

Tales from Tsibanobalka

February 12-23, 2011, Mark & Carol Wheeler journeyed to Russia to train pastors and emerging leaders at the House of Grace. The House of Grace is a guest house for Russian pastors operated by John & Naomi Musgrave, missionaries sent out by Crossroads Bible Church in Bellevue, WA. The House of Grace is located in the village of Tsibanobalka, about 10 km from Anapa on the north coast of the Black Sea.

During the winter, the House of Grace offers several three day concentrated courses for pastors and emerging leaders on different books of the Bible. Mark taught a course on the book of Joshua, with an emphasis on the leadership principles in the book while Carol served behind the scenes, helping to prepare meals.

The journey began on Sunday, February 6, when the elders of United Evangelical Free Church in Seattle followed the example of Acts 13:1-3 and laid hands on Mark & Carol and prayed for their upcoming ministry. Through this act, the church “sent the Wheelers packing.”

We left on Saturday, February 12, flying from Seattle to Los Angeles to London to Moscow to Krasnodar, followed by a three hour drive to Tsibanobalka. As the boarding process was winding down for the first flight, the captain gave the customary “Welcome and thanks for flying Alaska Airlines” speech. He concluded his opening remarks with an enthusiastic, “All Aboard!” and then blew a train whistle. The adventure was underway. All total, it took 43 hours from takeoff in Seattle on Saturday to arrival in Tsibanobalka on Monday afternoon, half of which (20 hours) were layovers in airports.

Tuesday and Wednesday were spent recovering from jetlag and getting to know the region, which is agricultural and known for its grapes and sunflowers. It was highlighted by a tour of a champagne factory near the city of Novorosisk. The tour provided insight into the history and culture of the region, as well as a glimpse of their pride of craftsmanship, as the champagne is award winning and has medaled in competitions in France.

One phenomenon we observed in the Krasnodar region was the prevalence of

mistletoe. For most people, mistletoe brings to mind romantic thoughts of kissing under the mistletoe during the Christmas season. For

residents of the Krasnodar region, mistletoe is a parasite that is destroying the trees. It infests the trees and literally sucks the life out to the point where the trees have to be cut down and destroyed.

Not all trees, however, seem to be susceptible to mistletoe. You find one row of a certain tree that is

infested with mistletoe. Right next to it will be another row of trees that is immune to the parasite.

As we drove by the mistletoe infested trees, Naomi Musgrave quoted Psalm 1 about the tree that is planted by rivers of water that grows and bears fruit. In contrast, the one who gets away from the water is more susceptible to temptation and sin. When we read and obey God’s Word, we are better able to resist temptation. Those who don’t soon become infested with sin, the ultimate parasite. Like mistletoe, it begins to grow and soon sucks the vitality from our lives. If its growth is unchecked, we can soon become like dead wood.



Wednesday afternoon, we met with Victor and Luda Semukhin, whom we have known since the late 90's.

Victor is an intentional church planter. He planted a church in Anapa, trained and equipped leaders, turned the church over to a new pastor, and then left to plant another church in Pyatigorsk, some nine hours away. His goal is to plant and establish several churches during his lifetime. Victor was in town to meet with the Anapa church leaders, as part of the plan to transition the church to a new pastor. It was encouraging to hear of Victor's plans and progress for this new work. He is employing a wide variety of evangelistic events, including the Alpha Course, to capture people's attention and share the gospel with them.

The weather was cold during our visit, ranging from -2 to -7 degrees C, or in the teens or 20's F with snow flurries several days.



I was reminded of the need to prepare spiritually before a ministry trip. Once the trip starts, your schedule is not your own. Normal habits and spiritual disciplines are disrupted. If you wait until the journey to get prayed up, it's way too late. You must pray and prepare before the battle ever starts.

Besides the Musgraves and Wheelers, there were 11 men attending the class. Misha, Mark's translator, came from Krasnodar, one man from Anapa, one from Krymsk, about 50 kilometers away, and eight from Kalmykia, a region in the Steppes near the Caspian Sea, a 16-hour drive. The Kalmyk group came from the cities of Elista and Tsagan-Aman. Ethnically, the Kalmyks are descendants of the Mongols and the only Buddhist people group in Europe. At one point in their history, Russia relocated these people from their homeland and resettled them in Kalmykia.



The group was pretty diverse. Some were pastors and others were leaders in their respective churches. They varied in age from the early 20's to the late 50's. One young man,



Kostya, had been a believer for one week. After discussing chapter one of Joshua, I asked the group, "What is your Jordan River? What is the step of obedience that God is asking you to do?"

Kostya said that his Jordan River is his family, which is Buddhist. He has not yet told them he has become a follower of Christ. His step of obedience is to go home and share his faith with them.

Kostya came to Christ through the ministry of Sandzhik who became a believer in 1998. Shortly after that, he entered New Life Bible College in Moscow, and graduated in 2000. In the past decade, Sandzhik planted three churches and trained several leaders. The eight from Kalmykia are all men he is investing time in.



One of those men is Kolya, who is engaged to be married in June. Knowing that a spouse can make or break one's ministry, Kolya asked for his church's approval of his fiancé. They did not approve of his first choice and he submitted to their wisdom. They approved his second choice

and are helping him prepare for the wedding.

Thursday, I taught for six and a half hours, Friday for seven hours, and Saturday for three hours. While exhausting, it was rich and fruitful ministry.

Joshua 4 describes how God instructed Israel to establish "stones of remembrance" to help them remember how God parted the waters of the Jordan River. As part of that lesson, I had the group go outside and find a rock of their choosing. Using Sharpie markers, they decorated their rock with a word or phrase that told of an answer to prayer or an event where God demonstrated his grace and/or power in their lives. We went around the table and told the stories of what God had done. It was a great encouragement to everyone.



On Friday, I had the group read the first 10 chapters of Joshua and look for one promise that meant the most to them. Several went to the promises in chapter 1—the promise that God would not leave us, and the promise of success if we obeyed God. Kostya mentioned the promise given to Rahab in chapter 2—not only would she be saved, but her whole family as well. Interesting choice for a new believer whose family is Buddhist.

Listening to the stories of Kostya, Sandzhik, and the rest, my life seems pretty pedestrian. My challenges and problems pale in comparison to theirs. I am grateful to minister to them, but humbled by their commitment and example.



Saturday morning, I gave the men an assignment to help them review the lessons of Joshua. It included four inductive Bible study

questions—(1) What attributes of God do you see in this book? (2) What commands are we to obey? (3) What promises should we believe? (4) What examples should we follow?

While the group was doing their study, I had a long conversation with Misha, my translator. He is the academic dean of a Bible college in Krasnodar. In addition, he is one of the pastors of his church. Throw in being a husband and father of two children, he is a busy man. He asked a number of questions about how to train and mentor leaders since John Musgrave shared in his introduction of me on Thursday that I had done that for several years. Misha asked about how you develop a philosophy of training, what curriculum I used, what authors I found helpful, and what kind of experiences I included. It was a wide-ranging, hour-long conversation which revealed his desire for effective, long-lasting ministry.

During the last session, I used a lesson taken from Walk Thru the Bible, “The Three Chairs.” It looks at what happened after Joshua died and how Israel fell away from God. The pattern of “Commitment, Compromise, and Conflict” is also illustrated in the descendents of Abraham and David. Afterwards, Sandzhik said he had many questions about why godly parents sometimes have rebellious children and this lesson answered his questions. Several of the men recognized their own need to recommit themselves daily to following God.

We had a time of prayer about personal commitment as we wrapped up the class. Before lunch, the group gave Carol and me two thank



you gifts—a plate from Kalmykia and a Gzhel vase. They are beautiful gifts

to be treasured and appreciated, as well as reminders to pray for these men. After lunch, the group was on their way to their respective homes.



We ate well during our time. John & Naomi plan and prepare healthy and hearty meals for their guests. They include spices and items that these pastors might not normally buy because of their limited budgets. As Naomi explained, it is their way of honoring these servants. It provides a good example for us to follow as well.

In the evenings, the men hung out, talked, played Wii, watched a movie, and went to the banya (Russian sauna). One evening, several of the Kalmyk group danced some of their

traditional dances. It was quite entertaining to watch. During the breaks in between sessions, or in the evening, someone might pick up a guitar and play. Others joined in singing. Misha was one who often played during those times.

After the group departed, the task of cleaning began. Carol

and I pitched in, along with Lena, the Musgrave’s assistant. The house was cleaned from top to bottom and mounds of laundry were started. John and I discussed the results of the class evaluations that each man filled out. They were overwhelmingly positive—facilities, schedule, price, food, material, presentation style—everything scored very high.

Sunday morning, we attended church in Anapa. This was the church planted by Victor Semukhin. John preached on John 4:24, God is looking for people who will worship him in spirit and in truth. We had a wonderful time of

worship with those 35 believers. They sang in Russian while Carol and I sang in English. We had a great sense of unity among the body of Christ.

On Monday, February 21, we began the homeward journey. We had one day of sightseeing in London on the way home, highlighted by a visit to St. Paul's, a beautiful cathedral which has stood in its location for 1400 years. It is a place of great beauty, history, and art. Ironically, we enjoyed greater worship with 35 Russian believers in a small storefront than we did in a beautiful cathedral. (Another illustration in search of a sermon.)

In closing, here is a summary of the lessons I encouraged the men to learn from the book of Joshua. (1) Remember the Past: Use memorial stones and Keep a journal; (2) Stay faithful in the Present: Walk with God; Reaffirm your commitment daily; Stay centered on God; Be a witness to the nations; and Serve faithfully wherever God calls you; (3) Move forward into the Future: Strive for growth; Seek and accept new challenges; Welcome change; Pursue new opportunities; Pursue maturity; and Finish well.

As for the future, the Musgraves invited me to return next year to teach another class. They also invited our church to bring a group to host and teach one of the New Life Bible College alumni conferences. There is also the possibility of bringing a team to host an English camp as an evangelistic outreach for Victor Semukhin's church. Much to consider and pray about.

Thanks for praying. We're in your debt.
Pastor Mark & Carol Wheeler



A view from the Kitchen...

While Mark was busy teaching each day, my (Carol's) time was primarily spent helping in the kitchen preparing and serving the meals. I think most of my time was spent observing life in Russia...

Meal times:

- People eat simply & healthy
- Vegetables are served in bounty at most meals
- Processed foods are rare
- Bread is served at every meal
- Leftover food is eaten at another meal
- They like really "hot" mustard
- People usually eat what is directly in front of them on the table (passing bowls or plates of food is not the norm)
- Maple syrup is "new" to them...they will pour it out of a plain container, but will avoid a bottle with a "maple" leaf label (a picture communicates what's in the container)
- Some of the younger men helped clear the table
- When a person came late to a meal, Sandzhik (revered leader) would make sure they had all they wanted to eat
- Fasting is taken seriously, even on retreats at special places with good food



Community

- Mode of transportation... walking or riding the bus...some old cars, many newer cars
- If a wife owns her own car, her husband can prevent her from driving it
- Old rusty gates & fences... with many coats of colorful paint
- Old (50+ years) houses next to new red brick houses
- A couple of new log cabin homes (very unusual)
- Clean broken sidewalks...little trash on roads
- People drive fast, pass fast (I learned that one can get a special permit to drive as fast as they want without getting a ticket... for the right price)
- People say please and thank you often
- Gypsy dogs roam freely



Free time

- Is spent singing, dancing, talking, banya (sauna), & if the weather is nice walking
- Also like playing Wii & movies

Life in General

- Simple
- Follow instructions without questioning (get on bus, get off bus, get on bus to travel from terminal to plane on tarmac at Domdomevo in 7° driving snow weather)
- Waste nothing
- Survival is a full time job
- Dental & medical care is difficult
- If taken to hospital, you will first need to pay the doctor to be seen in a timely manner (even though "medical care" is free), then you will need to purchase your own medications and food while in the hospital.

Spiritually

- The commitment of leaders to get training...driving 16 hours to a seminar, clearing a schedule to attend the next seminar, going home for a night for a small group bible study and then coming back by 8am the next morning (via bus round trip 12-15 miles)
- Asking questions
- Praying for personal renewal & commitment
- Planting churches in communities where no churches exist
- Fasting

I am grateful for the opportunity to go and share in this ministry. The impact of the people is far greater on me than probably I was to them. Much to learn, remember and to pray for these new friends.

