

‘Overcome Evil with Good’: Reflections on the War in Ukraine

James Andrews

Among the many moving stories to emerge from Ukraine in the early days of the war was that of a six-year-old boy, who, together with his family, was forced to leave his home because of the danger of shelling by Russian artillery. His mother later spoke of how in Ukraine there is a tradition of making a wish when spending the first night in a new place. She asked her little boy to make a wish. He told her that his wish was for the war to end – and for the President of Russia to become a good person.¹

To me, this apparently simple wish, made by a young child whose whole world had been turned upside down by war, speaks powerfully of how we as Christians might respond to the terrible events which have been unfolding in Ukraine since the escalation of Russian hostilities on 24 February 2022. It speaks not of vengeance, but of a desire for good to overcome evil. As Paul writes to the Romans:

Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good. (Rom 12:21)²

So I want to explore two biblical themes which I hope can help us to process and respond to the war in Ukraine – and to other situations of conflict or human suffering. First, we will think about how a longing for God’s justice to prevail in the world is at the core of the biblical message. Second, we will consider how as Christians we are all called to work, in whatever ways we can, to ‘overcome evil with good’.

¹ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/sounds/play/p0br90mk>

² Bible references from the New International Version.

Longing for God's Justice

The Old Testament visions of God's Kingdom are deeply rooted in the conviction that God is a God of justice; and that there is nothing right or normal or acceptable about oppression, war, or injustice. As Moses said to the people of Israel back in Deuteronomy:

He is the Rock, his works are perfect, and all his ways are just. A faithful God who does no wrong, upright and just is he. (Dt 32:4)

For most of their history, the people of Israel were on the margins of powerful empires. They were delivered by God from slavery in Egypt, and a large part of the Old and New Testament Scriptures were written and compiled in the context of rule by imperial powers: the Assyrians, the Babylonians, and later the Persians, the Greeks, and the Romans.

So the Scriptures have a deep sense that the world *now* is not the world as it *should be*; but also that God, in His justice and love, has the power to make things right again. Many of the psalms, particularly those written in the context of exile, hold together the conviction that God reigns over all the earth – that He is therefore greater than any human power or empire – with the faith that He cares deeply for the poor and the oppressed.

For example, Psalm 146 affirms that God is 'the Maker of heaven and earth' (v. 6), and that 'the Lord reigns for ever' (v. 10). But in between these statements, the psalm expresses what this means about God's loving care for those in need:

He upholds the cause of the oppressed and gives food to the hungry.

The LORD sets prisoners free, the LORD gives sight to the blind, the LORD lifts up those who are bowed down, the LORD loves the righteous.

The LORD watches over the foreigner and sustains the fatherless and the widow, but he frustrates the ways of the wicked. (Ps 146:7-9)

These are images of what God's reign and God's justice look like. They are images which seem particularly powerful in view of the situation in Ukraine, as people are forced to flee from violence and oppression. The message of the Old Testament is clear: the Lord is on the side of the foreigner, the fatherless, and the widow.

And although there are many times and situations in which the world seems far from God's justice, this conviction about God as a God of justice – and a longing for God's justice to become a reality on earth – is what underlies the biblical visions of God's Kingdom.

This is the hope that one day swords will be beaten into ploughshares (Isaiah 2); the hope for a king on the throne of David who will rule in justice and righteousness for ever (Isaiah 9); the hope in God's promise to fill the earth with the knowledge of the LORD:

They will neither harm nor destroy on all my holy mountain – for the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea. (Is 11:9)

Yet all too often these visions of God's justice seem remote from our own day-to-day lives and experiences. Most Christians in the West today are apparently far removed from the immediate danger of conflict – although the Ukraine war reminds us how quickly things can change. But we must acknowledge that, for the most part, our experiences are different from the people of ancient Israel, as well as from the people of modern-day Ukraine.

Nevertheless, the war in Ukraine seems to have touched a nerve with many of us. The invasion has been widely reported in Western media; images of warfare have been distributed via social media in a way that makes the war seem even more incongruous; and for those of us in Europe it is a country close to home, subject to a heinous and unprovoked attack. I have felt a close connection to the conflict myself – especially as my wife's family lives in neighbouring Poland, and I have a longstanding association with the Christadelphian community in another neighbouring country, Romania.

So this conflict in Ukraine is a terrible reminder that the world is *not* as it *should be*. And perhaps it might therefore shake us out of our complacency about wider suffering in the world as well. For those of us who are privileged to enjoy relatively comfortable lives, it is easy to put on hold our longing for God's justice, and our hope in God's Kingdom. The war in Ukraine reminds us that God's justice does *not* now prevail on the earth.

And it reminds us too that there are many other ongoing conflicts and situations of injustice or oppression throughout the world: the Syrian civil war; the war in Yemen; the re-establishment of Taliban control in Afghanistan – with over two million children in Afghanistan facing malnourishment at the time of writing, even as the war in Ukraine rages on.

All these situations of conflict are equally horrific for the people who experience them – whether in Europe, the Middle East, Africa, or elsewhere in the world. And while it is natural that Ukraine should have evoked our empathy and horror in such a strong way, it should also remind us that *all* wars are just as unnatural, just as evil, just as horrific for the ordinary people caught up in them.

Our response to circumstances in Ukraine should remind us that the world is not as it should be – and never has been. We desperately need God’s Kingdom, and God’s justice. This is what we should be praying for, and working for, in whatever ways we can – not only in response to the present situation, but at all times in the face of injustice in the world.

Several of the Old Testament psalms, known collectively as ‘imprecatory psalms’, are psalms which call down God’s judgements on the enemies of God or God’s people. They are among the passages of Scripture which as Christians we may sometimes wrestle with, as we seek to understand them in the context of God’s loving purpose.

However, these psalms make more sense when seen in the context of situations of profound injustice, such as we have witnessed in Ukraine. Many of the voices we have heard coming out of Ukraine since the invasion could be straight out of the imprecatory psalms – innocent people asking, ‘Why is this happening to us?’ or ‘What have we done to deserve this?’, or condemning the actions of those who started the war. In the words of the Ukrainian ambassador to the UN at the beginning of the invasion: ‘War criminals go straight to hell’. As we read, for example, in Psalm 17:

Rise up, LORD, confront them, bring them down; with your sword rescue me from the wicked. (Ps 17:13).

These are not our prayers to pray – unless, perhaps, we are suffering directly ourselves in the manner of the Old Testament psalmists. But in his passage about overcoming evil with good in Romans 12, Paul reminds us:

Do not take revenge, my dear friends, but leave room for God’s wrath, for it is written: ‘It is mine to avenge; I will repay,’ says the Lord. (Rom 12:19)

Perhaps bringing cries for vengeance in prayer before God is the first step towards trusting in God’s justice; trusting in *His* vengeance and not our own; and ultimately putting our hope in His true, final, and complete justice for all – the hope of His Kingdom.

Responding in Love

Appropriately enough, the editors of the NIV have given Romans 12:9-21 the subheading 'love in action'. Paul begins this section by saying 'love must be sincere' (v. 9). And he goes on to show that, put simply, love means doing good. We should 'hate what is evil; cling to what is good' (v. 9); we should 'overcome evil with good' (v. 21). The opposite of evil is showing love – doing good.

Yet the focus of these verses seems to change part way through the passage. The first few verses (Rom 12:9-13) focus on our relationships *within* our church communities – speaking of how we should honour one another, keep our spiritual fervour, and share with the Lord's people.

However, the second half of this passage (Rom 12:14-21) seems to focus more on those *outside* the church community – including 'those who persecute you' (v. 14). These verses encourage us, as far as possible, to 'live at peace with everyone' (v. 18). So it may be helpful – and perhaps a little challenging – to consider how we apply verses like these in our everyday lives: at work, in our neighbourhoods, in our wider friendships.

Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn. Live in harmony with one another. Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position. Do not be conceited. (Rom 12:15-16)

Following the example of our Lord Jesus, the Apostle Paul encourages us to show love and empathy to *all* those with whom we come into contact – regardless of background or social status.

Over the past few weeks it has been moving to witness the huge amount of empathy and generosity shown to refugees fleeing from Ukraine. Within the first two months of the war over three million Ukrainian refugees were taken in by Poland alone, with other neighbouring countries also stepping up to provide help and support.

Many Ukrainians have been taken into the homes of families across Europe and beyond. In the UK, an appeal by the UK Disasters Emergency Committee for Ukrainians fleeing the conflict raised £55 million in its first day. All these are examples of evil being overcome by good – by love.

But sadly, while newspaper headlines in Britain have been largely supportive of Ukrainian refugees, the same attitude has not always been shown to others seeking refuge. In recent months

and years, many of the newspapers now supporting the acceptance of Ukrainian refugees were publishing stories which dehumanised refugees from the Middle East and North Africa, crossing the Channel in small boats at great risk to their own lives.

The UK government's willingness to accept Ukrainian refugees also stands in contrast to its recently announced plan to send asylum seekers arriving in the UK to Rwanda for processing and settlement. Similar contrasts have been drawn between the Polish authorities' welcome of Ukrainians, and their poor treatment of Middle Eastern refugees arriving via Belarus.

The different ways in which political authorities have dealt with different groups of refugees is in clear opposition to the teaching of the Bible – that God shows no partiality (Dt 1:17; Acts 10:34; Rom 12:11; James 2:9). Just as all conflicts are equally horrific, all refugees are equally human – equally deserving of our respect and love and empathy.

In the UK, over the past few years the Christadelphian community has been blessed with an incredible opportunity to welcome many refugees from Iran, and increasingly from elsewhere in the Middle East as well. And just as we have been able to share our faith and understanding with them, they have greatly encouraged and enriched our community in many ways.

So while there may be ways in which we can directly help those affected by the war in Ukraine – whether by donating to relevant support agencies, or even by offering to host refugees ourselves – our response to seeing such evil should not be limited to the Ukraine conflict. In the UK, our response should perhaps be to redouble our efforts to support the refugee community already in our midst.

Overcoming evil with good does not mean responding only to this particular situation in Ukraine. It means *any* good we are able to do – ‘as we have opportunity’, as Paul puts it (Gal 6:10). The antidote to seeing evil in the world is to do whatever good we can, whether directly related or not. As one Christian writer has put it, we cannot put out all the fires in the world – we can only use our bucket of water to put out the fire that is closest to us.

It is interesting that in Romans 12, Paul uses the phrase ‘do not be overcome *by* evil’. Situations like the one in Ukraine can certainly make us feel overcome *by* evil at times. We can feel overwhelmed by the horror of the situation, and powerless to do anything about it. But rather than spending our time ‘doom scrolling’ through news and social media feeds, which can just paralyse us into inactivity, we can all take small, positive steps to do good – to show love.

Seeing great evil in the world should not make us feel overwhelmed, but should galvanise us into doing whatever good we can. It should provoke us to do all those things which Paul encourages us to do in Romans 12, as we seek to put *love* into action: living in harmony with one another; associating with people of low position; sharing with others; showing kindness, compassion, and empathy.

And in these ways – in very small ways individually, but collectively in a big way – we can be the salt of the earth; the light of the world – as Jesus told us to be (Mt 5:13-16).

The Darkness Has Not Overcome

We began by considering the Bible’s ‘big picture’ vision of God’s justice. We then moved on to think about our own often small-scale role in seeking to overcome evil with good. But of course, these two themes are closely related.

When Jesus spoke of the Kingdom of God, he spoke of the spiritual qualities or characteristics of Kingdom people – the meek, the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers (Mt 5:3-10). If we seek to display these qualities in our lives, then we are contributing in a small way to the big vision of God’s justice which the Bible points us towards.

Jesus himself embodied all of these Kingdom characteristics. And he did so not through dramatic or attention-grabbing actions, but for the most part through small-scale acts of compassion; words of wisdom and kindness; encounters with ordinary people who needed to know his love.

Even Jesus’ death on the cross was, in the context of his time, simply another example of routine brutality by the desensitised soldiers of an imperial power. But by accepting the punishment he did not deserve; by not turning his face away from mocking and spitting; by offering forgiveness instead of retaliation, Jesus himself overcame evil with good.

It was through his apparently small acts of love, kindness, and forgiveness, that Jesus changed the world – and opened the way for God’s big vision of justice to be realised. And so the cross, and the empty tomb, are God’s sure sign that His goodness and His justice will triumph in the end. As John writes in the prologue to his gospel:

The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it. (Jn 1:5)

It is ultimately Jesus, our Risen Lord, who is our hope for justice. He is our hope that still, even now, the darkness will not overcome. And, in the end, all that we can do when faced with the sometimes apparently overwhelming power of evil, is to come to Jesus; bring to him our prayers for justice and peace; and seek day by day to follow his example.