

# REPORT FROM MARIUPOL, UKRAINE

February 2005

Dear Brethren,

I feel compelled to make some explanation as to the extreme lateness of this month's report. The best I can offer is that this has been the busiest uneventful month in recent memory. More on that later.

We began the month with a study of the book of Esther and the Providence of God. The brethren here were very impressed with the chain of events that eventually brought about the salvation of the Jews from their enemies. That very evening, as I was traveling home from the study a lady sat down next to me on the bus and began reading her Bible. I could not let an opportunity such as this get away and so I directed Vera to ask her where she currently attended.

The lady introduced herself as Larissa and very eagerly described a Pentecostal group that meets just out of town. She was also very glad to hear that I had moved here to preach the gospel and promised to visit our Bible class on the next Wednesday evening declaring that the Providence of God must have caused our meeting. This, of course, caused Vera no small amount of astonishment considering I had just spent the last hour talking about that very subject. I believe, at that moment, she was almost ready to regard me as a prophet.

When people absolutely promise that they are going to come, there is usually a fifty-fifty chance as to whether they will. In the days following our meeting, the weather took a turn for the worse, which diminished my optimism that our new acquaintance would actually follow through on her plan to attend.

However, when I came walking up to the meeting place the following Wednesday evening, Larissa was standing there in the snow waiting. I had not realized it at the time, but Vera had accidentally given her the wrong apartment number. Thus, when Larissa attempted to find the place, the people inside informed her that they didn't know what in the world she was talking about. Faced with such a setback, and having nothing else to do but wait in the cold, most folks would have thrown up their hands and gone home. Fortunately, she decided to wait.

This evening, our study had moved on to the book of Job and Larissa listened quietly with everyone else until we came to chapter 4 and the first speech of Eliphaz. His "proof" that Job is a sinner is a dream he happens to have had (verses 12-21). As soon as I made the point that this is a very poor way to determine doctrine, she became very animated and said that she had a similar experience that she would like to share.

"Oh, great. Here we go." I thought to myself. "I have ten more chapters to cover and I'm going to have to spend the rest of the time arguing with her about Pentecostal doctrine." However, what she proceeded to say surprised me greatly. She related the story of a friend of hers whom she had been trying to convert who had a dream about her. In the dream Larissa had flown. Her friend was sure that only witches fly. Therefore, she was a witch and the friend wanted nothing more to do with her! Thus, I was able to agree heartily that this was a very poor method of making judgments and continue the lesson.

Given her previous statements, I was somewhat hopeful as we began to talk to one another after the conclusion of the lesson. However, in the two and a half hours of study that followed, it became clear that this experience had done nothing to dent her faith in Pentecostal doctrine. Apparently her criterion for judging a dream to be accurate is that she agrees with the interpretation!

At the end of the conversation, Valentin, who had remained at the table and listened the entire time, could see that I had not made any progress with her and offered his own solution: "Pretty Soon," he turned to her and said, "Charles (Gant), is going to come back here. And when he does, he will explain everything! Matt is ok, but Charles will explain everything!" It's good to be loved.

I was able to give her what material we had on the Holy Spirit and speaking in tongues and she promised to return when she had the opportunity. Sadly, in the weeks that have followed, she has not seen fit to return. Given her stubborn attitude when faced with clear scriptures during our discussion, I'm not terribly hopeful that she will. Ultimately, it turned out to be a very busy evening, but not a very eventful one as far as any real progress was concerned.

My progress in the Russian language continues to be steady. I have advanced to the point that I am reading children's books and making my own vocabulary lists in an effort to master usage as well as fill in the large number of words I do not yet know. As I believe I have mentioned before, this knowledge comes at a price. I seem to be much more fluent in the language than I really am. Thus, my ability to respond to what others have to say does not match what I am able to understand from them. This is especially frustrating when people ask Bible questions and there is no interpreter around. Which seems to be my landlord's new favorite pastime every time he gets drunk!

Perhaps, since the question is always the same If God made Man and Woman on the 6th day, why is He still making people in Chapter 2 and not very difficult, I think I can practice up enough to answer it effectively. On the other hand, given his logical thinking abilities when he arrives in this condition, it's highly doubtful I'll ever be able to convince him in any language. It's usually a very busy, time whenever he stops by, but it's not what I would call progress.

My greatest frustration this month, however, had to do with my attempt to obtain a visa for Russia, which I had hoped to visit in April and encourage the Christians in several cities there before returning to the US for a visit. I realize that the bureaucracy in America often frustrates us and is the regular topic of jokes. However, we have nothing on these folks. As Charlie often says, "They don't call it RED tape for nothing!"

I began several weeks ago by attempting to find a local travel agency who could arrange a tour to Russia and thus secure a visa through them. Each time, the answer was the same - you are an American, we don't mess with Americans. You need to find an agent in America to help you. Thus, I called my regular travel agent in Nashville who has secured a Russian tourist visa for me in the past. He was ready to help, and would have no problem securing what I needed. Accordingly, I went the next day to the local DHL office to send him my passport and the necessary pictures. As soon as the agent saw my passport he immediately refused service stating that it is ILLEGAL to send passports out of the Ukraine!

He suggested that I could use UPS to try to send it illegally, or, pay someone to take it across the border into Russia (about two hours away) and ship it to the US from there because it is not illegal in Russia only in Ukraine. Because both of these options bore a high risk of me never seeing my passport again, I decided against them. This, of course, left me no closer to solving the problem of obtaining a Russian visa.

My next step, was to contact the Russian embassy in Kiev and ask whether they were able to process visa requests from American citizens. They stated that they could without any problem. As a result, I secured an invitation from a company over the internet and made plans to travel to Kiev. However, knowing this part of the world as I do, I doubted that there wouldn't be any problems.

It takes 17 hours to travel from here to Kiev by train and 10 by bus. Knowing that I did not have that kind of time to spend traveling because I wanted to minimize the number of days I was away from teaching Bible classes here, and because the flights from here to Kiev are not nearly as expensive as I previously thought (only \$60 each way), I opted to take the flight to Kiev on Tuesday the 15th with a return the following Friday evening hoping that this would be sufficient time to take care of everything that was necessary.

Due to a weather delay (it was snowing heavily in Kiev), our flight did not arrive until nearly 11 and at the airport 30 minutes out of town instead of the downtown one as planned. Roman's (my interpreter) brother Dennis had arranged for one of the flight attendants to serve as my interpreter. Unfortunately, I had to wait another hour after my arrival for her to finish her post flight duties before we could make our way into town. Because all the embassies close at 1 pm or earlier, I had no choice but to wait until the following day. Of course, we did not know this at the time, and spent a miserable afternoon slogging through the mushy streets trying to find the place. The locals were very eager to help when asked. The typical response was: "I don't really know, but I think you should go that way." In any other conditions I wouldn't have minded as much. However, this also happened to be the day that my waterproof boots decided that they were not going to be waterproof anymore.

The next day, we managed to meet by 11 once again. Anya (my interpreter) was staying a good distance away from where I was and thus, by the time she got up and made her way to where I was, the morning was practically gone. However, I wasn't terribly worried because at least we knew where to go. However, once we arrived and rang the bell at the gate for admittance we were rather rudely informed that they didn't do that sort of thing here and that we would have to go across town to the consulate.

Things were getting a little desperate at this point since they would need at least one day to process my request. However, we managed to get a taxi to the other place with an hour to spare. Things went smoothly enough once we got inside. We presented the necessary invitation, filled out the application, and waited our turn to see the consular officer who turned out to be one of the grumpiest Russian women I have ever met.

It turns out that I had made the vital error of being honest on the application. Instead of only requesting to visit the city of Moscow, I had listed the other cities I intended to visit. Because the company through which I had received the invitation had only listed a hotel in Moscow and not in the other cities, they would only be willing to issue a visa for 2 weeks instead of the month that I had hoped for a price of \$340! I would have been willing to pay for a month long visa; but over three hundred dollars for a two week visit is kind of steep. They suggested that if I contacted the company and had them issue an itinerary for my entire stay, they would be willing to issue the visa for the entire period. Otherwise, two weeks was the best they could do.

I spent the following evening and most of the next morning attempting to contact the company which had issued the invitation and inform them of the embassy's demand. That morning, Vera was even so kind as to call the office in Moscow with my request. They had her call someone else, who in turn had her call someone else, and so on, until ten phone calls later, someone finally told her that she would have to call the office in Atlanta which wouldn't be open until 5pm Kiev time. This, of course, was too late to do me any good because by the time they could send anything, there would be no way for me to apply to the Embassy and get everything back before Monday. Since I had to return to Mariupol Friday evening, I had no choice but to admit defeat. Kiev is a beautiful city, however, I have a difficult time not associating it with extreme frustration and fatigue. Having boots that leaked didn't help either.

I arrived at the airport Friday evening exhausted, discouraged, and very ready to return to Mariupol. My accommodations to this point had not been terrible I was able to rent a flat by the day at a cheaper rate than the hotels in town but just about everything else had been. However, as I sat there waiting for my flight to be called, Anya walked in and informed me that it has been cancelled due to fog in Mariupol. Shortly, the official announcement confirmed this and instructed everyone to return at 8 am.

Most airlines I've ever heard of make some kind of provision for passengers they strand in cities overnight. This one does not. Anya suggested that I spend the night in the hotel across the street a bargain at only \$10 a night so that I would be ready to fly back the next morning. Although it is very convenient to the airport, that is about all I can say for it. It was by far, the nastiest rat hole I have ever slept in since coming to this part of the world. In order to spare your sensibilities I will not describe it in any greater detail here other than to say I never knew they had outhouses inside buildings! It is probably not entirely the hotel's fault (stress and fatigue were also factors I'm sure), but I have been rather sick ever since my stay there.

Thus, I am back here in Mariupol a few hundred dollars poorer, no closer to being able to secure a Russian visa, and running out of time to do something about it. The dilemma is as follows my visa for Ukraine expires on April 13. I must leave the country to apply for a new one. Otherwise, I will only be given a 6th month extension and then kicked out of the country for a year. I have very good reasons for wishing to be home in May rather than April my brother's graduation, my sister's wedding, and a young lady of my own who has done without me for the past year, needs some attention, and won't be finished with classes herself until the first week of May.

My options are as follows: 1) Go ahead and come home in April anyway I would prefer not to for the reasons stated above. 2) Make contact with the company again, secure the necessary document, return to Kiev and have the visa processed (they don't process them by mail here like they do in the states) A second trip to Kiev is cost prohibitive not to mention the additional classes I would have to miss teaching here. 3) Find other Christians within the European Union (no visa required for an American to visit these countries) to visit and encourage during the time I would have been in Russia perhaps the most attractive of the three, however, this means I will not get to visit the Russian brethren this year and someone needs to especially Yaroslavl.

Having been sick since my return, I have attempted to make progress on any of these options. Frankly, I don't really know what to do. Perhaps there is something I'm overlooking. If any of you have any ideas, I'm ready to listen.

At the risk of seeming to pile on bad news, Teresa was taken to the hospital this month with a hernia. She appeared to be in good spirits when I visited her most recently. However, her condition requires that the stay in the hospital for several more weeks. Although this is a strain on her family, especially her sister, I cannot help thinking that this arrangement might be for the best as she now has no access to alcohol and will not for some time to come. Thus, this may be a blessing if she regards this as an opportunity to dry herself out while she is being treated for her other problems.

Finally, Wiley Deason, who had been hoping to join me here and share in the work for several months has been forced to cancel his plans for personal reasons. The longer I am here, the more I am convinced of the wisdom of two men working together (Eccl. 4:9, 10) and I am certainly disappointed that things have turned out this way. However, I knew when I took this on that there simply aren't many men who are willing/able to commit to work like this

on a long term basis. As tragic as that is, it's simply the reality.

More troubling to me though, is the lack of anyone making short term trips to Mariupol this year. Charlie and Kay Gant are planning to be here while I am away. Other than that, there is no one scheduled for this entire year! I have tried to stress to all the men who have visited since I have been here that now is not the time to stop scheduling visits simply because I have moved here. Your work is likely to be more effective than before, because I am here to follow up. It does a lot for the saints here, and it does a lot for me especially given the circumstances. In the midst of tough times, there are always bright spots if you look for them. Thankfully, it is not necessary to look very hard to find something significant and that I hope will become more so in the future.

Valentin and Galina's grandson, Valera, 14, first visited when Jim Mickells and Charles Gant were here in the fall. After they left, he apparently had better things to do on Sunday mornings and I did not see him for several weeks. However, he has started attending regularly the past four Sundays and his interest and participation increases with each visit. He has not yet made it to any Bible classes during the week his older brother was recently beaten severely by thugs and his mother is now afraid to let either of them out of the house at night but he seems genuinely happy to be at our worship services. He is doing very well learning the songs, and taking notes on the sermons. This past Sunday he came in and showed me his Bible that he had spent considerable time making and applying page tabs to so that he could turn to the scripture references more quickly. His recent attendance has corresponded nicely with a series I had already planned on the steps of salvation. I am very hopeful that if his attendance continues, good fruit will result.

Hope of this kind is what keeps me going. Any measure of success makes the accompanying hardships seem trivial by comparison. May it ever be the case.

In Him,

Matt Duggin

