

REPORT FROM MARIUPOL, UKRAINE

July 2005

Dear Brethren,

It would be unkind of me not to take a moment to express my gratitude for the many kindnesses you all lavished upon me during my recent visit to the States. I was amazed and humbled by the great generosity that was shown to me regularly during my stay – often from people with whom I am not well acquainted. I find Mt. 19:29 to be more true all the time. You all certainly did your share to reinforce the truth of our Lord's words where I am concerned. I thank you for it and am greatly encouraged by your attitude.

It was such a great pleasure seeing most of you during the month of May, that it was rather more difficult to leave this time than I expected it to be. Consequently, I have been a bit slower than I expected to be getting back into the swing of things since my return. However, I have long believed that the work is its own reward and busying oneself about it is the best solution to any short-term discouragements.

I was also encouraged by the short visit (June 30-July 4) of Joshua and Erin Persall, from Nashville, TN. They spent the past month visiting with Christians literally all over Europe. This culminated in a 50+ hour train ride (several trains actually) all the way from Prague (Czech Republic) to Mariupol. Because they chose this particular method of entering the country they were obliged to pass through the obligatory checks in the town of Chop on the Ukraine/Slovak border. From what I understand, Chop managed to live up (down) to its name. However, this was nothing compared to the 20+ hours on a Soviet train; trapped in the same compartment with a screaming baby, a clueless mother, and a doting grandmother. Keep in mind, neither Josh nor Erin speaks any Russian. However, they arrived in Mariupol on the evening of the 30th not really any worse for the wear – having made a journey few would have ever had the nerve to attempt.

We had planned to spend the following Monday touring Kiev together. However, when we attempted to buy tickets for Kiev they informed us that everything was sold out until Wednesday. This, of course, was a problem because their flight from Kiev was Tuesday afternoon. Thus, I ended up putting them on the train to Kiev (in the last two available places together) on Monday night so that they would arrive the following morning a few hours before their flight. Considering their previous experience with the train, I did not expect them to be overly thrilled about the prospect of another 17 hours on one. However, they did not seem at all put off by it and handled the situation very well. Thus, they have now traveled Ukraine all the way from west to east and all the way from south to north in a space of 6 days. Impressive.

They are currently visiting the brethren in South Africa before returning to Nashville at the end of July. If you would like to contact them you may do so at persajh@juno.com.

I was very glad to find the Christians well upon my return. They were very glad to see me as I was them but seemed to have managed relatively well on their own during the time I was away. It was a relatively new role for Valentin to be in charge of the teaching and preaching, but he seems to have handled it quite well. I certainly haven't heard any complaints. However, he was quite happy to turn those duties back over to me.

Classes and worship have been relatively well attended since my return. We have begun our study of the prophets, which is going well despite the attendant difficulties caused by the speed at which we are moving through the material. As has been the case before, the Christians have managed to deal with it quite well and seem to be grasping what we cover. When we were studying the kings, I provided them with a list of the kings of the Northern and Southern Kingdoms. They are now adding the prophets to this by drawing and labeling brackets around the kings under which they prophesied. Their knowledge of the basic timeline of events has also served them well because we are studying the prophets in the order that they appear in the Bible rather than chronologically.

Some of you may remember Alexandra whom Matt Allen, Kipp Campbell, Mitch Davis, and I met with last June in an effort to bring reconciliation between her and the group here. Although our initial meeting went well, she later refused to admit any wrongdoing on her part (which was probably considerable). This was, of course, disappointing, however it also became clear that the other members of the group weren't ready to take her back in any case. Thus, we decided the best thing to do would be to drop the subject for the time being and hope that time and spiritual growth would eventually bring them back together.

A year later, little seems to have changed. However, Alexandra called me recently wanting to meet. She did not say what she wanted to talk about and our schedules have prevented us from getting together as of yet. But, I plan to meet with her as soon as possible and hope that this might be the first step in finally bringing the group here back together. Before she fell away she was by far the most zealous member of the group and had done the most to bring visitors to classes and worship. Whether she will ultimately have the humility to return remains to be seen. Pray for her.

Recently, I was standing in line at a popular food booth in the middle of town. Because it was close to lunchtime, they were rather busy and I was forced to stand there for around 20 minutes before it was my turn to order. I was alone and thus did not speak to anyone at length or do anything else to give myself away as a foreigner during the time I stood there. When my turn came, I asked for what I wanted in correct, unaccented (or so I've been told) Russian. However, even though I made no obvious mistakes either while standing in line, or speaking to the man in the booth, he immediately got a rather large, silly grin on his face, laughed out loud, pointed directly at me and exclaimed: "GEORGE BUSH!"

I have wondered several times since then, just exactly how one is supposed to respond when someone yells "George Bush" at you. Unable to think of anything particularly interesting to say (in Russian anyway), I laughed politely and waited for him to finish making my lunch so I could leave. He did seem genuinely pleased that a foreigner had visited his shop and was still chuckling to himself as he handed me my order. I headed for the nearest bus hoping that I wouldn't attract any more attention from the crowd of folks who had heard the cook's announcement of my nationality.

The incident did, however, set me to thinking about the unique place and power of the United States in world affairs (at least for now). I doubt there are many Americans who know the name of Ukraine's president off the top of their heads. Thus, the experience helped me to feel more keenly the responsibility to share the great blessings that came to me merely because I was born in the place and time that I was – foremost of which is the Gospel of our Lord. I would that there were more. Thank you all for sharing in what I do here.

In Him,
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