are to Donbas. Donbas is the eastern front, and Kherson is the southern front. It is through Kherson that the road runs, excuse me, the road to occupied Crimea ran. Ministry in Kherson is unique in that this large city (330,000 people lived there before the war; now there are 50,000 - 60,000) was already under occupation and has been liberated by Ukrainian troops for just over a year. People who survived the Russian occupation live there. Some residents supporting the invaders went to the east bank of the Dnieper River along with the retreating Russians. The uniqueness of this region is its incredible proximity to enemies, to the front line. The Dnieper River is the front line. And on the right bank, close to the water, is the city of Kherson. That’s why Kherson is being shelled from different weapons. Explosions sound almost around the clock. When something massive arrives, for example, a KAB-500 guided

bomb (500 kg of explosives) or KAB-1000 (1 ton of explosives), the chandelier in the room where I slept swayed. There are artillery attacks, tank attacks, grenade launchers... I don't know if you've heard about this, but the most insidious attacks now are drone attacks. They aim and catch up with their target on the move, but you don't see them unless it's absolutely silent outside. Then you can hear the approaching drone.

On the 1st day, when I arrived in Kherson, we removed my magnetic stickers with biblical texts from the car, since they look military-style and immediately make my car a target for drones. So, on March 8th and 9th we ministered to civilians and the military. These days we distributed the entire 140 sets of food that I had brought for people in need. Most of the food packages went to civilians, although we also gave some to the military. When distributing help, there is always a preaching of the Gospel and prayer. In those days, I received a unique experience in serving the military — we celebrated the Lord's Supper for one military brother.

March 10 was Sunday. From the very beginning, when we were planning this trip, I wanted to serve as a pastor in some church with a word of encouragement, a sermon. One of the pastors of Kherson, Zhenya, is an old friend of mine from the Bible Institute. That's why we

decided to serve together on this trip. He personally had a plan this Sunday to visit a very dangerous village, to which he goes no more than once a month to serve Communion to a small church. The situation there is so dangerous that he does not go there with his car. He leaves his car about 20



kilometers away, and one of the local brothers drives out to get him in an old car, which has already become familiar to enemy drones, like a local one. Zhenya immediately said to me, "Brother, I'm sorry, but I won't take you there. It's too dangerous. Go to serve in one of the churches in Kherson.

That's why I served in a church that deserves the title "Church on the Front Lines." I think that along the entire front line there are no churches operating so close to the front line as that one. From their yard, you can see the Dnieper River, which is the front line. I was amazed at the number of people who attended the morning's service. There were about 300 people there. Fifteen minutes before the start of the service, the auditorium was filled to capacity, and people



were sitting in the courtyard. The church uses microphones and speakers to let people hear God's Word preached in the street. On this day there was a holiday in this church—they baptized 5 people, 4 women and 1 man. Roughly 80-90 percent of those present were unchurched people. My word that morning was on the topic: Is it possible to be prepared for death? I preached Luke 13:1-5.

Inspired by what I saw and experienced in that church, I got into the car and drove away to minister to the military deminers, according to our plan. I was in no hurry and decided to shoot a few video fragments along the road near the church for my video reports. Such general video footage is valuable when I edit video reports on trips. I noticed 2 burnt cars standing on the right and left sides of the road some 500 meters from the church. I decided to take video them. As I drove past those 2 cars, an unexpected explosion shattered my car's glass. I realized they were targeting me. I had no idea where or who... The first thought that came to mind was to run. I pressed on the gas but realized that my tires were instantly flat. Since the car was moving, although poorly, I continued to leave that place. The street was familiar to me. I remembered there was a bridge not far ahead. Therefore, I decided to shelter under this bridge. In one of the



previous videos about the service in Kherson, this bridge was included in the title screensaver. So, I reached that bridge in 2 minutes. I stopped and got out of the car to see what happened. The entire right side of the car had shrapnel holes, there was no glass on both doors and the trunk lid, and 3 tires were flat. While I was inspecting the car, I saw a passenger car rushing towards me at great speed. He drove up to me and there was a military man in it. He offered to help me to their shelter, under another bridge. I took my documents, phone, car keys and went to the shelter. From there I called my friend, Pastor Zhenya, and had the opportunity to converse with the military until Zhenya arrived. The military, seeing the car body was full of holes but me intact, considered me lucky. I, on the contrary, testified to them of God's mercy and protection.

The military had heard an explosion from the drone. A moment later, they saw me noisily drive past them with flat tires and no windows. They realized that the driver might be injured and might need help, so they rushed to check me out. Assessing the damage to the car, it became clear that the explosion was near the rear right wheel. Most likely, it was a grenade dropped from a drone, or something similar. By the way, I instinctively chose the bridge that I remembered was farther away, and not the



bridge that was 2 times closer, which I passed while hurrying away. After discussing what to do next, we decided to try to pick up the car and return under the bridge to the military. Since my bulletproof vest remained in the car, the soldier lent me his bulletproof vest, and together with Zhenya, already in his car, we prayed and drove back to my vehicle, realizing that the threat from drones remained. When we approached the car, we realized that we should not stay under the bridge, but rather to hurry farther from that place. So, I jumped in the car and drove about 4-5 kilometers on flat tires. At the next intersection I stopped. It was impossible to go further. They called a tow truck and took the car to a tire shop. While we were waiting for the tow truck, Zhenya found out that in the church there were three wheels exactly my size. Two days earlier, someone had brought these wheels to the church. It was God's provision. Although these wheels were from different manufacturers with different treads, this solved the issue of driving farther.

On these wheels I returned to Ternopil. On the 2nd day, they covered the windows with plastic film, repaired the broken electrical wires, washed the car of dirt, and cleaned it of broken glass, and I went on my way.

A few days before this event, I had agreed with the military who serve in Donbas that I would come to them with aid, prayer, and support. This matter remained up in the air because I did not understand how this could be done after the shelling. The first idea that came to me was to drive to the city of Kropyvnytskyi, leave my car and trailer there, and rent another car to complete the ministry that I had already planned. Kropyvnytskyi is a city I pass through when I



go to Donbas and Kherson. When I started driving my car, I realized I could try to drive it farther, to Donbas. That's what I did. I left my trailer at the Baptist church in Kropyvnytskyi. So, I had two more wonderful days of ministering to the military. On the way back, I picked up the trailer and returned to Ternopil. The 2nd day after arriving home, my car was taken to repairs at one car service center, where

a brother from our church works as a director. He lent me another car so I could get around the city. Now, my car has been under repair for two weeks. I still don't know how much it will cost to repair the car, but I know that the Lord has everything planned. I now have the opportunity to improve my office affairs. Take time to talk with people on site. If the Lord allows, we will plan further ministry on the front line.

Friends, for me this story is a story of incredible blessing. The Lord is very kind. I saw God's mighty hand and His incredible protection. I have seen your prayers work. I saw God's provision.

Thank you for your prayers and support of our ministry. I would be grateful for funds for car repairs and other services during the war if you can help.

Your brother and servant,
Vitaly Bilyak from Ternopil