

# REPORT FROM MARIUPOL, UKRAINE

February 2006

Dear Brethren,

Greetings from frigid Mariupol. I learned in History class that Russia's three greatest allies have always been December, January, and February! I believe it. The brethren tell me that we are having a winter like there hasn't been in 20 years. Temperatures have hovered consistently below zero for the entire month save for one week when they made it up into the thirties. None of this would be so bad were it not for the strong winds (20-40 mph) that blast in from the Sea of Azov. I'm hoping that the winter will bottom out this weekend with expected temperatures of a 25! As you might guess, I don't leave the house unless I have to.

In addition to the cold, it has been a month of shortages. Some of you may be aware of the dispute between Ukraine and Russia over Natural Gas prices. Russia apparently wished to punish Ukraine for moving into the West's sphere of influence with the Orange Revolution of last year. Thus, when the natural gas contract came due at the beginning of this year Russia quadrupled the price! The message was, if you want to be part of Europe, you can pay the European price. This has left Ukraine in a bit of a power crunch. State subsidies have prevented folks from feeling the full bite of the price increase (although all are complaining bitterly about increases to their heating and gas bills). However, this has caused the state to take other measures to compensate. The more electricity they can sell to other countries, the more money they have to throw at the gas problem. Thus, the power companies have frequent "accidents" that can take days to repair! The less we use, the more they have to sell. Starting from the 22, mine was off for the better part of a week. Since then the outages have been less severe (just a few hours at a time), but the region where the saints here live has been cut off even more frequently leading to the cancellation of several Bible studies during the week. It's hard to study the Bible when you can't see anything.

With difficulty, though, comes the opportunity for growth. Valentin in particular has been very disturbed by this development. As the outages became more and more frequent, we fell further behind in our goal of finishing our survey of the Bible in a year's time. After three weeks of missing at least one class due to power failures, Valentin approached me on Sunday morning and stated that we need to something about this. I agreed. He then asked if it would be an appropriate use of our treasury to buy a rechargeable lantern so that we would be able to study with or without power. I suggested we buy two (one for each end of the table). Having conquered the lack of electricity, I found myself lacking a translator the very next Sunday. I have relied on Roman and his brother Dennis from my first days here. They have been exceedingly reliable and helpful as well as good friends. Thus, I have never thought of replacing them for a moment. Because they both work at the airport performing the same job in different shifts, one of the two is always available to translate for me on Sunday mornings. Although, they do not need the money I pay them for their services, both have expressed the desire to continue to translate out of a desire to help. Because of this, I have not given the matter of having an interpreter for the worship service a moment's worry in nearly two years.

This particular week, Roman called me late on Friday to inform me that their boss had scheduled a mandatory, all day training session for Sunday. Thus, neither he nor his brother would be able to translate for me. Never having considered that both interpreters could be taken out of commission in one fell swoop, I was left wondering what exactly to do. Fortunately, my interpreters here had translated all the written material for my brother-in-law's recent trip to Russia and the files were still on my computer. I am something of a minimalist when it comes to handouts. I give my main points with accompanying scriptures but little else. I prefer for the audience to make their own notes and above all, not sit there reading the paper instead of listening. Lee took the opposite approach with his the sermon is almost verbatim. Thus, I informed Valentin of the problem and suggested that he preach the following Sunday from the outline I would bring him. He readily agreed. When I arrived Sunday morning, Valentin was waiting for me at the door and said excitedly: "I didn't even sleep last night! I just read this all night long so I would be ready. It's a good sermon!"

Thus we began. I led singing and Valentin did everything else. And the whole service went off (almost) without a hitch. Valentin even had a few thoughts of his own to add to the written material I had given him. I couldn't help thinking as I sat there that this is really the way it ought to be. Not a single word said in English the entire time: Christians worshipping in their own tongue; one of their own teaching and admonishing them. Someday, Russian society has long been a matriarchal one. In general, many of the older women have a predisposition for bossiness if not downright shrewishness. This often affects churches in this part of the world and has been a problem I've been trying to address since coming here. Our recent study of 1 Timothy afforded me another opportunity to deal with the topic and seemed to make an impression. I mentioned that writing a note would be a much better means of communication during the assembly rather than interrupting to make an announcement. The ladies registered impressed looks of surprise at the suggestion as if to say "Well that solves the whole thing!"

Valentin had not been present for this particular meeting and in his nervousness at preaching forgot himself and called upon the ladies to read the passages he would reference during the course of the lesson. Galina drew herself up in righteous indignation and wagging her finger scolded loudly: "THAT'S NOT ALLOWED!" Sometimes I don't know whether to laugh or to cry.

Elnora upon witnessing this outburst, frowned, pulled out a piece of paper, and started writing furiously. Having finished, she shoved it across the table at Galina who understood its contents at a glance and slumped sheepishly back into her chair embarrassed. I wanted to cry again, but this time for a different reason.

This evening marked a new milestone in the work here. When I arrived, the first thing I set out to do was begin a (roughly) one year survey of the Bible. Tonight we completed our study of Revelation and thus completed the first goal I set for the work here. I am happy to report that this course has had precisely the effect I had hoped it would. When I arrived, the brethren here knew almost nothing of the scriptures outside of the Gospels and the book of Acts. Their grasp of even these fundamental books was tenuous at best. Now, having come through this, they have a working knowledge of both the Old and New Testament. Thus, as we begin the second phase of study, this time on a 5-6 year plan, they are ready to study passages in depth because they have the framework to place it on. I almost feel like a farmer who has finally finished clearing the land and can finally start planting.

My studies with my landlady have largely fallen victim to her busy work schedule during the past month. We did, however, manage two meetings and I remain hopeful about the progress she is making. This past Monday evening when I finished presenting material on the resurrection and why the various attempts to explain it away are seriously flawed, I asked if she had any questions. She replied that "I always think of questions when you are talking, but by the time you finish you have already answered them" As I have mentioned before, she is a very kind and likeable person and already displays many of the characteristics one would expect to find in a Christian. Please pray that she will ultimately be willing to come all the way in obedience to our Lord.

The brethren and I are looking forward to the arrival of Shane and Mary Frances Gillespie on Tuesday. I have been saying since 2002, that if a family

would decide to merely take their vacation in a place such as this and spend it teaching and being an example for the saints, it would do an untold amount of good both for them and for the ones they are helping. I'm very glad that someone has finally taken me up on it. Although, I must admit, that the dead of winter was not originally the timeframe I had in mind! Certainly, it is more useful to the saints from the perspective of being able to meet more often (they can't work in their gardens as they must during the spring and summer). However, I hate to think of someone traveling abroad for the first time having to face the rigors of a Ukrainian winter on top of everything else. I admire their faith and fortitude. Please pray for their safety as they travel. As I have mentioned for the last few months, I am still in need of a small increase of support starting in June due to my upcoming marriage. Thanks to those who have expressed interest in helping thus far. I can't stress enough how indebted I am to all of you for your support of this work. Without your help it could scarcely be done at all. Thanks also for your prayers and kind words of encouragement as I labor through this inhospitable time of the year.

In Him,  
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