

# FOUNDATIONS

Because we all deserve to know

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## REFLECTIONS JANUARY—MAY 2017

Dear friends and family,

Buckle up! Right now, as I write this, I am riding in a bus traveling from Klaipeda to Vilnius. Those are cities in Lithuania. The events of the past few months have been running into each other, overlapping and filling the calendar. I now have 4 hours while someone else does the driving and I'd really like to spend the time with you. You deserve to know what has been happening over in Siberia. You deserve to know why I'm here in Lithuania. And you need to know what's coming up this summer and fall. I don't know how long my battery will last, so let's get going. I think it will be best to report this chronologically.



### January

On the first day of the year, most of our teens group boarded a train bound for Alma-ata, Kazakhstan. Our teens had been working through November and December to learn and perform the skits we had presented to them as a part of the lessons during camp last summer. We were going to participate in a winter camp project being done by the church there. Representing our summer camp "Footprints in the Sand", we were responsible for the lesson part of the event, with our kids helping by doing the skits. The "Pulse" team from Almaty was responsible for, well,



everything else. It was a great success with meaningful time spent in Bible study and mentoring sessions. Important relationships were built between our teens and their teens, our workers and theirs. I even got to spend significant time with Yuliya Ldokova, a fine sister who serves the LORD through ministry to youth and orphans. That was really special because Yulia was a camper in one of the camps I worked in many years ago. Sometimes I sit back and wonder what fruit will come in the next 17 years because of the connections God established and nurtured during this event and others you will read about soon.



And, sometimes, we don't have to wait so long to see the fruit of our labor. Just a few days after the trip to Kazakhstan, one of our teens, Misha Markin, expressed his desire to be baptized. Misha's family and even some extended family are all members of the church. Unlike most Russian teens his age, he's grown up as a 2<sup>nd</sup> generation believer. When he was younger, Sonia studied with him. Most recently, I've been mentoring him. Misha told me that he heard the lessons in camp last summer differently than he heard them in Kazakhstan. In Kazakhstan, he understood



Jesus' offer, Jesus' invitation, and he was ready to respond. Misha's conversion is the result of the Holy Spirit's work through many people. Let us rejoice together and pray for his spiritual protection and growth.

That trip to Kazakhstan occupied the first 11 days of January. During the second half, we served the LORD by working with the Russian brothers to

launch the new theme for the church in 2017. For the whole year, we are focusing on maturing in Christ. You can't be growing if you haven't changed in the past year, or two, or three, ... or more. So, as a church, we are studying the Book of Acts through a sermon series that is looking through Acts carefully for activities of the early church that we can/should imitate. It's connected with the idea that we need to remember our first love and do the things we did in the beginning. (See Rev. 2:5) Wednesday night Bible Study is also connected with the theme for 2017. We are studying short series of lessons on different topics related to maturing in Christ. It seemed right to start with a series on prayer. I believe we established a good foundation of understanding how our prayer life can develop well beyond praying for each other's health and safe travel. In fact, I'm sure of it, because more than one participant commented on how "scary" it is to pray the kind of prayers of submission that the LORD desires to hear.



I just looked up from my tablet screen to see the Lithuanian countryside. The fields are plowed. The hills are rolling. Trees are turning green with springtime leaves. And there is a thin layer of snow on the ground in the darkest shadows. At the moment, I could almost mistake this place for Georgia (USA). The patches of birch trees remind me where I really am - and I'm really blessed to be here doing what I do.

## February

Very quickly in February we got to work on a marriage seminar that was presented by Joel Petty who visited us one weekend in the middle of the month. Couples and a few single guys attended the Saturday event. During this time, Joel also helped the church leadership with some conflict resolution. It always hurts the LORD and His church when offenses come between us. I see the process that Joel started among us as the leadership's part of growing up and reaching for maturity in Christ.



Right after Joel's visit, Sonia and I traveled to Dgtarsk, a small city outside Yekaterinburg. We were invited to present ScreamFree Parenting at an event organized by the church there. What a wonderful experience we had! Dennis and Natasha Poderyachikov, the LORD's servants in Yekaterinburg, were our kind and generous hosts. We had many good conversations with them and their daughters. The church in Dgtarsk, a group that Dennis and Natasha assist and encourage, is the most unique of any I have ever visited. Most of the adults were children who were adopted and raised by one woman. She worked in an orphanage and noticed how certain children were overlooked every time someone sought to adopt. So, over the years, she adopted them. Now, many of the girls who became sisters through adoption have also become sisters in Christ. They have married and are living righteously before their husbands, praying they, too, will respond to the LORD. They are having children and adopting children and raising them to love and serve the LORD. The event was a church-family seminar-fellowship that they



planned, organized, funded, and accomplished on their own. After the two-day event ended, we worshipped with them in their home. I shared a message, but the family did everything else. Unconventional. Untraditional. And 100% on target. I felt like I had stepped back into the book of Acts and was witnessing the first church's joy and devotion to the wonderful LORD Jesus. Sonia and I came away greatly encouraged. Before being invited, we didn't even know this group of the LORD's church existed. Now, not only can we look forward to seeing them in heaven, we might even have other chances to work together. They might very well participate in our summer Christian camp. The cost to travel to us might limit how many can come, but if only one comes, she'll come to learn and observe in order to return and share and duplicate. So. Very. Cool. What a blessing!

## March

Once back in Barnaul, we resumed the routine: preaching, teaching, small group study for the sisters on Saturday, and planning for the coming months. We also started the final preparations for the seminar that was scheduled for the last weekend of the month. The Milwaukee Avenue Church of Christ in Lubbock, TX, sent Nathaniel Fritz and Christopher Melton to Russia and Bulgaria for a few weeks. Nate and Chris visited Barnaul 3 years ago. Last fall we started talking possibilities and I volunteered to organize a major seminar for all the churches in Siberia. Nate and Chris agreed to be the main speakers.

We borrowed the theme from the Barnaul church's 2017 plan and all the seminar lessons related to Reaching for Christian Maturity. Location, supplies, services, schedules, transportation, small group discussion leaders, printing, etc. - these we organized or delegated. The event also gave us opportunity to celebrate the Barnaul church's 25th birthday with messages and videos and pictures from former members and missionaries. We made posters, played games, and ate cake! Many attended and everyone was uplifted and encouraged. God truly blessed His people.



## April

Nate and Chris stayed in Russia after the seminar. They visited the church in Omsk and then returned to Barnaul. I think they helped open some doors in a local orphanage and hospice house where the church might start some ministries. Time will tell. Some initial preparations to follow up after their visits are already in motion.

Later in the month, we got back to the routine, secured a location for the summer camp event, published the camp announcement, invitations, and applications. And, we finalized the plans for the trip I am on now. Sonia started a new children's class for pre-teen kids. They really needed to be separated from the younger kids class on Sunday morning. Sonia is using the curriculum we first wrote for the teens in 2004 and then refined in 2008. I helped with the first lesson and she's adapting the material for this age group. This should be really good for these kids. Sonia taught this age group at the seminar, so for the kids from Barnaul, this new class situation was already comfortable and familiar. On the last weekend of the month, Mason and I traveled to Tomsk so he could participate in a teen's retreat there. Good stuff, huh?!

## May

Right after celebrating Mason's 16th birthday (can you believe that?!) I started out on a 3-week journey that will ultimately take me to Lithuania, Poland, Latvia, and Austria. In Lithuania and Latvia, I am returning to the locations where I presented the ScreamFree Parenting material as an outreach effort by the local churches last December. The goal is to reconnect with those who participated previously, supplement their knowledge and ability to apply the ScreamFree principles,

and further assist the churches with their outreach efforts. In Latvia and Poland, I'll present the material for the first time. Latvia has been particularly busy promoting the event with online ads and offering multiple sessions - one in Russian, one in Latvian, and another will be a presentation to orphanage workers in a facility outside Riga. I hope I have a chance to finish and distribute this letter before I get to Poland. So, this is something that is going on right now, as you read.



Please pray that the LORD will bless and use these events for His kingdom purposes. And pray for Sonia and Mason who are back home finishing up the school year with exams in both regular school and the music school.

Pray, also, for the LORD's church in Barnaul. Our desire is to grow. Our desire is to mature. My desire as a leader is to see and organize opportunities for people to unite and serve, to present lessons that inspire and equip, to connect with people in deeper and more meaningful ways so that they feel the love of God through my interaction with them. My desire is that our church will heal from the pains of the past and forgive the offenses that generate bitterness and division. (See, the Wednesday Bible Study lessons on prayer affected someone!)

The trip to Austria has a completely different purpose. A group out of Texas (I think) conducts spiritual renewals for English speaking church servants around the world. Sonia has attended several such events for sisters and always returned encouraged and inspired. When she learned the Come Before Winter group was planning to do a renewal event for brothers, she insisted I plan to attend. I did, and will be on my way as soon as I finish my presentations in Latvia.

Oops! I almost finished without telling you the plan for the summer and fall. When I return to Barnaul, there will be 4 weeks left until camp. I will devote most of my attention to that work. Then camp will be the first 2 weeks in July. After that, the plan is a little sketchy, but taking shape: A week after camp, I'll go to the States and update my driver's license. The rest of the family, including Mason's Russian grandmother and cousins, will join me in Colorado where one of us will attend a Youth conference on worldviews and the rest of us will enjoy Colorado's sights. Mason will return to Russia before school starts. Sonia and I will make plans and start to visit all of you in person. We have several other priorities for this time, too. Updating and upgrading documents is one major part of the plan that will require Sonia to stay in or near SC. And I may have to return to Russia part of the time to limit my time outside of Russia (I don't want to lose my residency status) and take care of Mason. It gets crazy sometime, juggling all these requirements and desires. Just know that visiting you is one of our main priorities for this fall. We haven't seen some of you for several years and you deserve a little "face time" so that you are fully informed of all the LORD is doing in Barnaul and beyond.

Wow! Time flies! I just saw the sign saying we are entering Vilnius, my destination. It's been 3.5 hours already. Wow. Well, keep your seatbelt on until we come to a complete stop and don't forget any of your belongings. It's been really good talking with you again.

God bless you for your faithfulness to Him and your partnership in this ministry. I hope you are always encouraged by the news coming from Barnaul.

Your fellow servants,

Joseph, Sonia, and Mason Rhodes

*P.S. I didn't get to send this letter before visiting Poland. In fact, I've just finished formatting and adding the pictures ... and this is already my last night in Latvia. The seminars have served their purposes: to share the ScreamFree Parenting message and to introduce people to the LORD's church that cares about them.*  
*P.S.S. Although the letter was done over a week ago, I didn't manage to send it to you from Austria because the daily schedule was very full of very beneficial spiritual interaction with the Come Before Winter team. I am back in Barnaul now; taught last night's Bible Study; and am sending this to you before anything else prevents me from doing so! Peace and grace to you all. —Joseph*