Russia 2017 Trip Report

**Bible teaching meets real life.** That statement aptly summarizes my recent trip to Russia. In teaching the book of Romans, I answered questions about paying taxes, eternal security, divorce settlements, obeying the government when you don’t agree with their decisions, addictions, raising teenagers, dealing with superstitions, how to forgive those who hurt you, and much, much more.

I spent March 12-26 serving in Russia. I stand amazed that this was my 18th short-term ministry trip since 1992, and my 13th time in Russia. It was the 6th time in the past 7 years I worked with John & Naomi Musgrave to help train and equip young pastors and leaders. This ministry follows the example of the apostle Paul in Acts 13-14 where he shared the gospel, gathered people into community, taught sound doctrine, trained leaders, and then left to repeat the process in another city. He wrote letters and returned to continue strengthening the believers. My ministry fits into the second half of Paul’s strategy for missions.

John & Naomi are longtime friends who are missionaries sent out by Crossroads Bible Church in Bellevue, WA. John was one of the elders during the time I was on staff at CBC. They have served in Russia since 2001. For several years, they operated the House of Grace, a guest house for Russian pastors in the village of Tsibanobalka, near Anapa on the northeast coast of the Black Sea. House of Grace was a place where pastors could rest and renew along with their families, and where they could deepen their spiritual and emotional health. John & Naomi now focus on a new ministry, Mentoring Matters, where they focus on mentoring Russian pastors and their wives.

In 2016, I taught a three-day class on the first half of the book of Romans, chapters 1-8. During this trip, I taught a three-day class on the second half of the book of Romans in two locations. The first week was at the House of Grace in Tsibanobalka. The second week was in Elista in the region of Kalmykia. During our study this year, we covered chapters 9-16. I have been asked to return in 2018 to teach the book of Revelation.

What follows are my observations and reflections about the trip and ministry. Pour yourself a cup or glass of your favorite beverage, pull up a chair, and read through the report. Thanks for praying! I’m in your debt.

My adventure began on March 12 when the elders, deacons, and deaconesses of First Central Bible Church laid hands on me and prayed for me during the morning worship services. We were following the example of the church in Antioch as they commissioned Saul/Paul & Barnabas for their first missionary journey (Acts 13:1-3).

I connected with John & Naomi at Boston Logan Airport on Sunday evening, March 12. They had flown from Seattle to Boston earlier that day. We boarded the overnight flight from Boston to Amsterdam, arriving Monday AM. We were able to check into our hotel around 10AM. After taking a 3 hour nap, we headed into the city center for dinner and some sightseeing.
On previous trips, I have flown straight through from Boston to Amsterdam to Moscow to Anapa, arriving exhausted and needing a couple of days to recuperate. On this trip, we stretched out the travel in order to gradually adjust to jet lag. The overnight stops in Amsterdam and Moscow helped lessen the fatigue and made the first week go by quicker.

On Tuesday, we flew from Amsterdam to Moscow. On Wednesday, we continued the journey from Moscow to Anapa, on the northeast coast of the Black Sea. After dropping off our bags at House of Grace in Tsibanobalka, we headed into Anapa for lunch and grocery shopping. We purchased the food for the 7 meals that would be served during the 3-day class.

There were 13 of us seated around the table discussing Romans during the first week of class in Tsibanobalka. Four of the men drove 10 hours from Pyatigorsk (south of Tsibanobalka) to be with us. The remainder came from Holy Trinity Church in Anapa, where John Musgrave is part of the elder team. My translator, Lena, serves on the Anapa church worship team.

Only one member of the group was new to me. The others were part of previous classes I taught. This allowed me to build on previous relationships and go deeper with the folks. This was especially evident in the questions they asked throughout the day. They left the surface level questions behind and were asking more penetrating, insightful, authentic questions. Some were of the information or clarification type, but most were of the implication or application type. That was very encouraging.

I started the first day by sharing about my family and ministry background. I explained that I spent much of my life wanting to be someone else. It was only after discovering 2 Corinthians 3:5-6 that I learned it was ok to be me. (If you want to read more of that story, check out my blog on October 26, 2012 (https://wheelsms.wordpress.com/2012/10/26/learning-its-ok-to-be-me/). I also shared about the dictionaries I gave Amanda and Caitlin on their wedding days. You can read that account on my blog as well on February 8, 2017 (https://wheelsms.wordpress.com/2017/02/08/a-dads-day/).

I started the study of Romans 9-16 by going over the assignment the students were given. Prior to the class, each one was to do the following:
- Read Romans twice
- Review the outline of the book
- In Romans 12:3-8, Paul gives instructions on how we are to use our spiritual gifts in the church. In 12:9-21, he speaks about our responsibility to one another. What is the relationship between spiritual gifts and the “one another” commands of Scripture?
- What is the role of civil government (Romans 13)? Is it ever appropriate to disobey government? Why?
- What does it mean to cause someone to stumble (Romans 14)? How might we do that?

After discussing their answers, I reviewed the outline and synopsis of the book. I figured it had
been 12 months since our initial study and I wanted to make sure we were all on the same page.

During the first day of class, we covered chapters 9-11, Paul’s theological discourse on Israel. I introduced the study by explaining that a tension exists between the topics of God’s sovereignty and man’s responsibility. Does God have a plan and is in control? vs Does man have free will? I explained that I believe both are true, though I don’t completely understand how to reconcile the two. Chapter 9 emphasizes God’s sovereign plan for Israel. Chapter 10 emphasizes Israel’s responsibility for rejecting Jesus. Chapter 11 explains that God still has a role for Israel in the future.

The group asked some thoughtful questions on these chapters. They seemed to struggle with the concept of God’s sovereignty. John Musgrave explained that there is a strong Arminian influence in this region which means they wrestle with the idea of God’s sovereignty in general and how Israel’s rejection of God led to the Gentiles receiving salvation in particular. They also struggle with eternal security which I emphasized last year and reminded them of as we reviewed chapter 8.

Since the bulk of the group stayed at House of Grace, it meant that we shared our meals together. As always, John & Naomi prepared basic, but sumptuous meals. The menu for the first day included homemade cinnamon rolls, spaghetti, barbecued pork chops, and chocolate cake with whipped cream. It also goes without saying that there was plenty of bread and fresh vegetables.

“So, when are you going to get to the practical areas?” was the question John asked with a twinkle in his eye during the afternoon break on the second day. I spent most of the day answering questions about how many possessions are enough, how to forgive those who hurt you, whether or not we need to pay taxes on unreported income, and how to deal with those who are perpetually late to church. Needless to say, we had several very practical discussions that day.

We started the second day with breakfast at 9AM. We enjoyed pancakes, boiled eggs, yogurt, sausage and cheese, and juice. Our morning session went from 9:30-1:00PM, with a break midway through the morning. After lunch, class went from 1:50-5:30PM, with another break midway through the afternoon.

During the second day, we covered Romans 12:1-15:6. We spent the first hour discussing Romans 12:1-2. What does it mean to be a living sacrifice? and How do we avoid letting the world squeeze us into its mold? were two of the questions we wrestled with. One person said he felt he had too many possessions—car, house, etc.—and some people thought he should sell everything and give to the poor, but if he did that, then he wouldn’t be very happy. We discussed his question in light of these two verses. The world might tell him to sell everything or it might tell him to keep it all for himself. The answer is found in letting Scripture transform your mind and understanding what Scripture says about learning to be content in all situations.

We also explored the myth that God’s will is designed to make us miserable. I stressed that Romans 12:2 says that God’s will is good, acceptable, and perfect. God wants us to enjoy life to the fullest and his will is always best.

We ended our discussion of chapter 12 by talking about how to forgive those who want to hurt us. One person asked for a practical example of how to do this. I shared how I dealt with people who have criticized me during my ministry. I talked about how I had to come to the point of praying for these individuals rather than being angry and seeking to retaliate.

After finishing the discussion on not seeking revenge but allowing God to bring justice for us,
one said, “Mark, where were you in 2013 to explain this to me? I did something stupid and I am still paying for it today.” The truth hit home.

By this point, it was time for lunch. We enjoyed a Russian favorite, golubitsi or cabbage rolls, French fries, and fresh vegetables. Afterwards, many enjoyed tea and conversation until our afternoon session began.

Chapter 13 brought up another hot button discussion—how do you submit yourself to a government that you don’t like or when you disagree with their decisions? We covered the waterfront on this discussion but kept coming back to the heart of the matter, can we trust God and obey his commandments? We talked about the fact that the issue is not whether the government is good, bad, or indifferent, but whether or not we will obey God’s instructions. This led to a side discussion of whether or not we should pay taxes on unreported income. I gave a personal example of someone I knew who got in trouble for not paying taxes when they were paid under the table. (I also had to explain what “under the table” meant.)

During our discussion of chapter 14, we focused on how to deal with a weaker brother or sister. This led to wrestling with the issue of those who are perpetually late to church, as well as discussions about food, dress, and music styles. I tried to explain the difference between those who are weak and need to grow and those who are “stuck” and refuse to change (Joe Aldrich called them “professional weaker brothers” in one of his books).

By 5:30PM, it was evident we were all running out of gas, so I called a halt for the day. After another sumptuous dinner of beef stroganoff, the Anapa folks headed for home and the Pyatigorsk group started watching a movie.

On Saturday morning, we wrapped up our study of Romans by discussing chapters 15 & 16. I said that compared to the rest of the book, chapter 15 is pretty straightforward and easy to understand with its emphasis on accepting one another and pursuing unity. I commented that we often skip chapter 16 because it is just a list of names. I pointed out the words Paul uses to describe some of these people—beloved, fellow workers, chosen, hard worker, risked their lives, approved, and fellow prisoner. Some are named and some are unnamed. Some of us may have ministries that are not remembered by people, but God sees what we do and will reward us for our service.

I concluded the session by asking what lessons they learned from Romans. I encouraged them to remember Paul’s balance in the book. Doctrine is not merely something to learn (1-11). We must put it into practice (12-16). We must guard against false teachers who seek to divide the church and lead people astray (16:16-18).

In the class, we had one person going through a divorce and two alcoholics. You never know who you are teaching and what their needs are.

One man was going through a divorce unwillingly. John tried to explain how the process works in Russia, but I could not wrap my head around it. In a convoluted or twisted approach to “no child left behind,” each member of the family is granted equal ownership in the house. In this case, the man, his wife, and three children under the age of 12 all own 20% of the house. Since the wife has custody of the children, she controls 80% of the house, and their joint business venture as well. Who can sell 20% of a house? is his dilemma. If he wanted to be vindictive, he could sell his 20% to a drunken person who could make life hell for the rest of his
family. In situations like this, you need the wisdom of Solomon to sort out what to do.

Two of the people in the Tsibanobalka class were Igor and his wife, Lena. They appear a happily married couple today, but only because of grace. Igor was a medical doctor who became an alcoholic and lost his license to practice. He divorced his wife and left his family. His wife and son, Vanya, who is the pastor of Holy Trinity Church in Anapa, prayed for him for 12 years. He came to faith in Christ, remarried his wife, and is a faithful servant in the church today. Igor and Lena have been remarried for 10+ years. His salvation and their marriage is a testimony to grace and the power of prayer.

On Sunday morning, we worshipped at Holy Trinity Church in Anapa. After lunch at KFC, our driver picked us up and took us 3+ hours east to Krasnodar. On Monday, a different driver took us 7.5 hours further east to Elista in Kalmykia.

Kalmykia is located in the steppes region of the Caucasus Mountains near the Caspian Sea. The Kalmyk people are descendants of the Mongols who migrated to the area in the 400’s. They are the only Buddhist people group in Europe. The city of Elista is dominated physically and spiritually by the large Buddhist temple in the center of town.

The land of Kalmykia is as flat, flat, flat as the eye can see. There are no trees or topography to break the horizon. You can seemingly see forever. It may not be the end of the world, but it certainly feels close by.

For the past three visits, we have stayed at a complex called City Chess. It was built in 1998 and used to host the World Chess Championships in 2006. Whereas before we were in a townhouse, this time we stayed in a 4-bedroom apartment with a large living room. We had breakfast and lunch in the nearby restaurant, Royal Park.

After arriving and checking into our rooms, we enjoyed dinner with Sandzhik & Elza. Sandzhik is the pastor of the church in Elista. Elza is currently undergoing chemotherapy for a recurrence of cancer. Please pray for her health and for Sandzhik as he supports her during this time.

I had 11 people in my class on Romans and John Musgrave had six men in his class on church leadership. My class met in our apartment while John’s class met in Sandzhik’s home. John’s class was made up of Sandzhik’s elders. Most of the group were from Elista and a few from Tsagan-Aman, about 3 hours to the east.

When I started the class on Tuesday, our first day, I asked each person to share their name and how long they had been a believer. One person trusted Christ last year, several have been Christians for three years, one for seven years, and one for 24 years. Spiritually speaking, it was a young group.

For the class in Elista, our typical day started at 10AM and we worked until lunchtime at 12Noon. Then we went from 1PM to 5:30PM with two 15 minutes breaks during the afternoon.

During the first day’s sessions, we covered Romans 9-11. I again explained that chapter 9 emphasizes God’s sovereignty. God chooses, God elects, God has a plan and a purpose. Chapter 10 emphasizes free will. God holds us responsible for our choices. Rather than choose one or the other, you have to hold the two truths in tension since Scripture teaches both.
Chapter 11 explains God’s plan for Israel in the future.

There were many good questions asked during the sessions. As in the first week, this group went far beyond the shallow, safe questions, and dealt with issues closer to their hearts. Can you lose your salvation? Do I personally have doubts about God’s sovereignty? and Do young children go to heaven when they die if they weren’t old enough to accept Christ? were some of the more challenging and difficult questions I dealt with.

When Julia asked if children who die young go to heaven, it was not a theoretical question. Naomi explained that Badma and Julia lost a child before the age of one, and Badma was not able to give her a satisfying answer as to the child’s eternal destiny. It was a question she was deeply concerned about.

Jordick, or George as they nicknamed him, asked about people who have never heard the gospel. I referred him back to Romans 1 where Paul said that the truth about God is evident in nature, but people suppress the truth. Therefore, we are all without excuse. If people desire to know God, God can send them a witness. I said there were stories of missionaries who went to remote jungles and found tribes expectantly waiting for the gospel. They were aware of a movie, The End of the Spear, which tells of the five missionaries martyred by the Auca Indians.

In the evening, we had dinner at the home of Sandzhik and Elza. Badma and Julia, who live in Tsagan-Aman (another 4 hours east) and who were staying with Sandzhik during the conference, were there as well. It was a wonderful evening of food and fellowship.

On the way home from dinner at Sandzhik’s home, a comment was made about speed bumps. (Elista has more speed bumps than any city in the country. Depending on the route they took, John counted 20-25 behind City Chess and Sandzhik’s home, a distance of about five miles.) I thought Sandzhik said speed bumps were the only honest policeman, one who didn’t ask for a bribe. Turns out he said a policeman laying on the road was the only honest one.

Sandzhik went on to explain that jokes and stories making fun of government is part of their culture since they cannot organize groups to protest or speak out against government. He said that in America, you pay bribes to do things illegally. In Russia, they pay bribes to get legal things done. People don’t pay taxes because it just lines the pocket of a bureaucrat. If taxes actually were used for repairing roads, improving electricity or other basic services, people would be happy to pay taxes. Withholding taxes is their only form of protest.

On Wednesday, the group gathered again at 10AM and we tackled Romans 12. I ended Tuesday by explaining verses 1-2. I began Wednesday by asking what challenges they face in applying these verses. We talked about the nature of commitment and the need to be diligent and constant in maintaining it. One person wanted to know how to raise her teenage son. Another asked how to gain victory over superstitions.

Romans 12:3-8 talks about spiritual gifts and 12:9-13 give several “one another” commands. As part of their assignment, I asked about the relationship between the two. I gave them a copy of the many
one another commands in the New Testament. I also gave them a chart I made comparing the list of spiritual gifts with the commands of Scripture. All of the gifts except for the more miraculous ones (apostleship, healing, tongues, interpretation) have a corresponding command. I explained that just because I don’t have the gift of _______, I still have a responsibility to serve in that area.

In determining one’s spiritual gifts, I encouraged them to ask two questions—Where am I most effective and fruitful? and What do I enjoy doing? Effectiveness and enjoyment generally go hand in hand when we use our spiritual gifts. We have that sense of “this is what I was created to do.” During the final discussion of lessons learned, several commented they were going to use these questions to discover and use their spiritual gifts.

After enjoying lunch at Royal Park, we tackled chapter 13. We wrestled with the challenge of obeying a government you don’t agree with. Natasha shared that the government routinely issues a tax bill that is 2-3 times the normal amount. She and her husband were told to pay the bill and then sue the government to receive a refund. She wanted to pay the bill and sue, but her husband didn’t want to pay the bill. Her dilemma was whom she should obey—the government or her husband. She asked what I thought she should do. I said that she should pray and ask God what he wanted them to do. On the one hand, she should obey the government and pay taxes. On the other hand, she was to submit to her husband and allow God to work through him. This was another situation where I needed the wisdom of Solomon to navigate the whitewater of real life.

In our discussion of chapter 14 and the weak and the strong, one asked about the issue of alcohol. Should we drink or not drink? What if it causes a friend to sin? I told of a church in Spain that changed their observance of communion from wine to grape juice because they recognized there were some alcoholics in the church and they didn’t want to cause them to stumble and fall back into alcoholism. I also mentioned that there are many other types of addiction and listed drugs, pornography, gambling, phones, and videogames.

After our discussion of chapter 15, I ended the class early at 5PM. I gave them an assignment to read chapter 16 and look for three things—What did Paul praise the individuals listed for? What did Paul warn the church about? and How did Paul praise God at the end?

At 7PM, Sandzhik brought a group of 7 African students to our flat for pizza and fellowship. The men were from Congo and Zambia and are students at the local university. Sandzhik befriended them and is ministering to the group. It was a unique Acts 2 moment to hear songs of praise in Russian, French, English, and their native languages. The men asked Sandzhik to share his testimony and he told of being a committed Buddhist and discovering the gospel by reading through the New Testament. Elza shared how the gospel delivered her from the many superstitions that had kept her in bondage. It was a wonderful evening of fellowship.

Our final class was on Thursday morning. A few of the students came early and were led in worship by Slava, who brought his guitar.

We spent the first hour talking about Romans 16. I explained that often we want to skip the first part of the chapter because it is just a list of names. I emphasized the words Paul uses to describe these individuals—hard worker, risked their lives, servant, chosen, beloved, kinsman, approved. I explained that these were qualities I hoped would one day be said of me. I pointed out that some of the folks are not named, just referred to. In this life, people may not remember your service, but God does, and he will reward us for what we do for him.
After spending 15 chapters teaching sound doctrine and how to practice it in daily life, Paul then warns the Roman church of the danger of false teachers. I stressed that we need to be vigilant and on guard against those who will seek to divide us over minor, non-essential issues. I encouraged them to work towards maintaining unity.

Since I ended early, I gave them a 15-minute assignment to think about two things—(1) What are the lessons you learned from our study of Romans? and (2) What is one lesson you want to put into practice this week? When we came back together, they shared some very personal lessons and heartfelt desires for growth. Rather than try to apply a dozen lessons, I encouraged them to focus on one. We then closed with a time of prayer for one another.

After lunch, the two groups (my class on Romans and John’s class on church leadership) gathered for a group picture. Sandzhik gave thank you gifts to John & Naomi, Lena, my translator, and me. He said he had asked people what they were learning and he was impressed and encouraged by what they were taking to heart. He closed by saying he was looking forward to our next visit and the classes we would offer.

When he gave gifts at the end, Sandzhik thanked John & Naomi and me not only for our ministry and teaching, but for not forgetting them. In a sense, Kalmykia is easily forgettable. Elista is remote and difficult to travel to. It would be much easier to ask them to come to us or just to neglect them, period. But the fact we made the effort to go speaks volumes to them.

The afternoon was spent relaxing, reading, and running errands. In the evening, we had dinner at the home of Mergen and Elza.

On Friday, our driver picked us up at 8:30AM and we made the 7.5 hour drive west to Krasnodar. On Saturday morning, we continued another 3+ hours west to Tsibanobalka. In the afternoon, I worked on this report. On Saturday evening, I flew from Anapa to Moscow, where I filed the report. Tomorrow morning, Sunday, I will make the long journey from Moscow to Amsterdam to Boston. My wife will pick me up and we will drive home to Chicopee.

After we arrived back in Tsibanobalka and before leaving for the airport for my flight to Moscow, John Musgrave and I spent time evaluating the classes. We both felt very positive about both weeks and what took place. Both of our classes—Romans and Church Leadership—struck a chord and met the needs of the students. Expenses were slightly more than we planned, partially due to fluctuation in the value of the ruble. This means we will need to add a bit more to that portion of next year’s budget.

John & I also started talking about next year. I was asked by several people in both cities to return next year to teach Revelation. As my wife pointed out in an email exchange, perhaps our friends in persecuted countries are more aware of the signs of the times and concerned about the future than we are. Both John & I agree that Revelation should be the next class. We discussed holding the class over a full three days rather than the two and a half days as we do now. The only thing left to determine is the date for next year’s class. I have 12 months to study and prepare, so I best get started when I get home.

As I look back on this adventure, I feel a sense of identification with the apostle Paul when he said, “In Christ Jesus, then, I have reason to be proud of my work for God. For I will not venture to speak of anything except what Christ has accomplished through me to bring the Gentiles to obedience—by word and deed” (Romans 15:17-18). I am grateful for what God did in and through me. Thanks for praying.