

In the U.S.A.:

Joseph and Sonia Rhodes
550 Greenbriar Lane
Murrells Inlet, SC 29576

In Russia:

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

NEW!

E-mail: Siberian-Foundations@usa.net

Skype: josomarhodes

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

REFLECTIONS

January-February 2024

*So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God.
I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand.
(Isaiah 41:10)*

Dear family and friends,

It was January 3rd when I last wrote to you about all the surprises of the 4th quarter of 2023 – the biggest surprise being, of course, the cancellation of my permanent residency status in Russia. I explained the situation and mapped out our planned course of action, beginning with a decision to not worry, but to “think of God more and to think more of God.” Today is February 26th. I’m eager to share with you what we’ve been doing for the Lord – and with the Lord – in these new circumstances.

On the very first day, just hours after the train left Barnaul, I was able to share the gospel with a young Hindu-yoga-spiritualist who was traveling in the same train compartment. We talked for a long time in the wee hours of the morning after crossing the Russia-Kazakhstan border. At supper time that same day, she brought 4 more traveling companions with similar beliefs to our compartment and for 3 hours we discussed our beliefs. I acknowledged how their belief, as they explained it to me, requires them to work hard for “laser-like focus in meditation” to achieve union with the Supreme Cosmic Consciousness they call God. But, in contrast, Jesus of Nazareth (someone they consider enlightened) said no one could come to the Father except through Him. “He knows I could never work hard enough or be good enough. So, He came to do for me what I can’t do for myself – to pay my debt and to restore my connection with my Creator, God,” I said. “It’s good to work hard to be good. But you are working hard to be ‘good enough’. That’s different. I don’t want you to miss what you are looking for – what we are all looking for – by believing that all religions are equal and lead to the same God and that you can reach Him if you try hard enough.” Later, one replied, “Thank you for explaining that. I never really understood how what Jesus did on the cross had anything to do with me.” May the Holy Spirit water the seeds of truth planted during this conversation.

I wish every day could be like that first day – full of almost-tangible spiritual purpose. You know, I never would have been on that train to have that conversation if my residency had not been cancelled. And if I had been consumed with worry about the future of my life, my family, and my ministry, I would not have been ready to share His Good News with these seekers. But God has said, “I am near. Do not worry.” Because His truth prepared me, He could use me. Brothers and sisters, we can trust Him.

In the 2 weeks that followed, I was in Almaty, Kazakhstan, staying in the home of fellow believers. I shared with the church God's message about not worrying. It started several significant conversations with others who are facing questions about their future. And I started investigating the local banks and setting up non-resident bank accounts. Even though I had no permission to return to Russia, I was working towards the funding solution for the time when I would be able to return.

Then Sonia joined me in Kazakhstan for a few days and we got her set up with non-resident banking accounts as well. This has already proven to be a solution for us to get our personal finances into Russia. (Moving money has been very difficult for 2 years because of U.S. sanctions against Russia.) The money we deposited into Sonia's new account in Kazakhstan can be very easily accessed from Russia. (Now, I am working on getting money to the accounts in Kazakhstan.)

On January 31st, Sonia went to the U.S. Embassy in Almaty, Kazakhstan, for her interview to get a visa for visiting the U.S. As you might remember, this is something we've been trying to get – permission for Sonia to come to the U.S. with me – since March 2020 ... almost 4 years! We are rejoicing that she was granted this visa, and we are looking forward to a trip this fall when she and I will come to visit all our mission partners to share with you in person the news of what the Lord is doing in Russia.

While we were together in Almaty, Sonia and I also started premarital counseling sessions with a young couple in the church there. We had two good sessions and will continue with them online in the coming weeks and months.

I'm convinced that God brought attention to Job so that whoever witnessed his story would understand how to respond (and how not to respond) to difficulties, disappointments, and stresses in life. Job suffered terribly so that we might learn. Being told, "We are revoking your permission to live here in Russia," qualifies as a difficulty, a stress. I'm convinced it is also an opportunity to openly validate God's promises. Can we have peace that transcends all understanding – peace of mind when it doesn't make sense to have peace of mind? Yes. Can we be spiritually fruitful while our comfort zone is crumbling? Yes. Our God can give us that peace. Our God can use us when we are weak and vulnerable. Or, as I concluded before, "It is irrational to worry about anything when God is so interested and able in everything."

Since February 4th, I've been in Texas. Within 4 days I had my new passport in hand. (The mail-in renewal process usually takes 8 weeks.) Having that new passport meant that Sonia could do the paperwork she needed to do to invite me back to Russia. We thought it would involve a local migration officer and take a minimum of 20 days. Then we learned there was a different process for invitations by individuals, and she was done in 4 days. I personally submitted my application for a 3-year multiple-entry visa to Russia at the Russian Consulate in Houston on February 15th. They approved my application immediately without hesitation and without requesting all the supporting documentation I had prepared. I have notification the visa was just received in the mail at the address I will go to tomorrow. We thought it would take at least 3 months to restore permission for me to return to Russia. It has taken 20 days! It has happened so fast, I haven't had enough time to do all the good things we were thinking I would have time to do!!

Please rejoice with us. Pray prayers of thanksgiving. Pray prayers of praise. Our God is a great God! When I left Russia in January, this was the situation: I had no legal right to be with Sonia in Russia and she had no legal right to be with me in the USA. Now, already, the opposite is true. The obstacles have been removed and in record time. It was more than we could imagine.

Ephesians 3:20-21 (NIV)

Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen.

I've shared so much good news already, but I haven't shared with you what has been going on in Barnaul during this time! Sonia, of course, is there. Our house is still open and used for the sister's Bible study on Friday's. Last week Sonia wrote, "We really missed you. All three little girls came." That means I would have the wonderful "job" of taking care of the little girls while their mothers studied and fellowshiped. It seems that 7 sisters gathered for the Bible study – a good crowd despite the winter weather.

Next weekend, which is a national holiday for honoring women, the sisters will conduct a 2-day seminar in our apartment. Some of the sisters will stay overnight. Sonia will be the hostess, of course. I just read messages that indicate they are expecting record attendance.

Sonia is also teaching the toddlers on Sunday's, translating my articles and meditation thoughts for the church, and helping with the banking. I am the blessed husband who reveals her works to "bring her praise at the city gate". (See Proverbs 31)

Kristina, Mason's wife, has been working with the teens, teaching lessons, and hosting social events. She uses our apartment as a meeting place for the group almost every weekend. It is important for the teens to have opportunity to build community. We are happy to support her in this effort.

Mason continues to produce the online recordings of the worship assemblies and sermons and he participates in the church leadership meetings. Mason has also been active in searching for a new facility for the church, perhaps a place to buy.

I've also been participating in some of the leadership issues, writing opinion papers for the brothers to consider as they deal with some inappropriate behavior by specific individuals.

I continue to format and publish my teens curriculum that is being used by a teacher in Novosibirsk and by Kristina with her siblings in Crimea. The teacher in Novosibirsk tells me her students are always looking forward to the next lesson – not even questioning anymore why they must do homework before the class. (They get so much more out of class when they've started to process the scripture before class even starts. Real foundations of faith are being laid.)

And while I've been away, I've been writing and sending in those articles and short meditational thoughts for communion and offerings that Sonia has been translating. It's a way to be a part of the ongoing life of the church in Barnaul from a distance. After one article I submitted to the church's online chat, Sonia said one sister told her, "I felt like I'd been hugged!"

Good things being done here and there. The situation is far from normal, but I hope you can still praise God and thank Him for the good news of what He is doing in and through the church in Barnaul.

To finish this report, I should share my plans for March while I'm here in the States and while the normal mission work continues in Barnaul:

1. Travel to Lubbock, TX, for some ministerial training.
2. Travel to Anderson, SC, for meeting with the shepherds there about the future of the ministry and to continue working on banking solutions.
3. Travel to Cincinnati, OH, for a brief visit with family.
4. Stop at other places along that travel path to share the latest news and plans in person.
5. Announce the beginning of application season for Summer Camp 2024.
6. Return to Russia very early in April.

I also want to express our gratitude to all of you who have been praying for us. I know there are many of you—and I believe your prayers have made a difference. They've given us strength to stay strong in our belief. They've given us hope.

We did not know whether I would be granted permission to return to Russia. We did not know whether Sonia would ever get permission to visit the U.S. We hoped for these things. We believed these were righteous desires. But we have also been ready to accept whatever else God might have in mind.

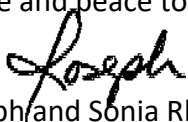
Speaking for myself, I could not imagine it would not be God's will for me to return to Russia. There is still so much work to do, some for which I am uniquely situated to accomplish. God changed the direction of my life once by giving me a clear invitation to join Him in what He's doing in Russia. The cancelation of my residency did not seem to be a "sign" from Him to change directions again, but rather a hinderance from the adversary to slow us down.

Someone has asked me, "What is your emergency plan? Many members feel like you should move your family to the USA...[where there are] plenty of lost souls that need saving!" I know the question comes from sincere Christian love and a concern for the physical safety of me and my family. And I appreciate the concern. Please know that we are not trying to be martyrs. The truth is, we do not feel unsafe in Russia. Investigated? Yes. Watched? Yes. Questioned? Yes. But these are familiar inconveniences to be endured for the advancement of God's kingdom.

I am willing—and now enabled once again—to go and teach the Good News of Jesus in Russia. Ours is but a small part in the larger work that God is doing there. "How beautiful are the feet of those who bring Good News!" declares the scripture. For it to be true, those feet (our feet) must go despite the danger others may perceive. "Here am I, send me."

Send me. Send us. Continue to be our partners in ministry for the glory of the Lord and the advancement of His kingdom in a place where others cannot or will not go.

Grace and peace to you all in the name of our Lord, Jesus.



Joseph and Sonia Rhodes
volunteer missionaries
Barnaul, Russia

An elder suggested I include this statement for your convenience:

If you would like to be a partner in this ministry financially, send your gift to "Upstate Church of Christ, 1136 Brown Road, Anderson, SC, 29621" with the memo: "Russian Missions".