

Paul Kurilov

Saved

2022

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**The story of one family's rescue from Mariupol
following Russia's invasion of Ukraine.**

This tale is entirely grounded in reality. Every name and event recounted in this book is factual, without any exaggeration. Indeed, numerous lesser incidents and miracles are omitted from this account to avoid overburdening the reader with too many details.

This story unfolds around Paul and Hanna Kurilov and their three children Adelina, David, and Dominika after the onset of Russia's aggressive military incursion into Ukrainian territory starting on February 24, 2022.

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Saved

Sleep was abruptly washed away, as if a bucket of ice water had been poured over me. An instant realization of complete despair, overwhelming depression, and a fierce fear that permeated the entire room, engulfing my entire family. War. From this moment on, our lives and the lives of millions would never be the same again!

Five Minutes Before Awakening...

It was one of those sweet, peaceful morning dreams following a day that had felt endlessly long. I had no intentions of waking up early that day. We were at the tail end of a decade-long journey of building our dream home, with just the finishing touches left on the second floor. So, there we were, the whole family together in one room on the first floor, simply lying on mattresses spread across the floor.

Suddenly, I woke up - or more precisely, through my slumber, I thought I heard what seemed like a deep, heavy, low-frequency explosion. Following this, in the kitchen, the vent flap, which occasionally rattled from strong winds, began to clatter. It had this unpleasant, sharp, plastic sound that jolted me awake. Barely opening my eyes and still not fully grasping what was happening, I turned on my side, planning to go back to sleep.

A minute later, my phone rang. It was my younger brother Ilya, calling from another city. I didn't pick up and thought to myself:

- *"Why is he calling so early at 6 in the morning? I'll call him back later..."*

But just as I closed my eyes again, my phone rang once more, and this time it was Andrey, another younger brother of mine. He lived with his family on the neighboring street, close to where our parents lived.

Something had happened! A sense of alarm surged in my heart, and in the fraction of a second it took me to answer the phone, the thought crossed my mind that maybe I really had heard something through my sleep and it wasn't just my imagination.

- *"Hey..." I whispered, trying not to wake the children sleeping next to me.*
- *"Dude! Are you sleeping?! You're gonna sleep through the war?" I heard Andrey's loud, anxious voice.*
- *"What do you mean?!" I asked, springing out of bed as if stung, and at that moment, my wife woke up from my loud speaking.*
- *"You didn't hear? The war has started! We're being bombed!"*
- ...

After that, the conversation was brief... Instantly, there was the realization that it had been an explosion. Perhaps far away, but incredibly powerful! The explosive wave had made the kitchen vent flap rattle, the noise that had awakened me. It also became immediately clear why my youngest brother had called earlier...

A shiver ran through my body, instantly filling my entire being with fear and panic.

- *"Hanna! It's war!!!"* I exclaimed loudly.

In an instant, we were all dressed; sleep had completely abandoned us, but our minds were in a fog...

One question, one thought - *"What to do?!"*

Just a couple of days before, there had been an especially uneasy feeling in my heart because Russian troops had been amassed at the borders of Ukraine, supposedly for "exercises". And in the evenings, I couldn't fall asleep for a long time, researching what to do if war indeed broke out. But I absolutely couldn't believe that something like that could happen. Why? I don't know! Maybe because for the last 8 years, there had been periodic military actions close to the city. Almost weekly, there

were shellings of neighboring villages. Perhaps we had simply grown accustomed to such a wartime atmosphere in life.

So, what was the first thing to do?

Most importantly, food! And a go-bag, also known as an "emergency suitcase".

After making several calls to my relatives and close friends, to our utter horror, we realized that everything was very serious! Bombings were happening almost simultaneously across the entire territory of Ukraine. This was not at all like what happened in 2014 when Russia captured part of Ukraine's eastern territories. Now, it was a full-scale war against the entire country, against all its inhabitants!

Stocking Up on Food...

Time was of the essence! Making any kind of decision was extremely challenging due to the sudden onset of panic. However, stocking up on food was necessary and of utmost importance! After asking my wife to dress the kids and to be ready for anything just in case, I quickly left the house and drove to the store for groceries.

The nearest 24-hour grocery store was not far away, just about a mile away. Passing a gas station on the way to the store, I noticed just a few cars refueling. Further on, the store. The atmosphere was eerily calm. There were many people, as many as during peak hours on a workday, all buying supplies in large quantities. People spoke to each other in hushed tones. Their calmness was somewhat unsettling. Or perhaps, it was the intense fear paralyzing and oppressing everyone. There was no panic emanating from the people. But in everyone's eyes, you could read, "this is the end," what comes next will be a different life, if at all. No one could have imagined just how different it would be. The horrors that almost everyone would face in the coming days. After buying groceries with all the cash I had on me, I dashed out of the store like a bullet.

The car. The road. The same gas station on the way. But now, the surroundings had completely changed. A massive queue, possibly a hundred cars long. And all this happened in just about 20 minutes.

A thought flashed through my mind, *"Thank God I filled up last night! I don't have to wait in this insane line."*

Just about 7-8 hours ago, last evening, I was returning home from church. As usual, on Wednesdays, I led the service. I conducted meetings for young men, studying the Bible. And that late evening, as I was coming home, my wife called and asked me to refuel the car. I told her it wasn't necessary since I had just filled it up recently and the tanks were almost full. But she insisted I do it again, just in case. My beloved usually never worried about the car's maintenance, repair, or refueling. That was always my responsibility, and she didn't even have to think about it. But that evening, I believe God moved her to ask this of me.

Our car ran on both gas and gasoline. I topped off both tanks. And looking ahead, I'll say just one thing – it saved our lives. Without doing that, we wouldn't have been able to get out of the city later on. And there were many such moments without which we couldn't have escaped the war. It turns out God had taken care of us long before all this happened! But let's take things in order.

Driving past the gas station, hurrying home, it started to rain. Everything around was damp and muddy. It seemed like the air had gotten heavier. A sense of panic, fear, and utter despair reigned, although there were hardly any people on the streets. But in my heart, there was a feeling of complete desolation. This couldn't be happening! It wasn't supposed to happen!

This Won't Last Long!

Here I am, at home. My wife and children are by my side. That's what matters most! In fact, it's the most important thing in life! It's a shame we don't always realize this...

My wife and I had just one question:

- *"What should we do?"*

The first half-hour was agonizing and dreadful. Vibrations from powerful explosions were intermittently felt. It was clear that the explosions were happening on a completely different side. This was nothing like what had become customary over the last 8 years. This was closer. Much closer. And it was from the other side of the city.

Fear is a terrible thing! It shackles, paralyzes, and prevents coherent thought.

- *"Why didn't we leave the city yesterday? We were called!"* - I would mutter occasionally, pacing back and forth in the house, restless.

Just yesterday morning, my very close friend Denis called me, suggesting we leave the city. To take, so to speak, a small trip to the western part of Ukraine. Saying, even if nothing happens, we'd just relax, take a ride. But if it goes south, we'd escape something terrible, given the dreadful situation brewing at our country's border. Unfortunately, I didn't take it seriously and declined. Simply because I was in a hustle! We were at the final stages of our house construction, wanting to finish everything by spring and rest. After all, we had been building our home for more than 10 years and were quite tired from it. Moreover, we were helping my wife's mom with repairs in her house. She had sold her apartment and bought a house which needed some minor repairs. She was supposed to move into it in the coming days. That's why, when Denis called me suggesting we leave, I wasn't ready to drop everything.

At that moment, we were at my mother-in-law's house finishing her repairs. Plus, the construction of our house. And tomorrow, a contractor was supposed to come to do the finishing work. In other words, there

were too many tasks, cares, and plans. They just clouded my mind, and I couldn't accept my friend's sensible offer.

Now, after all we've been through, I'm ready to travel at any time ;)

- *"Let's wait till evening"* - I told my wife.
- *"It'll all be over in a few days at most"* - I added.

We so badly wanted to believe this. We so badly didn't want to part with everything we had earned and built over 10 years of family life.

Our minds simply refused to accept the reality that this was a real war. It can't be that it would reach our district! Was I comforting or deceiving myself?

Our district was indeed the furthest from the border with Russia. It was as if on the outskirts, situated separately from all the through roads in the city, the main streets.

- *"Even if there's the fiercest war and they take the city, they won't shoot here!"* - I reassured my wife, arguing with the above facts. How wrong I was then.

After 3 hours, the shelling intensified significantly. We began to read a lot of news on our phones, about what was happening where.

Kyiv was being bombed, Kharkiv was being bombed, everything was being bombed. The major capital cities were being shelled, and it made it clear that there likely wouldn't be an easy resolution to this situation.

Seeking a Safe Haven...

At the heart of our home was the staircase to the second floor. Beneath it lay some odds and ends and a small storage closet. My wife set about clearing this tiny space so we could hide the children there. Of course, it wouldn't have saved us from a direct missile hit. But it could have protected us from shrapnel from the windows if a shell had exploded nearby. Our house had many large windows. Having cleared the space under the staircase, we laid blankets on the floor and brought the children in. As evening approached, while discussing our plan of action with my wife and reading the news, it became clear that it wouldn't all be over in a day. But our minds refused to believe that this could be a long war.

- *"Let's not panic! In two weeks, at most a month, we'll reassess, and if needed, we'll leave the city. But it's unlikely anything will happen to our district!"* - I said, despite being in a state of panic myself, trying to calm my wife. At the same time, I genuinely hoped that indeed, in a week's maximum, everything would end, and we could continue living as before.

Near our house, in the yard, we had a garage. In the garage, we'd built a small basement space since we hadn't planned for anything like it in the house itself. After all, we started building the house as soon as we got married. Back then, we were much younger and lacked life experience, and the garage was built nine years into our marriage.

My wife gathered, just in case, necessary warm clothes, a go-bag, and food, while I headed to the basement to somehow make the unfinished and utterly uninhabitable basement space livable. There was no lighting, no heating, intense dampness, it was cold, and droplets of condensation dripped from the ceiling onto the dirty clay floor. I will never forget those sensations. Even for me, an adult man, it was unpleasant to stay there for long. The temperature outside was below freezing, and in places, snow lay on the ground. It was very cold. Somehow, after covering the damp floor with a tarpaulin and laying down polyurethane children's play mats that my beloved wife had bought for the children before the war, I

set about installing electricity for lighting and heating. Thank God, we had everything necessary for it! An electric bulb and two heating fans.

On the first day, we didn't yet retreat to the basement with the family. It seemed that our area was still safe, although sometimes the explosions were very loud.

By evening, many gas stations had run out of fuel. And by the next day, not a single station in the city had a liter of gas left. Station employees said they would no longer bring fuel because it was too dangerous.

With fear and agonizing worry, the first day of the war came to an end. The news feeds were filled with tragic messages one after another.

In its very first day, the war killed numerous people, destroyed homes and apartments, trampled all dreams and plans, and tore apart the lives of countless citizens of our country!

With great anxiety, prayers, and tears, we put the children to sleep under the staircase, which seemed to us the safest place in the house. But we ourselves couldn't sleep and spent almost the whole night there next to them, following the news on social networks and texting with relatives to find out everyone's status and if they were alive?

Often, after another intense shelling in the first days when mobile communication was still available, the heart would just freeze in apprehension awaiting the answer to the question, "Is everyone alive?" which we frequently wrote in the family group in the messenger.

It's unclear how much time passed, we didn't notice how we fell asleep and how we woke up, or if we slept at all, but nonetheless, the second day came. It felt as though a week had passed. But the days were still easy to count. It was still clear that it was only the second day of the war, and in our hearts, there was a flicker of hope that maybe it would all end soon and we could return to our usual life, finish the repairs in the house, furnish the children's rooms with soft furniture, and raise our children, enjoying life.

But the approaching darkness and deadly shadow, with all the horrors of war, could care less about all our dreams, desires, and plans. It came to steal, kill, and destroy everything in its path.

The second day was much scarier; shells exploded louder and louder. Closer and closer, the soul-tearing, vile "rolls of thunder" could be heard, pressing you down, oppressing your very nature, making you feel like a worthless being, incapable of helping yourself or anyone else in this situation. All you wanted at that moment was to be below ground level. And the deeper, the better! Or just to disappear somewhere. That day, we had to descend into the basement multiple times when the bombings started. The electric heating fan, which I had prepared the day before, provided some warmth.

That day, we made our penultimate visit to the supermarket. The shelves were almost devoid of any food. People had bought everything indiscriminately, even the candy and chocolate sections were nearly emptied.

There was still telephone communication and electricity. I called my friend Denis, who called me the day before the war began and suggested that I leave the city; He, with his wife and two children, was already far beyond the city limits. He tried to convince me that we urgently needed to leave the city, but I couldn't part with the home we had built with my wife over so many years. So much effort, labor, money, and soul had been invested in it. It was like a big, beautiful, golden anchor, holding us back and preventing me from making a rational decision.

The day passed in great tension, constantly grabbing the children and hiding either in the basement of the garage or under the staircase in the house, constantly monitoring fresh news and events, hoping to grasp at some thought or news as a lifeline, with breaks for shouting, "Quick, everyone under the staircase!" or "Run to the basement!".

On the Edge...

As evening approached, I suddenly noticed my eldest six-year-old daughter, Adel. And then, it struck me - I was terrified, not because of the explosions. I suddenly realized that since the day before, she had hardly spoken a word, no crying, nothing, just fear and detachment in her eyes. I was terrified that I might lose her psychologically, that she might withdraw into herself. My wife and I started asking her questions, trying to reach her consciousness, and suddenly she burst into tears and through sobs whispered:

- *"Daddy, I'm scared! Are we all going to die?"*

She cried briefly, and my wife and I did our best to comfort her, and it was as if she came back to reality. I am deeply grateful to God from the bottom of my heart, for guiding us all and preserving not only our bodies and souls but also the psychological well-being of our little ones.

That night, we slept in the basement, as the shelling in the evening was very intense and my spouse and I were incredibly tired, and sleeping in the house was no longer an option due to the immense stress. We understood the need for physical rest, and the only place where we could psychologically "breathe" a little was the basement. It was still damp and cool there. But thankfully, the heat fan was working, providing some relief. We were able to relax morally somewhat.

The next day. It was only the third day, but my brain was already mixing everything up... The same fear, explosions, and death breathing down our neck. The temporal boundaries were beginning to blur. It seemed like this day we made our last attempt to go to the grocery store to replenish our food supplies, but besides gingerbread and cookies, there was practically nothing left in the store, and the line started outside the store.

The following days were hard for me to distinguish; everything merged into one long, terrible period with seemingly no end. Especially after the power station that supplied electricity to our district was blown up. I believe it was the fifth day of the war.

From that moment, darkness began to thicken more and more. The explosions became monstrously terrifying at times. We constantly hid either in the basement or under the stairs. There was no electricity. No light. The phone was dying very quickly, and it took us a while to realize it needed to be set to power-saving mode.

Between dashes to the shelter and back to the house, during the lulls in the bombings, we feverishly checked the news on our phones, as if searching there for an answer no one knew to the question: "When will the war end?"

It was the fifth, or perhaps the sixth day, of merciless war. It was almost the last day I had a mobile signal. The internet was still working a bit.

That night, we spent again in the basement, but it was much more harrowing. The heating fans were not working, and there was also no light because there had been no electricity for two days. It was much colder and more uncomfortable in the basement than before. We used a candle briefly and extinguished it to save it. The children were constantly crying, unwilling to be in complete darkness. The night stretched on endlessly long... We couldn't sleep that night due to the damp, cold, and the children's cries.

In the morning, we moved back to the house to warm up. Our house had a large, beautiful fireplace that we often loved to light in peaceful times, sitting in front of it, drinking tea with our eldest daughter. That morning, there was a brief lull, very short.

It was relatively calm. My wife even tried to tidy up the room, as chaos had reigned in the room over the past few days, and there was no desire to do anything. Mattresses blocked the doorways. Everything was scattered throughout the house as we scrambled to hide from the bombings. It was the second day without electricity. And this was the last day I had phone service.

Deadly Darkness...

As evening fell, complete darkness ensued. Such darkness I had never seen in my life, not once! Not a single light outside the window, no light in someone else's window, no stars, no moon. The sky had been covered with winter clouds for many days. Inside the house, not a single indicator light, not a single lamp was lit, absolutely no source of light, nothing! In one word - darkness! This scared even me, let alone the children and my wife. Sometimes we would briefly light a candle, just so our eyes could see some light. Without it, it felt almost painful to look, trying to discern something in the absolute dark!

That night we slept in the house under the stairs, as the basement had become very cold, and my youngest daughter had developed a very high fever, over 39 degrees Celsius. Pharmacies had long been out of operation, hospitals too. Some had even been bombed. Including the Mariupol maternity hospital which by then had been bombed. That's the very maternity hospital where our nephew, my wife's brother's son, was born on the first day of the war. A day after giving birth, they were discharged from the maternity hospital due to the martial situation. Three to four days later, a huge aerial bomb was dropped on this maternity hospital. It sowed much grief and tears, this evil deed.

Fearing that staying in the damp, cold basement would worsen our daughter's condition, and with no one to help, we decided to take the risk and sleep in the house at our peril. Pharmacies and hospitals were no longer operational. Mobile reception was very poor, as the enemy had destroyed nearly all electrical and cellular stations in the city. We were left without information, without communication, without light, in ignorance and mounting fear.

There had been no electricity for about the third or fourth day, and no mobile reception for almost two days. Only occasionally my wife's phone would receive some messages since she had a different service

provider, and by the last day, it too stopped working. My phone had already lost its network. We switched them to super energy-saving mode to conserve energy and charged them in the car. Hope for the restoration of electricity had dwindled. We all understood well that under such shelling and bombings, which had significantly intensified by that point, no one would risk their lives to make repairs.

Looking back a few days, when my phone still worked, I was in contact with my friend Alexander. He too hadn't left the city, just planning to, but like me, he was very worried, debating whether to leave or not? At that time, strong rumors had spread that the city was surrounded by Russian troops and that attempting to leave the city came with enormous, almost certain risks of being killed. We were faced with the dilemma of staying and possibly dying or trying to leave and likely dying there? Staying then seemed safer than risking movement somewhere.

It's also very important to note that my wife's mother indeed moved to her newly purchased house, literally on the second day of the war, right amidst all these horrific shellings and bombings. And almost all relatives on my wife's side moved to her house, fleeing danger. Her new house was located not far from us. At that time, we considered our district to be the safest in the city. Therefore, relatives had to leave their homes since they were close to the frontline.

Thus, by God's miracle, all my relatives and my wife's relatives ended up in one district of the city and very close to each other. During the first week of the war, we could visit each other to find out any news. After mobile reception was gone and the city's electricity supply was destroyed, it was the only way to get news about each other.

Day of Agony...

Something incredible is about to happen! But for now, this is the last day... And it was simply horrific!

They say people can get used to anything, but I never could get used to these explosions. They are pure evil, sowing death and permeating the air with terror.

On this day, unlike any of the previous ones, nearly all our relatives came to visit. We heard a multitude of opinions from each family about whether we urgently needed to leave the city or not. All advice varied greatly. Some said we must leave immediately, that this was our last chance! Others claimed it was akin to death, and Russian soldiers would kill us all upon leaving the city. How I wished to get a definitive answer from someone, should we leave or not?

There was a burning desire to vanish from this place, from this city! The bombardments intensified. Enduring this became unbearably nauseating. We needed just one answer, to go or not? Would we be killed, or would we survive?

That day, we couldn't muster the courage to leave. We also couldn't make a clear decision about leaving. It was already late, and curfew was approaching, which meant shoot-to-kill orders for any moving object. I realized we wouldn't manage to escape the city in time to reach the nearest village, where we could have stayed overnight safely. But with my relatives, we agreed to meet at our house the next morning, everyone who wanted to come, must come in cars, and we would make a final decision to leave or not. And everyone walked home to save on gasoline, not using their cars.

A couple of hours later, my father and younger brother Andrey arrived by car. I was quite surprised they weren't saving on gasoline. It turned out, they wanted to tell us in time that they had changed their minds about leaving, considering it too dangerous. But my other younger brother, Mikhail, who lived the farthest, didn't get the memo that they had changed their minds because they didn't go to him in order to save gasoline.

A Decisive Answer...

Evening descends. Once again, we're engulfed in unbearable darkness.

I'm devoid of answers, undecided about what to do tomorrow. To leave? Everyone's had a change of heart, except for my youngest brother, who remains unaware... The absence of mobile service persists. Earlier in the day, I attempted to send a voice message to my friend Alexander, who also contemplated leaving, to inform him of our departure tomorrow. The message failed to send all day long. No connection. But now, everything's changed, everyone's reconsidered. I'm consumed by fear, desperate for a clear directive on what to do.

Constantly, I query my wife:

- *"So, what's our plan? Do we leave? Don't we? Shall we go?"*

Without any guidance from anyone, we're once more submerged into the city-wide abyss of darkness.

My mental state is on the brink of collapse. I was 100% convinced we needed to flee to survive the city's doom, yet equally certain that leaving posed a tremendous danger, that we'd likely be killed on our escape! Such were the rumors... The city was indeed encircled by the enemy. Amidst this severe psychological dissonance and indecision, compounded by the escalating intensity of explosions never before experienced, I cried out to the Lord!

- *"Forgive us all, Lord!!!"*

My wife had already tucked the children into their makeshift bed under the staircase, a spot we scarcely left for nearly a week... And I simply started yelling into the heavens, begging the Lord to calm us down, to envelop us with the Holy Spirit and offer consolation! Otherwise, I screamed, we would lose our minds!

With each explosion, each trembling of the house walls intensifying, we cried out to the Lord as never before! This was no ordinary prayer. There was no room for religion or ritual. Whether kneeling, pacing through the

house, or sitting under the staircase, we simply cried out to the Lord, pleading for forgiveness for all our sins! We confessed everything we knew about ourselves. We begged for His forgiveness for everything and implored Him to console us.

The explosions continued, sometimes weaker, then stronger again. And there, lying under the staircase, praying, we began to feel the Peace of God filling our hearts. To this day, I remember the wall trembling behind my head, yet despite everything, an unnatural peace and tranquility settled in my heart. My wife and I even sang a few Christian songs. By then, we started thanking God for His comfort; I began to feel alright, no longer on the verge of madness, the indecision dissipating.

We thanked God, praying fervently with my wife. It was a genuine conversation with God, devoid of pretentious words, devoid of eloquent phrases, just a loud cry reaching up to the heavens.

Peace entered our hearts, yet we still lacked an answer on whether to leave.

In such a troubled state, after enduring so much, I feared I wouldn't hear what God was speaking to my heart. I was apprehensive about missing His prompting. I continued to pray, now for something else, seeking a definitive answer from Him, as I might misunderstand everything else.

Daring not to impose conditions on God, I nevertheless continued to loudly request:

- *“God, forgive me for consulting everyone about leaving, with relatives and my wife, but not asking You! Lord, I need a clear answer, should we leave tomorrow or not? Will we survive or not? If You bless our departure, if You wish to save us and lead us out, then grant me a clear sign for my two requests. First, let there be mobile service on my phone, which has been absent for three days. Second, send us fellow travelers, as our old car won't make it far; we need a convoy of vehicles to exit the city together.”*

As we continued praying and repenting for all our sins, we didn't notice drifting off to sleep with peace in our hearts alongside my wife. We hadn't slept so peacefully since the war began.

Awakening...

At 1 a.m., I woke up to silence. The darkness was so thick it felt like it was pressing against my eyes. I lay there motionless. To my right, the children slept, and beyond them, my wife. I heard her stir.

- *"Can't sleep?"* - I whispered barely audibly.
- *"No! Can't sleep at all"* - she replied.
- *"Let's pray and maybe have something to eat"* - I suggested, as the day's stress had made eating impossible.

We crawled out from under the staircase. Lit a candle. Eating was out of the question as stress had knotted our stomachs, but after drinking some kefir, we managed to talk a bit. At that moment, there was a lull. No bombings...

We knelt down and prayed again, this time in a whisper to not wake the children, asking God for the same clear signs: mobile service and fellow travelers.

The first seemed humanly impossible. The city's power supply was destroyed. Mobile towers too. No one was going to repair them amidst the conflict. This response seemed unattainable, but that's precisely why I needed it, as I was in turmoil.

I feared misunderstanding and sought a firm answer from God. After praying, we extinguished the candle relatively calmly and without much anxiety, and went back to sleep. It was around 1:30 a.m. We lay down by the children under the staircase. My phone was next to me on a shelf in the closet under the staircase.

Within minutes, the phone's light sliced through the darkness! It was an incredibly pleasant and joyful illumination. For two reasons. First, it was light! Seeing it was so pleasant when surrounded by complete darkness for so long. Second, and most shocking! I realized, even without looking at the screen, it was the signal. Yes! Mobile service had appeared on my phone!

This was a direct answer from God! God's light filled my heart with joy! God was speaking to me! He had answered! In the morning, we could leave. He would protect us.

I was certain. This was a direct response from God! He woke us up at 1 a.m., when we were too exhausted to notice. The Lord showed us, it was not a coincidence! God answered my direct question about mobile service. He woke us in advance. He provided service for just a few hours, and by morning, it was gone again. God demonstrated it was indeed His answer, because He woke us at night at the right moment. It didn't happen in the morning or during the day when I might not notice the light from the mobile phone. It didn't occur when we could be distracted, hiding from bombings.

It was an amazingly precise, perfectly timed moment! A moment when the children slept quietly, a moment when we awoke, a moment when in the silence I managed to make a few calls to gather crucial information.

I moved upstairs, where the signal was slightly better. In that time, I managed to call several acquaintances who, to my knowledge, had planned to leave the city the day before and, as it turned out, had already done so. They were now beyond the city limits, hence their mobile service worked. I learned the route. Found out where and how to bypass the destroyed bridges and roads. Anxiously, I jotted all this down on a piece of paper. I sent messages to all relatives, but unfortunately, they never received them, though they were just down the street from me. It seemed like the service was working only for me. After thanking God once more for the answer, I went back to the shelter under the staircase to my wife and children. My heart was filled with a sense of joy and contentment. Joy that we could leave tomorrow, as God blesses! And contentment that God hears my prayer and responds! How I've always dreamed of truly speaking with God. After praying with my wife, simply lying under the staircase - we fell asleep.

The Valley of the Shadow of Death...

Morning.

Naturally, we woke up before the alarm. Hope blazed in our hearts, and our minds were filled with determination. We were about to embark on the most perilous journey of our lives! Of course, it was frightening, but now we knew what to do, armed with a decision and an answer from God Himself!

Half an hour later, my younger brother Mikhail arrived, whom we hadn't managed to inform that the others had reconsidered leaving. Like mine, his car was very old and unreliable for a long journey, especially one so fraught with danger.

The second crucial part of God's answer that my wife and I had prayed for was fellow travelers. A convoy of reliable cars with which it would be safer to venture on this dreadful road. There were no fellow travelers yet.

The second part of God's response had not yet manifested. This thought troubled me, but I tried not to voice it aloud to avoid spreading further anxiety and panic. The younger brother, like me, was confused that no one else was leaving and felt that it might seem like a suicide mission. Setting off in two barely functional cars, through a part of the city that had witnessed the most powerful explosions since the war began that morning.

Suddenly, just about ten minutes later, my brother Andrey, who lived very close by, came over. He simply wanted to see if we had changed our minds too. In a bit of confusion, I timidly replied that we were still intent on going and asked if perhaps they would join us. Andrey said that he, along with his family and our parents who also lived nearby, definitely wouldn't go. He believed it was madness, with a huge risk of dying on the road.

From afar, on the side of the city we needed to exit through, the strongest explosions echoed as if to affirm my brother's fears. It was terrifying.

Doubts began to creep in for a moment... No fellow travelers. Continuous heavy shelling there. How to proceed? My confidence crumbled instantly like sand slipping through my fingers. I returned inside the house, where my wife stood at the threshold with the children and our belongings gathered. I said:

- *"I don't know what to do! Almost no one is leaving! What should we do?"*
- *"What did God tell us?"* - my wife said, uttering just one phrase.
- *"That's it!"* - I responded briefly and dashed out of the house.
- *"We're going anyway!"* - I yelled to my brothers.

All that was left was to say goodbye to my wife's relatives, who lived a 15-minute walk from our home. The three of us brothers quickly made our way to them. I wanted to give them the keys to our house so they could come and take whatever supplies, firewood, and anything else they might need.

We made the visit swiftly. As we said our goodbyes to the relatives, we confirmed one last time if they were sure they wouldn't join us. My wife's mother was in tears, saying goodbye as if she'd never see us again, convinced we would perish on the way. Everyone was scared, with tears in their eyes. We prayed together. I firmly stated that we were leaving no matter what and quickly returned to my home to set off. There was no time to delay. The shelling was intensifying. Back at my house, we bid farewell to Andrey, my younger brother, and decided to leave without further delay.

We needed fellow travelers with sturdy cars; without them, it was terrifying. This thought wouldn't leave me in peace. We decided to first stop by our church to say goodbye to everyone we knew. We also hoped that my friend Alexander might have received my message and would join us. He lived very close to the church. His car was old too. But still, we felt it would be safer with three cars; we could support each other or tow if needed.

We arrived at the church. Our wives and children went into the church basement because it was too dangerous outside, while my brother and I ran to our friend.

Seeing each other was a joy. After agreeing that we were urgently leaving, we returned to the church to say our goodbyes, collect our wives and children, and hit the road.

And then, God prepared another miracle for us, the missing piece from my request! Approaching the church, I met a man leaving:

- *"Is it really possible to leave the city?"* - I asked, as I did with everyone I saw.
- *"Well, people are leaving every day..."* - he replied and then added - *"today, they're evacuating the last part of the church's children's shelter from the city."*
- *"Who?! How can I contact them? Can we join them?!"* - I quickly inquired.

Instantly, I was handed a special old phone with an enhanced antenna and a mobile operator that was still working, allowing me to call the leader of the group evacuating the Christian children's shelter.

- *"Are you evacuating the children today?"* - I asked anxiously.
- *"Yes, we're leaving in 15 minutes, meeting on the outskirts of the city!"*

This was God's answer to my second question! Praise God! We had a complete, clear answer from God! Action was imperative without delay!

It took us about 20 minutes to reach the outskirts of the city, and we also needed to alert Alexander. We jumped into the car almost instantly. Within half a minute, we were by our friend's apartment.

- *"We're leaving urgently! There's a column of cars! Quick, to the outskirts! See you!"* - my wife shouted to them and ran out of their house while I was turning the car in the narrow street.

The most precious thing with us were our wives and children. Everything was in two cars. Plus some food and warm blankets since it was very cold.

Twenty minutes later, my brother Mikhail and I, with our two families in two cars, were on the outskirts of the city. Before us unfolded a scene of death and horror, something I had only seen in war movies before.

Chaos reigned around! Burned and exploded cars were parked on the roadside. High-rise buildings were burning, and thick black smoke columns rose from them. Dirt and trash were everywhere, shards from explosions and complete disorder. It was damp and overcast, and in the distance, there was a Ukrainian military checkpoint. The road was blocked by concrete barriers. Moving slowly, dodging them, we couldn't find any fellow travelers.

Where were they? Could the column with the orphanage have already left? Of course, nobody here would wait for us, I understood that, especially since we arrived late. Confused and desperate, worrying about how to proceed on our own, I stopped the car in the middle of the road and jumped out of it. Seeing a group of people in cars standing far beyond the road, I ran towards them. Maybe these were our fellow travelers, maybe the orphanage, but it was a vain attempt, these were people unknown to me, who were also planning to leave, but it was unclear when, as they were waiting for someone. Staying in this place was critically dangerous.

Approximately at that moment, a shell landed about 300 meters away from us. It was an enemy missile that hit the ground and did not explode. The sound was terrible because it was very close, and it was just the sound of the missile hitting the ground. God saved us! The missile just didn't explode! Otherwise, we might not have survived. At that moment, the driver's door in the car was open. The car was parked across the road. My wife first wanted to jump behind the wheel and drive the car to the side, but it was futile. And almost immediately, the thought came to her that God was with us, and He would save us! She was filled with peace and calm in her heart. All she did then was just pray loudly. She prayed incessantly to God!

Two, or maybe five minutes at most, but for us, it was eternity! After so long, some column of cars appeared behind us. I ran towards them, to meet them. Thank God, it was our people! Employees from the

Christian orphanage, who were evacuating the last group of children from the city. A few words and we were already following them in line. Me with my family and my brother Mikhail with his family. Alexander didn't manage to arrive in time. The situation was dreadful. Far away, where we needed to go, periodic shelling was heard, there were checkpoints... First Ukrainian, then the city was surrounded by Russian troops. Ahead were the most dangerously perilous thirty minutes of the journey. This stretch of road was constantly under fire. Just to get through it! Just to make it through! If we pass this section of the road, then further on we have a better chance of staying alive.

These were the scariest twenty minutes of my life! The strongest twenty minutes of crying out to God in my life! The closest to death twenty minutes of our lives! The strongest feeling of God's near presence in my life!

Clenching the steering wheel with my hands, slightly bowing my head down, feeling the looming death in the air, we rushed forward with the entire column, through the valley of the shadow of death! We will never forget that prayer, our cry to God with my wife.

- *"Lord forgive us! Have mercy! Please save and protect us!"* we cried out to God, navigating the most perilous stretch of the road.

We had just passed the Ukrainian checkpoint and had barely gotten a kilometer away from the Russian military. The last car in the column got delayed at the checkpoint. Anxiety and worry consumed us. We were all in the strike zone, standing in the middle of the road waiting for the last car with children. Those 10 minutes felt like an eternity. Finally, it caught up with us. Our hearts pounded. Everyone was tensed to their limit. We urgently needed to move on. And so, we sped along the highway, needing to drive at least another 15-20 minutes to reach a relatively safe place to escape the impact zone.

Suddenly, the lead car of the column, responsible for guiding us all, had a tire blowout. The entire column came to a halt on the road near an intersection. We couldn't find a spare tire, everyone tried to help by fitting

ones from other cars, but it was all in vain. Another attempt with a different tire also failed, it just fell off.

Internally, I questioned

- *“God, why did this have to happen here? It's so dangerous!”*

Suddenly, we saw an approaching column of military vehicles turning right at the intersection just next to us and heading towards the field. Realizing that a shelling was likely imminent, we quickly reattached the old, punctured tire trying to escape the impact zone. Just a few more kilometers. After driving for about 10 minutes, we had to stop again as the tire completely locked up due to the shredded rubber. To our amazement, one of the men found a spare tire hidden underneath that car. It was securely fastened, rusted over. Since we were in a relatively safe place by then, we all endeavored to remove the spare tire. We had no other choice.

After over half an hour of struggling, we replaced the tire. And then, another miracle happened! Just as we were finishing, my friend Alexander, who couldn't leave with us from the church, caught up with our column. Praise God! We continued on our journey together.

The nearest gas station was in a neighboring city, about 200 kilometers away. Thank God, the day before the war began, at my wife's request, I had filled up the car, otherwise, we wouldn't have made it.

Moreover, I had never driven my old car for such long distances, as it often broke down. In the end, our car took us over 1000 kilometers across Ukraine. The Lord preserved us!

After driving the first 40 minutes, leaving the most dangerous part of the road behind, an indescribable joy filled our hearts! We were alive! How we thanked God for preserving all of us!

But to our great joy, a deep sadness was added. We couldn't rejoice for long about ourselves, as almost all our relatives remained there in Mariupol, without communication, electricity, in complete

oblivion. As we learned later, they didn't know what was happening to us for a long time and even thought we had perished.

Continuing our drive to the nearest city where we could refuel and spend the night, we kept thanking God for our salvation and prayed for Him to preserve all our relatives and lead them out of that horror!

Gradually, mobile service began to reappear. We started making calls to our relatives, sending messages, but all to no avail, nobody heard us, nobody read the messages. The city was dead. No communication, everything destroyed! Our hearts were torn for our family!

The joy of salvation and the fear for our relatives mixed inside us into indescribable feelings. We drove on. With good mobile service now available, we called friends who had left the city a few days earlier, inquiring about the road, clarifying the route, the best way to reach our destination, and where to go next. Trusting in God alone, we continued our drive to the city of Zaporizhzhia.

Reaching the outskirts, the first operational gas station, all the "camels at the watering hole"! It was just another great miracle that everyone had enough gas to get there. I remember the terror of possibly being stranded in the middle of the road without fuel, under fire.

After refueling, we immediately went to one of the churches in the city, where Christians were ready to meet us, feed us, and provide the entire column with overnight accommodation. Arriving at this church, we were greeted as if by family and they were ready to take care of us, but the men responsible for transporting the children's column decided we should continue to another, safer city while there was still time before the curfew. Everyone agreed to seize this opportunity, as we all wanted to get as far away as possible from all the horrors we had endured over the last week in our city. We, too, did not want to part with our fellow travelers, and above all, we wanted to be as far away from the war as possible. We wanted to drive and drive until we were safe. Ideally, we wanted to quickly leave the country or at least reach its western part.

In peacetime, it was possible to drive across the country in a day and a half, at most two days. We ended up on the road for five days. Huge traffic jams on the roads, sometimes stretching for tens of kilometers.

Military checkpoints. Blockposts. Road accidents. All this created significant movement difficulties and time delays. Along the way, we stopped overnight at different churches, where we were always lovingly and joyfully received, fed, allowed to sleep, and take a shower, which was a huge blessing after a week of war without any hygiene necessities.

We are Saved!

Our first night was spent in a church in the city of Dnipro. It was the first peaceful night on a soft bed, away from the nightmarish shelling and bombings. After being fed and having a room prepared for us and the children, we had a chance to talk with the believers from the church and were getting ready to sleep. After a horrendously tough day, after the most dangerous journey, after a week spent in war in a besieged city. Thanking one of the women who helped us settle in and for everything they had done for us, we heard a piercing story about how much grief she had experienced in her life, losses of loved ones, a house fire, and much more. She spoke without bitterness or resentment towards anyone or anything, and her face radiated joy from serving God. The last thing she said before leaving changed my plans for that evening and many months ahead, maybe even for the rest of my life. She cited an example from the Bible and said

- *“Don't forget others when things start going well for you!”* - these words deeply penetrated my heart. Strikingly, the exact same words, from the same Biblical example, will be said to me by a completely different person, unknown to me before, in another country, two weeks later. And then I will understand again that this is what God Himself wants from me.

After her words, I suddenly realized that, in essence, things were already good for me. We were actually safe, alive, and unharmed. And there in Mariupol, numerous people remained, acquaintances and relatives, who needed salvation.

The first thing my wife and I did was pray earnestly for them. Then we immediately began to write messages to everyone we knew, dropping photos of maps, routes on how to leave the city, hoping that someone would also get service and be able to receive a message from us! We also started responding to all the messages we could receive from anyone who had some connection still in the city and wanted to leave. For a long time, my wife also answered calls from people who had left before us and wanted to know news about their relatives who were still

alive in Mariupol, instilling hope in their hearts. After all this, we literally passed out...

The next morning, as everyone was gathering to continue the journey, I went with some of the men to look for spare cans of gasoline for the road. Gas stations in the city were operational, but finding a container for gasoline was challenging. After unsuccessfully visiting a couple of stores, we encountered some military personnel who asked what we were looking for. Upon our reply "cans and fuel," they asked us to follow them, and within half an hour, we had 4 large cans of gasoline and diesel, absolutely free. This was yet another miracle for all of us!

We hurriedly continued our journey further. The road became increasingly difficult and tense due to a large number of obstacles, checkpoints, traffic jams, and places with ice.

On the evening of the penultimate day, to our great regret, an accident happened to my friend Alexander. Due to the intensive traffic, a huge number of cars, and ice on the road, the car following him lost control and crashed into him at high speed from behind. The impact was strong enough to render Alexander's car inoperable. It could no longer be driven. After redistributing all the passengers from his car among the other vehicles in the column, namely his pregnant wife, son, wife's grandmother, and himself, as well as all their belongings, we continued on our way. There was very little time left until the curfew. Praise God, everyone remained alive, and there was no harm to their health.

On the last night of our journey to the western part of Ukraine, we drove almost non-stop for the night, even ignoring the curfew, which was not as strict closer to the western part of the country. Stopping just for two hours at a gas station in the early morning, because sleep was overtaking everyone. I sometimes even had to sleep for a minute and a half to two minutes, in traffic jams, during intervals between movements, when the car stopped. My brain would shut off, then my wife would wake me up, and we would move on. This way, I could slightly recover my strength. Therefore, we all really needed a rest, and then we continued on our way again.

Left at the mercy of fate no longer...

The last day on the road across Ukraine. Thank God, all our cars, well, almost all, except for the loss of my friend's car, have brought us to the western border of our country. Only on my car, the wheels began to knock, emitting a strange sound. As it turned out the next day when I went to the service station, the wheel bolts had come loose. A little more, and I could have lost the wheels at high speed, which would have led to tragic consequences. God spared and preserved us here too, glory to Him!

Here we arrived at our final destination. A Christian children's home was already being met by some organization, which took them in for the night, and then sent them on to Europe. As for us, we had to think on our own about what to do and how to be next.

I won't forget the words of my friend Alexander, who, in such a difficult moment when we were literally left on the street, without the slightest idea of what to do next, said with irony and a smile on his face:

- *“Congratulations, brothers! We are now officially homeless...”*

It was both funny and a bit scary because for the first time, I thought about the fact that we really had nowhere to spend the night. We were not on a resort, not on a vacation, there was no way back, but ahead was absolute uncertainty.

But the Lord performed a miracle here too! I remembered that a girl from our church, who also traveled with us in the same convoy, called me when we were just approaching the city of Chernivtsi. She simply called and offered me the phone number of some believers from this city we had arrived in. As far as I understood then, they were ready to help those in need with a place to stay.

All the hotels in the city were either occupied or charged a lot of money per night, and we had no other option but to ask these guys if we could stay with them for the night. We called them hoping to stay at least one night, and they accepted us with great joy and love, fed us, provided a lot of care and respect, and allowed us to stay as long as we needed.

We were very pleasantly shocked by their insight and sympathy. It was a beautiful young family. Daniel and Ella and their kids. They showed all the love and deep empathy for everything we had experienced. They specially allocated a small house for us, where we could stay for four days while our sick children recovered from poisoning due to the exhausting journey and stress from the war. Maybe we could have stayed there longer, no one was driving us away. In principle, my friend Alexander stayed with them for some time. But my wife and I decided that we would move on until we took our children to the safest possible place, especially since our status as parents of many children allowed us to do so.

While we were still at Daniel and Ella's, I called a few acquaintances. One old friend who had lived in America for 8 years, even though a long time ago, we, together with Peter, carried out youth service in the Mariupol church, before he flew to the States.

The second call - to Germany. I was faced with a difficult choice again. But now I was calm because I knew for sure that the Lord leads us, and only in His hand is it safe, and only He can give the right path and sound advice. We began to pray to God about this these days, while we were there and treated the children from severe vomiting and diarrhea.

Literally on one of the first evenings when we were still in Chernivtsi, Peter, my friend from America, called back and asked me to send him photos of all the family's international passports.

Another great miracle and God's grace happened to us, involving two incredible facts.

First, and quite amazingly, just a few months before the war started, we made international passports for all our children, even for our youngest, one-year-old daughter. My wife and I had had our passports for a couple of years, but we only recently got them for the kids, just because, hoping that maybe soon we'd realize our dream and go somewhere for a vacation. We couldn't have imagined how much we would need them, and not just for vacation. Otherwise, we simply wouldn't have been able to leave the country later on. It's astonishing that God foresaw even this.

The second amazing event regarding the use of these documents occurred when I sent the photos of the passports to Peter, and he, in turn, passed them on to his acquaintance in America. A bit later, this stranger, named Ruslan, called me. With complete insight and empathy, he listened briefly to our story and said that we were a blessing from God to him, and that he wanted to help us financially. I didn't understand at that moment what he meant by saying that we were a blessing to him, as it seemed the opposite; he was a blessing to us, providing us with significant support and help. Only later did I realize what he meant.

It's a great blessing to be sacrificial and to serve someone for God's sake!

How awkward and ashamed we felt to accept such significant help, as I'm usually not accustomed in life to taking help from anyone, but we were not in a position to refuse any help due to pride... May God bless and repay a hundredfold to all such sacrificial people!

It seemed to be the fourth day since we had been in Chernivtsi, in the western part of Ukraine. We didn't want to linger in one place for long. There was a relentless desire to move further and further, until we found ourselves in some non-warring country's territory.

The children were already feeling a bit better, and we decided that we needed to at least cross the border with Romania to be outside the country, and from there, we could calmly think about what to do next.

Thanking Daniel and Ella's family, who warmly welcomed us into their home, we prepared to head for the border. They were very surprised that we were just going abroad with no relatives, acquaintances, or anyone who could meet us there. We didn't hide our nervousness either, but we placed all our hope in the Lord! He led us, and we believed that He would not abandon us, that He would help us through some miracle or some kind people, volunteers. Early in the morning, my wife and I prayed together with Daniel, Ella, and my friend Alexander, who had traveled with us in the same convoy and whose car had been damaged and abandoned on the road a few days ago. I asked Alexander to take us to the border. We planned to cross it on foot,

leaving the car for him, as it was clear he needed it more than we did. Having agreed on this, we headed for the Romanian border.

At the border, there was a relatively short queue.

In the palms of the Lord...

A wife. Three children. A stroller. Two bags. A backpack. That's all! That's all we had left. All 10 years of hard work, worries, construction, and experiences, all remained in the past! We felt as though we were freed from all the burdens of life's hustle and bustle!

We passed the Ukrainian passport control. We just kept moving forward! It's impossible to convey this feeling, a feeling probably only known to someone who has lost everything they've acquired over many years. A feeling of emptiness and at the same time, lightness. A feeling of fear and some ghostly hope. Behind us was emptiness, everything was uprooted from the heart. There was no way back! Ahead was hope and at the same time, a threatening uncertainty.

And here is Romania. Suddenly, numerous people ran up to us, volunteers and even journalists trying to ask some questions. Not a single word was heard in our native language anymore. We stopped in front of everyone, a bit puzzled. Everyone was very friendly and wanted to do something for us, to help in any way they could!

Suddenly, a man from the crowd, in a light green vest, getting closer to us, tried to explain something to us in English. Barely understanding what was happening, we tried to listen to everyone and somehow explain our situation and what we needed. His face looked painfully familiar, or simply so kind that I considered him somehow kin. And when he continued to address us in English, I heard him say, "We are a Christian organization...", to which I directly interrupted him, exclaiming, "Oh! I am a baptist!" After which, he was very delighted, telling all the volunteers around us with a big smile - "They are mine!", meaning we belonged to him! That's when I realized that I recognized a kind Christian face, that's why his face seemed familiar to me.

The man helped carry our belongings to his car. In 10 minutes, my wife, children, and I were driving on European soil for the first time in our lives.

Half an hour later, we were brought to a Christian center that provided assistance to refugees, where we were met by several Russian-speaking girls with huge kind hearts. One of them was named

Anna, just like my wife. We were fed, listened to, and taken to a wonderful family.

By the evening, we were settled into an amazing Christian family. They were wonderful elderly people. Unique grandparents! They had a huge three-story house, which I initially took for a hotel. But it was simply their home, not luxurious inside, but purely practical, all because they had twelve children. Of course, the kids had all grown up and married. And this beautiful elderly couple, opened the doors of their home, as wide as their hearts were open for refugees from Ukraine. They lived on the first floor, and the second and third floors were given over for use by refugees from Ukraine. On Sundays, they made a joint lunch with all their children for the refugees. When we got there, at that time, about five families were already living there. Children ran through the corridors, like in a communal apartment, adults walked around, communicating with each other like one big family. Everyone welcomed us very warmly and with love. We were very tired with the children and would have been insanely happy to lie down and sleep even in the corridor. But everyone busily bustled, trying to find us a better room. It was so nice to feel such care and warmth from people. As it turned out later, these were Christian families from Ukraine, and almost all of them were from one church.

Skipping ahead, I'll say that we all became very good friends in a week and a half...

These one and a half weeks were very pleasant for us in one way because there were many good acquaintances, a lot of communication, and ultimately, a rest from the sounds of bombings and shelling. On the other hand, it was an unbearably tormenting and excruciating wait, as all our relatives were still there... in Mariupol.

We didn't even want to think about where we would go next, where we would live... We shed tears and cried out to God day and night for our relatives who were still in the terrible war, in our native city surrounded by enemies. We decided not to go anywhere until all our relatives got out of Mariupol.

We wanted to stay in touch, just in case someone would call, in case we could somehow help someone.

The first week was unbearably hard psychologically. Practically no communication with relatives. Sometimes, almost once every two or three days, we could receive a text message from Natalia, my wife's sister, saying that they were all alive. And that was the greatest comfort. They sometimes ran to a certain place where the connection very rarely worked and tried to call us or send a message. We, in turn, constantly tried to call them. All to no avail.

Contrast...

By the fourth day of our stay in this large house, having forged new friendships, evening conversations brought us closer and closer. That's when we received an invitation from them to visit a Romanian church to share the Word of God, testify about our lives, and how God saved us from the war. We agreed and prepared to go with them to church on Sunday. Sunday came, and before leaving for church, my wife and I sat in the kitchen, quietly chatting over a cup of tea.

- *"I'm so tired of it all! Where are our relatives? Why the delay? Why haven't they left? What should we do? Where to go? Live in Europe and then return home to Mariupol? Or fly far away forever?"* - almost indignantly, I began to list all the painful questions we had no answers to.
- *"We could go anywhere, only the house holds us back; we've built it together for so many years."* - I continued to pour out my soul to my wife.
- *"If only we knew for sure that we have no home left, it would probably be easier to make a decision"* - I said in desperation.

And, looking at the time, we went to prepare for departure to the church.

The church service was joyful and pleasant. We were happy to visit the church after the war. It was my turn to step forward and share our story, offering teachings from the Bible. The key points and thoughts were noted on my phone, a habit I maintained even back in Mariupol. Usually, I would switch my phone to airplane mode, but not this time! What if someone from the war, from Mariupol, calls, I thought.

I was almost done with my story when suddenly my phone rang. It happened - relatives of my wife were calling. A call from Mariupol couldn't be missed. They had been out of touch for too long. Despite sending them numerous messages every day urging them to leave the city because it was surrounded, they received nothing due to the lack of connection.

I spoke very loudly, almost yelling

- *“Call my wife! It's from Mariupol! Give her my phone.”*

My spouse quickly left the hall with my phone to talk to her relatives, while I briefly finished my testimony about the miracles of God and how He saved and protected us.

As soon as I finished, I immediately went to my wife to find out what happened and the news.

She stood there, joyful and with tears in her eyes.

- *“They have left!”* - she exclaimed with a strained voice.

They left amid horrific destruction and casualties, amidst corpses and mined roads. Only the Almighty God could lead them through and preserve their lives!

After this, there were many discussions, accompanying calls, and advice on where and how they should travel. The connection was there but still very unstable. We drove home from the church, frantically trying to send all the information that could help them on their way.

Soon we returned to the large three-story house where we were staying.

We were all "on pins and needles". Incredible news! The relatives of the wife had left the city. But my own relatives, for some reason, still couldn't escape from the city.

In any case, it was immense joy! The first in a long time. They are alive! Everyone is alive, even those who have not yet left.

Literally an hour later, contrasting news responded... As soon as the wife's relatives had already left for a safe place and stable mobile connection was established, after all the important questions and conversations, we inquired inadvertently:

- *“What about our house?” ...*

- *“It's gone! A bomb destroyed it, burned down to the ground...”*

It was a shock for us!

My wife and I retreated to a separate room... There were tears, quiet sobs. And a heart-wrenching prayer.

- *"Perhaps this is how it should be!"* - I said, then added.. - *"this too is an answer, nothing holds us back now!"* - but my heart ached fiercely! So much effort and sleepless nights, so much work, all destroyed so swiftly...

We tried not to dwell in our sorrow for too long, though it pained us deeply. We prayed, poured out all our sorrows and pain to Jesus, asked for peace in our hearts, and quite quickly calmed down. So it must be, this is how the Lord leads us. Nothing holds us back now, except for our other relatives.. As soon as they leave, we could fly to the ends of the earth, even to America. There's nowhere to return to, no way back.

That same day brought more joyful news. As it turned out, later that same day, my older brother Denis and his family managed to escape the city. How many prayers of thanks we offered! How happy we were to hear each other over the phone once they got out of the city and regained mobile service.

We had a large family, just in my family alone there were six of us. Me, four more brothers, and one sister. And in my wife's family, there were four.

My younger brother Andrei and my parents still have not been in touch. The following two days were sheer torment for me... We prayed a lot, but there was no word from them. Despairing from fruitless attempts to reach them, I was losing all hope, and by the evening of that day, a terrible foreboding feeling weighed on my heart... Could it be? I pushed away those thoughts!

But Glory be to God, He miraculously led them out of the city, already nearly completely destroyed...

Unspeakable joy filled my heart! Everyone is alive! Praise God!

Wings as a Gift...

When all our relatives who wanted to leave our city of Mariupol had departed, we felt a certain freedom and lightness. It was as if we had suddenly awakened. We felt very lively, joyful, and full of energy to move forward:

- “*Okay, where to next?*” - was the only question before us. Though we almost had an answer from God, only the final touch was needed, which put everything in its place and served as a catalyst for us.

During our time in Romania, in this beautiful large house, among such wonderful and sincere people, we met many individuals. Until our relatives left the war zone, although we couldn't think for ourselves about how and where to move forward, as we had neither the financial means, clarity, nor the desire. Nevertheless, we prayed and asked God for an answer, and the Lord inclined our hearts towards moving further to America, but how to practically achieve this remained a big question.

I vividly remember those evenings when we, with all our new friends from that cozy big house, would gather around the large table to eat, drink tea, and simply talk about the future of each one of us, where everyone planned to go next?

We often shared testimonies of how God miraculously led us out of Mariupol and saved our lives. And many guys, with great love and empathy, constantly tried to support us and somehow help.

Peter, my old friend, would call me frequently, asking how I was and if I was ready to head to America yet? My heart felt peace and tranquility, and there was a clear realization that we should fly to the States, but we still didn't know how. The options were limited.

Either apply for a visa, which was highly unlikely to be approved.

Or fly through Mexico. And that meant a perilous journey crossing the Mexican-American border. From rumors and information on the Internet, we understood how dangerous and fraught with the risk of imprisonment and even death it was.

We were only waiting for the relatives to leave, at least out of immediate danger. While they were in trouble, we didn't want to move.

Sharing our desires and heart's direction with new friends at the table in the evenings, we also conveyed our likely path through this dangerous route to America. Peter gave me small instructions on how to act, how to survive, how to cross this dangerous border.

We were preparing for the worst, not even suspecting what gift God had prepared for us.

Among all the new friends in the house, there was a young man who himself had a large family but, despite this, selflessly helped others. His name was Roman. We became friends, and one evening he told me the same phrase, word for word, that the woman in Ukraine had said to us when we had just left the besieged city. He recalled the same story from the Bible and said:

- *"Don't forget others when you are better off..."*

And then it struck me to the core, I clearly realized that for the second time, God was speaking to me through people, a very important truth, that I should not now live only for myself! I must selflessly serve others too!

Shortly before our departure, when our souls had already calmed down knowing all our relatives were safe, I was talking to Roma again, sharing my concern about our further path and the problems with flying, trying to get any information from him, as he had relatives or friends in America.

The next day, a great miracle happened for us! As it turned out, he shared our story with his people in America, and it moved their hearts to provide us with tremendous help!

It was an incredible act, and to this day, we can hardly believe it! I received a call from a person in America, unknown to me at the time. Without asking many questions, he only clarified some details about the flight and whether we were ready to move through Mexico. Knowing a suitable time for us, he asked for photos of our passports and told us to wait!

Incredible! That same, or the following evening, he purchased five plane tickets for my entire family. These were huge amounts of money for us, an incredible event for all of us! How thankful we are to God, and such amazing His children, who perform such great deeds. May the Lord repay them a hundredfold!

The answer is clear. The question is closed. God finally arranges our path. Now we have “wings,” and we can fly to America without a doubt.

Flight of Liberation...

Our hearts were aflutter with both joy and apprehension! In a couple of days, our departure from Romania's capital, Bucharest, was set. We were staying in the small town of Suceava, not far from the border with Ukraine.

This was our family's first-ever flight. We had never flown before, let alone through international airports. Our itinerary was to fly from Bucharest to Frankfurt, then from Frankfurt to Mexico City, from Mexico City to Tijuana, and from there, dash across the border in hopes of seeking asylum.

The journey was daunting. Overwhelmed with worry, we decided to move closer to the airport ahead of time.

A few days before the flight, we bid farewell to all our new, yet so close friends. That big house, its wonderful owners, the grandmother and grandfather, warmed us all with their care and love, making us all very close friends.

We grew particularly close to a young family, Sergey and Sophia, who also had three children like us. I vividly remember the puzzled look on that guy's face after my question when we were parting. I asked:

- *"What are your plans next? Where to?"* - hugging him goodbye.
- *"I don't know, maybe through Mexico like you"* - he replied uncertainly and perplexedly, with a smirk as if joking.
- *"Go ahead, scout everything out, and we'll follow you!"* - he added with a smile.

We headed to the capital by train. There, people from the church welcomed us, offering us a place to stay for a couple of nights and helping us get to the airport.

They were wonderful, caring folks who fed us deliciously, like on a holiday, during those days and then drove us to the airport in the deep of night, showing so much love and attention.

A grueling flight with children awaited us! We were anxious about getting lost in an international airport, not knowing the language. We were worried about crossing the border through Mexico. Having read online

about people even dying at the border, I was deeply concerned for my family and constantly prayed. God had led us through so much, I believed He would guide us further!

The night of departure arrived. I woke up at 1 am to pack the necessary items before heading to the airport. Suddenly, my friend Peter from America called me.

- *"Everything's canceled!"* - he started mysteriously.
- *"What do you mean?"* - I asked, frightened.
- *"No need to run! No need to demand anything! No one's going to shoot at you! Just calmly walk through the Mexican border!"* - he joyfully said.
- *"Are you sure?"*
- *"Yes! 100%! From today, Ukrainians have been granted simplified passage!"*

It was incredibly uplifting news! Just like before the Israelites, all waves parted on our path.

The Lord is Great! Glory to Him! He blessed us immensely. Our story was becoming too fantastical to be true. Yet, we couldn't even imagine the greatest surprises and miracles the Lord still had in store for us.

Everything was falling into place so smoothly. The Lord painted our story so vividly that sometimes I wondered how to share it with people. They might not believe it. It all seemed too fairy-tale-like. I realized one thing very clearly. If this is how the Lord loves and leads His children on earth, how wonderful it will be to dwell with Him in Heaven.

And here we were at the airport. We said goodbye to the person who had brought us. Ahead lay many unknowns: check-in, luggage, boarding, etc. We had never done this before...

But they've done it many times! Who? There they are! Our new friends, Sergey and Sofia, from Romania with their three children. Yes, it was them! Just stood in line to check in.

- *“How?!!!! How did you end up here?”* - we exclaimed in huge bewilderment and delight!
- *“We just decided the next day, bought the tickets, and also went”* - they joyfully replied.

As it turned out, we had tickets on the same plane and even had seats very close to each other.

We had already checked in before meeting them and, waiting for them, happily went together to board the plane.

The flight was relatively calm, except for problems with the layover in Mexico City. There, our flight was canceled twice. There was a lot of discontent among the passengers. We had to spend the night right on the benches in the terminal at the airport. By that time, my body, from the multitude of stresses, began to falter, and I felt very unwell.

The next day we finally managed to fly to Tijuana. What lay ahead was still unknown. The plane landed at the airport. What to do next, we did not know.

Passport control. All “suspicious” individuals, including us, were taken aside, our passports were confiscated, and we were kept in limbo for a while. It was a real test of faith for me! I had no idea how it would end. After some time, they started releasing people one by one, returning their passports. It turned out we were additionally registered somewhere there, and if it hadn’t been done, we might have faced problems at the Mexican-American border. As happened to some who didn’t show their passport at this checkpoint and got lost in the crowd of locals. And in this, I see God's guidance and care for us.

While we were still not released, I received a message on my phone from Peter, who was supposed to meet us in America in San Diego, after we would have to cross the border. He informed us that they had decided to come for us right in Mexico, and they were already at the airport waiting for us. Relief and joy filled our hearts.

How glad we were to see him and his wife! It was a long-awaited reunion since parting in Ukraine in Mariupol 8 years ago.

Driving around the “wonderful” Mexican roads, we finally found the border. They helped us reach it and dropped us off not far from the border. From there, we had to walk.

There was the border! The goal so close, yet six long hours of agonizing waiting in line lay ahead. Holding our ailing and tired children, we stood in line at the border. The line moved once every hour and a half by 5-7 people. It was excruciatingly difficult to psychologically grasp that if you didn't make it into the next group of people, you'd have to wait another hour or more.

Finally, we were about to be next... Time unbearably slowed down! My wife held our youngest daughter, I held my son, and our eldest daughter sat squatting on my feet.

It was getting dark... No strength was left! A tear rolled down my cheek on its own.

- *“I might deserve bigger problems, I realize I’m not such a good person, made many mistakes in life... But the children, why must they go through this?”* - I thought, drained by the hopelessness of the situation.

Soon we were let inside. Document processing. Passports. Fingerprints. Done!

We were led through a long tunnel, then through some building, wished “Good luck,” and exited.

America!!!

We stepped through the huge high door. And stopped outside. My friend Peter and his wife Tatiana ran up to meet us!

Showing great care, they drove us to a hotel, bought us food, and fed us.

By that time, my health had severely deteriorated, and I was overwhelmingly sleepy. I quickly fell asleep in bed.

What joy it was to wake up in the morning in a clean bed, in silence, and most importantly, in America. It took us a long time to fully grasp it.

Our path ahead lay to Sacramento. They drove us leisurely, showing us America in all its glory, stopping by the ocean on the way!

God Gives Us Friends...

After arriving in the city, we were introduced to a young couple, Vitaly and Daria, who agreed to host us in their home for the initial period. They turned out to be marvelous people with huge hearts and an absolutely positive outlook on life. Eventually, they became our best friends. They created all conditions for us, helping and entertaining us, so we could quickly forget all the sorrows and hardships.

But we could stay with them for only one week. Exactly a week to the day, we moved to another American family, which quite literally changed our entire life! Michael and Debi, these people completely overturned my understanding of human kindness and selflessness, showing immense care and incredibly sacrificial love towards us. But let's take it step by step...

Upon arriving in America, our story of miracles and God's grace was far from over; the most incredible and indescribable was just beginning.

We spent the first week with our future best friends, Vitaly and Daria. Literally on the second day, an interesting man came to visit us, about whom I had no idea who he was and what he wanted. He came to get acquainted with us, to look at us and learn more about us, where we were from, and what we had truly experienced. This man was very engaging, especially since his name was Paul, just like mine. As it turned out later, he was the administrator of a Slavic Russian-speaking church in America.

We had no clue how his visit would change our life and that we would become very close friends. Thanks to him, a lot of help and care would be provided through the church for our family. How often he would later show care and attention to us with a note of merriment and positivity. And there he was, standing, looking at us, and offering us some "dubious" deal, as it seemed to me then. We were offered to move in with some American family. I didn't understand why and how, given that we had just arrived, been through so much. We hadn't even had time to settle down from it all, and here we needed to move again.

Simply, we had no idea then that this was a magnificent God's plan. That the Lord would work in amazing ways in our life through this! We didn't understand then that God was answering the prayers of many people through this situation! God's plan was, as always, amazing.

We agreed to meet and get acquainted with this American family within the week. We were a bit anxious and nervous, facing the unknown again.

Even while still in Romania, and even in Ukraine, thinking about and planning our move to America, we knew we had no relatives here. Only my longtime friend Peter, who was eagerly awaiting us and provided us immense help in the first weeks of our stay in America. He constantly drove us to various administrations and helped us with paperwork. He and his wife showed us a lot of care.

The Remedy...

Around the third day, we needed medication for our children and for us, my wife and I, as after everything we had been through, our health was far from its best.

Vitaly and Daria, the family we stayed with during the first week, offered to help us with the medicines. As it turned out, they had a relative who worked in a Russian pharmacy. Almost all the employees there spoke Russian. When Vitaly took me there, he first decided to introduce me to everyone. A conversation started, and I briefly wanted to share the most important miracles God had performed in getting my family out of Mariupol. After a few sentences, a woman approached me and asked:

- *“Are you a believer? Do you have a church in Mariupol. Are you familiar with the surname - Kurilov?”*
- *“That’s my surname!”* - I exclaimed, stunned by the shock. It was a very unexpected twist of events.

It soon turned out that she was my mother's aunt. Interestingly, both she and my mother are named Lyuba.

How?! How is this possible!? What are the odds of such an event? I "randomly" met my relative in a Russian pharmacy in America, about whom I had no idea existed.

Isn't God miraculous? Isn't this a masterpiece?!

How much joy we had. We gathered and communicated together thereafter. This woman's son, named Alexey, was about my age, with whom I became very close friends and we often marveled, saying:

- *“No way, we’re definitely relatives!”* - when we discovered many common interests and hobbies.

Our new American relatives. How much they helped us later, gifting us a car, later we realized that without a car in US is the same as being left without legs. Amazing people, sincere and responsive, ready to help at

any moment. Who, by sacrificing their time, helped us many times with car repairs and other things. In short, this trip to the pharmacy gave us not just conventional medicine, which, by the way, was simply gifted to us, but also a remedy for the soul, in the form of a new family I never even knew I had in my life!

He Made Us Family...

A few days later we met a new American family whom Paul introduced us to, who were ready to welcome us into their home. What amazing people they were. God has been teaching me through them how to live rightly to this very day. For the first time in my life, I truly understood in practice that age doesn't matter. Despite their age, they were so strong and full of energy that they could easily outpace thirty-year-olds. There's a very funny story related to this, but more on that later.

Their hearts seemed boundless and filled with love. Richly blessed by God, owning a large beautiful spacious home, they welcomed us with genuine Christian modesty and humility.

Before our fellowship, they gave us a tour of their home, showing us the backyard and bedrooms where we would be staying. Seeing all this beauty and space, after so much time wandering while fleeing from the war, we couldn't hold back our tears. Embracing my wife, we quietly cried.

After that, we had a warm conversation. Our new friends Vitaly and Daria, as well as Peter and Tatyana, who had been supporting us and helped with translation since at that time we hardly understood English, let alone speak it, joined us.

Michael and Debi welcomed us as their own children. It was later, over time, that I realized they were not just being hospitable but truly sincerely from the bottom of their hearts telling us:

- *"This is now your home! Feel free to be yourselves!"*

Their doors, both of their hearts and home, were opened so wide. And not just for us, but for our friends too. They were always glad to see all of us together.

Soon we moved in with them. It was a bit sad to leave Vitaly and Daria, with whom we had barely managed to spend a week, but thank God, we didn't lose touch with them, and our relationship, support, and friendship

only grew. It's always with great warmth and comfort that we enjoy visiting them, our first sanctuary, the first island of peace, the first home in a faraway foreign land.

Truly, the Lord writes a masterpiece from our destinies! Parallel to our story and the miracles we recently experienced in our lives, God was doing equally amazing things and miracles in the lives of Michael and Debi.

After the war in Ukraine began, they started praying for God to send them people from Ukraine whom they could help. Specifically, those who genuinely needed it. Some time after praying for this need, God reminded them of an event from two years ago. Long ago, about two years prior, a Ukrainian believer had done some work in their home, laying laminate on the floor and building a staircase. Naturally, they didn't have the contact of this person, as he worked through the store where the laminate was purchased. After calling the store and finding information from their database about the order and the contractor, they established contact with this person. Inviting him for dinner, they had a wonderful conversation and expressed their desire to help someone from Ukraine. Through him, the Slavic Russian-speaking church got to know about it, and Paul, the church administrator, came to meet us almost immediately and offered this arrangement. It was quite symbolic and amazing to learn that our meeting with Michael and Debi happened on Michael's late mother's birthday, who was from Kyiv, Ukraine. And many other miracles the Lord performed in preparing our mutual encounter.

The Horn of Plenty...

If we had previously experienced immense blessings from God on our journey, arriving at this marvelous, truly Christian family made us feel as if the "trumpet of blessings" had finally burst open!

I finally grasped the meaning of the "horn of plenty" mentioned in the Bible!

It's simply impossible to describe how much grace, help, and blessings we experienced through this family, their adult children, and their church. One could write a whole book about it.

They noticed such nuances and moments in which we needed support, often even anticipating our needs. Their relatives gifted us iPhones, something we couldn't even dream of back in Ukraine, despite not living poorly. We were literally showered with gifts. Clothes, food vouchers, gift cards, organizing crowdfunding for us, groceries, money, and much more. Every day, through them and their community, we experienced enormous blessings.

How grateful we were for all the gifts, sometimes rejoicing, sometimes crying from happiness. But once, the gift was so significant that we didn't know how to react, as words and emotions couldn't express it. We were in deep shock when they told us they would introduce us to very good lawyers who wanted to help us with legalization for free so we could stay in the United States. We understood this meant a huge amount of money and a lot of work. We just had no words; we didn't know how to thank them. We cried from happiness.

And then, once while communicating with them, at that point still only through Google Translate, they asked my wife:

- *"Would you like your mother and your family to be with you here?"*
- they knew that at that moment, my wife's family was in Romania. Like us before, looking for ways to get to America or Canada.
- *"Of course! It's my biggest wish!"* - my wife replied.

I don't remember exactly how that conversation ended, but a few days later, they came into our room and announced:

- *"We've found sponsors for your family! We can help them move to America."*

I remember my wife's emotional storm! She was literally exulting!

That marked the beginning of a tough two-month battle for documents. It was an unbearably hard process. This family showed a great example; they didn't give up when faced with so many refusals and document-related issues. And when they finally saw it through and my wife's relatives were about to fly to America, we learned that they were listed as the sponsors in the documents. Not only had they welcomed us and taken care of us, but they also undertook to help three more of my wife's families, totaling nine people. These are true Christians with sacrificial Christ-like hearts, from whom one wants to take example and learn how to live rightly.

Amidst all the abundance and joy, sorrow unexpectedly knocked on our door. The news of the death of my wife's father, who stayed in Ukraine, shattered my spouse with grief. Essentially, before and after this, we never forgot the people left in the war in Ukraine, constantly praying for them and for peace in the country with tears. But this news, the death of a loved one, just knocked the ground from under our feet. War brings only evil and sorrow. Moreover, all these events made us view life entirely differently.

There's nothing eternal on this earth. One must live by the day and serve God!

One day, Michael and Debi introduced us to dentists who also wanted to support us and take care of our teeth. Mine and my wife's, who wore braces fitted in Ukraine just before the war began. These doctors were truly remarkable and generous people who took our treatment seriously and with full responsibility, providing us immense help.

To this day, my mind reels from the kindness and care of all the American people we met along the way, whom God sent and continues to send to us. All our stereotypes, imposed by the godless Soviet authority, about Americans were shattered to smithereens. This was especially true regarding American Christians, who were always particularly sympathetic toward us.

For me, this family became an example in many ways. In living practical Christianity. In the relationship between spouses. Even in matters of food and exercise.

I remember once they invited us to their lake house. A place of incredible beauty. There, the soul finds peace and serenity. It was there that the amusing story I mentioned earlier occurred. One early morning, as Michael was getting ready for a jog, he suggested I join him.

I thought to myself:

- *"This will be easy, as I'm much younger"* - I agreed without any concern and we set out on a four-mile run.

How wrong I was! Although I had run a bit before, never over such hilly terrain or distance. I was practically dying after the first mile, while he ran circles around me without stopping, encouraging me, saying that I could do it. That's when I realized that youth is not hidden in the body but in the soul and the character of a person!

When all the paperwork was ready and it was time for my wife's relatives to fly to America, they, along with their church, fully covered the plane tickets for all nine of them. Then, we all went together to meet them.

People from the church took the families of relatives into their homes, opening their hearts to them as well.

Looking at all of them, I learn to love and live sacrificially as well! To serve God through serving people! I'm learning to live truly as Christ teaches, not as religion does!

They helped us start over. Take the first steps. The Lord is creating an amazing story from all of us together!
With Him, we will overcome everything! I'm sure God has much more interesting things in store for us.

Our journey is not over... The story continues...