



In the U.S.A.:
Joseph and Sonia Rhodes
637 Misty Hammock Dr
Murrells Inlet, SC 29576

In Russia:
656015 Russia
Altai Region, City of Barnaul
Brestskaya 11-51
Joseph Rhodes RUSSIA

E-mail: Siberian-Foundations@usa.net

Skype: [josomarhodes](https://www.skype.com/user/josomarhodes)

Phone: 1-843-808-0190 (a U.S. number, but it rings in Russia!)

REFLECTIONS
FALL-WINTER 2017, JAN 2018

Dear friends and family,

“Give thanks to the LORD, for He is good. His love endures forever.” These thoughts are expressed repeatedly throughout the scriptures and they are an appropriate beginning for this newsletter. They are positive words of hope. They are instruction with explanation. They are a reminder – a foundation of truth – a core expression of this ministry.

I had thought that I would be writing some of this information almost immediately upon our return to Barnaul, early last December. That didn’t work out, obviously, for reasons you’ll read about below. Please know that I am really happy to now be able to spend some time with you.

DECEMBER To say that December didn’t go as planned would be an understatement. It started well, though. Sonia and I arrived back from the States very early in the month, as did all our baggage which was packed with gifts and supplies and equipment. Since the middle of September, we had been visiting all of you, and succeeded in reconnecting personally with all our church partners and very many of our individual/family partners. We also got to meet new friends and churches. We were on the road sharing the ministry news for 15 weeks and have once again been reminded how God is JEHOVAH JIREH.

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Reunion with Mason after such a long absence was great. Other family members greeted us warmly, too. Then we learned that while we were traveling towards home, Sonia’s mother had checked herself into the hospital and was being treated for pneumonia. So, Sonia was immediately busy attending to her mother while also getting us settled back into our home and resuming her (and her mother’s) work at the music school. And I was no help to her. I suffered a major back spasm almost immediately upon arrival that made it necessary for me to stay in bed, fully horizontal for about 2½ weeks. Fortunately, the doctor made house calls, so I could recover and receive treatment and do therapy while staying home. I just wasn’t in any shape or capable of any position where I could be productive at a computer keyboard. I thought of all the people to whom I had promised a newsletter, a link to files, etc. I’m so grateful for everyone’s grace. I’m now working on keeping all those promises.

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I was able to participate in the church assembly the last few Sundays in December. My return was both uplifting and disconcerting. It was very good to see, be with, sing with, pray with, and fellowship with the brothers and sisters here. We were glad to see each other. That was the uplifting part. But, I also felt something uncomfortable. Many were missing. Leaders and members who were present seemed preoccupied and tense. In the final weeks of the month, we leaders were able to plan and accomplish a good, Christ-centered, Christmas assembly. But, it was clear - the general health of the church needed attention.

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Sonia and I were scheduled to join our teens and coworkers in the teens ministry on a trip to conduct a special winter camp “seminar” in Chelyabinsk as the year changed from 2017 to 2018. Although I was finally vertical and mobile on the day they departed, we thought it would be better to continue working on my recovery and other responsibilities. Here is a picture of the group that boarded the train on December 30th. They returned about a week later with testimonies of good and encouraging experiences – and ideas about the next location for our teens winter camp/seminar trip next year! The successes of the last two year’s may influence us to consider this an annual event.



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This month, we’re “making up for lost time”:

1. I worked on the sizeable task of preparing the receipt letters that our financial partners need for tax purposes. (We are so thankful to all of you who give – and serve – so generously for the LORD’s ministry in Russia. Your faithfulness is amazing and encouraging to us!)



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2. As soon as the teen’s group returned from Chelyabinsk, Sonia prepared a meal and all the teen’s ministry workers met to determine the status and direction of the group.
 - a. We decided to return the teen’s class to 9:00 a.m. Sunday morning before the regular assembly time. We will do other events at other times to promote fellowship and outreach.
 - b. We reviewed and redistributed the mentoring assignments.
 - c. We also decided to write and use a new curriculum to help our newest Christians understand how to connect with “Immanuel” (that is, how to submit to God, who is with them) in their everyday lives.

Since the planning meeting, we’ve hosted a kick-off event that about 14 people attended. I’ve taught the first class and outlined the lesson series. And, we’ve accepted two new teens into the group; they’ll be 13 years old soon.

All in all – I think it’s been a revitalizing restart to the ministry and I’m looking forward to the practical discussions this curriculum will generate.

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3. I’ve resumed mentoring 4 people: 2 teens and 2 who are now young adults. Please pray for the LORD to give me His wisdom to share with these who seek practical, helpful Truth.

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4. I’ve had several conversations with various folks about the future opportunities for presenting ScreamFree Parenting seminars. The earliest will happen next week when Sonia and I travel to Chelyabinsk to keep our promise to present the material there. I will also preach in the church and do a short series of nightly lessons, all related to Christian maturity. Other seminar opportunities in Irkutsk (Russia), Poland, Estonia, and Belarus may be realized this Fall, 2018.



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5. The church leaders have resumed regular planning meetings. Since the other active leaders have full time jobs, Sonia prepares a meal and we host the meeting at 8pm on Friday evenings. We’ve already dealt with several important issues, the most urgent of which was the selection of Sunday sermon

topics and Wednesday night lesson topics. The brother's accepted my proposal to study all of the "One Another" or "Each Other" passages. Perhaps we will be more ready for the transformations the LORD wants to make if we carefully consider all of these instructions about relationships. On Wednesday nights, back by popular demand, our lessons will be from the week's scheduled reading from the Chronological Daily Bible.

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6. Sonia and I, having experienced the blessings of being in so many people's homes last fall, have started to invite others into our own home just for fellowship and developing more personal and deeper connections. We've also gone to see others, including one sister on her 80th birthday. It was a mutual blessing for sure as we learned about her commitment and continued service to our LORD.

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Before I finish, I need to keep a promise that I made to several people. Here is a link to an online video file: https://1drv.ms/v/s!Ag_-jrJOZ0phgoNTc7vY7-AqCOL5JA. This is a recording of the ministry report we presented last Fall. Some people expressed disappointment that they were traveling or teaching class or otherwise unable to hear our presentation. Some, who learned we had such a recording, wanted to share some part or all of it with others. Thanks to the Memorial Church of Christ in Houston, we can offer this recording file for those purposes.



So, family and friends, we are back in Barnaul and serving our LORD as best we know how. Thanks for your partnership and prayers. Next month, with God's continued blessing, we will see progress with preparations for summer camp and, hopefully, first fruits of sermons, lessons, and study sessions based on God's truth.

*Give thanks to the LORD, for He is good.
His love endures forever.*

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Joseph".

Joseph, Sonia, and Mason Rhodes