

March 2012 China, Winter Welfare, Sister Nana, Mali

The *Bible Companion* readings for this Sunday include Luke 24, and there's an MP3 about this at <http://www.aletheiacollege.net/audio/lk24.mp3>

WINTER WELFARE

Our efforts to assist needy brothers and sisters throughout Eastern Europe continue, and there really is huge appreciation of your help. At the recent **Carelinks UK Conference**, sister Irma from Riga was present and read out a statement of gratitude and appreciation; the text of her message is reproduced at the end of this newsletter.

We mentioned that a group of brothers and sisters are living in a garage together. It has concrete walls and floor, and they have done their best to put carpets on the wall and heat it. There's no water, they have to walk to a petrol station and get it from there, and no toilet. The temperatures are below freezing at night still. The electricity was recently cut off, and so they're sitting there reading by candlelight. This is what we found when recently dropping by there with some [unrequested by them, although much needed] food and clothing



SISTER NANA

Sister Nana has faithfully run an ecclesia of sisters in southern **Ukraine** for several years, always attends Bible schools, and we can say has totally devoted herself to the Lord's work and cause after being baptized several years ago. In her 60s, our sister began having sweats and losing consciousness last year, but was shy to ask for the funds to get further diagnosis. Health care in Ukraine is hopeless unless one has money. After collapsing again, she was taken to hospital and diagnosed with serious kidney problems which require immediate operation. Cindy considers that every day this is delayed, there is the danger of permanent damage to our sister's kidneys and risk of loss of life, which could all be averted by immediate operation. But Ukrainian doctors won't operate without being paid, that's the reality. The cost of the operation has been established at 4000 Ukrainian Grivnas, which comes to about 310 British pounds or 480 \$. It won't take long searching the internet to verify the ridiculous health care situation in Ukraine, resulting in operations being basically impossible for poorer people. Hence Wikipedia comments: "Ukraine is considered to be in a demographic crisis due to its high death rate and a low birth rate. In 2008, the country's population was one of the fastest declining in the world at -5% growth". We would like to enable this potentially life-saving operation to take place- please pray for our very faithful sister, and donate, if you can, for her operation. Our PayPal address is info@carelinks.net or our bank details and postal addresses for cheques are at <http://carelinks.net/doc/otherdonations>

CHINA

Brother Donald reports the baptism of W, another *Bible Basics* contact in China, describing his efforts to achieve a full immersion of this contact:

"I baptized bro W in an inflatable pool in the hotel room, it was hard to fill up with air and also water, with only a small bowl for putting in the water, but finally Brother W laid down on the pool which associated him with the death and burial of Christ, and he came out of it, standing for the resurrection of Jesus Christ, and signified W's death to the old life and his resurrection in Christ.



In modern China people feel no sense of belonging, Brother W said that sometimes he used to think about this wonderful universe, human race, these ingenious natural laws which make the world run orderly, and he asked how could it all be without a creator? And life is so short and fragile. Does God really exist? In his daily life he came into contact with people in every walk of life who had become Christian and was therefore attracted to it. As he had been exposed to popular doctrines, we discussed Biblical arguments against such ideas as going to heaven and hell etc, stressing that the Kingdom will be based here on this earth. This Kingdom will be like the world was in the garden of Eden.

I will be praying for our new brother, to grow in faith and understanding the truth in Christ. Amen"

MALI

We continue very concerned for the welfare of our brethren in Mali following the recent coup. The banks are running dry of money and press reports show huge crowds of hungry people in the streets. The borders of Mali have been closed, nothing can go in or out. They are also running out of petrol there. You may've heard on the news today that Al-Qaeda related Islamist groups have now taken over much of northern Mali during the power vacuum there now is. So the situation's not at all good there and we should continue in prayer for our brethren.

WEBSITE UPDATES

Sister Robin Jones has produced another quite exquisite Bible timeline which you may like to download from <http://carelinks.net/Timeline.jpg>

We've produced a list of all *Bible Basics* related literature which Carelinks publish in nearly 80 languages, and which can be freely downloaded; it's

at <http://carelinks.net/languages/nonenglish.html> . If anyone has on their hard drive any translations of our literature, please email them to us so we can get it online for free download.

The latest issue of "Gospel News" magazine is now online at <http://carelinks.net/gospel-news/>

With love from your brothers and sisters of Carelinks

I would like to thank you for all the good work you have enabled in Latvia and in my own life. I understand you want me to tell you something about myself and my experience of grace.

I am a Latvian but was born in Russia. I was the daughter of a Red army officer, who was repressed during the time of Stalin (when many Latvians- and not only Latvians-suffered the same fate). He was rehabilitated after he volunteered to go and fight fascism. After the war we came to Latvia and I went to a Latvian school, but then I went to study English at the Moscow Institute of Foreign Languages. My husband was Russian-speaking, my daughter married a Russian and I live with them now. So I am bilingual in Russian and Latvian (but in Soviet times most Latvians were bilingual). I am, as it were, caught between the two worlds, Russian and Latvian.

Like everyone in the Soviet Union I was raised under the dogmas of Marxism, of atheism and materialism. I wasn't a religious person. I had accepted communism as a system in which there is no private property and goods are held in common and available to all as needed and I had heard people say, and it seemed to be common knowledge, that the moral code of the

Communist party was practically based on the Bible. But I have to say I didn't think deeply about it. I was busy with life, raising my daughter, and working at the University in Riga teaching English. I noticed there were students who were marked by the authorities as 'Believers', the subtext being – you have to be stricter with them and I could not understand it, still believing that we had freedom of conscience as it was stated in the constitution of the USSR. I wondered about it, but I don't think there was any discrimination in our faculty. But again, I didn't think so deeply.

As you probably know, in 1991 Latvia broke away from the Soviet Union and Soviet power in Latvia came to an end. There was a freedom of religion and freedom of travel and I bought my first Bible in English on a tour in France. Bibles were not freely available in the USSR, but I had always wanted to have one. Then I saw an advertisement in a Russian newspaper for "*Bible Basics*", and I wrote off to Duncan for a copy of this literature, which I actually received. I studied the lessons. It all made sense, and I suppose I started to join the dots, and see that yes, God exists, and His existence answered the questions I had had without fully realising it. I was invited by Duncan to attend a seminar about the Bible. At the time I had the impression that church was for old ladies, and some 10 years ago I didn't feel it was quite for me. "The tragedy of old age is that you still feel young", Somerset Maugham has said. But I did attend, and was amazed that there were young people there and a very active and enthusiastic spirit for the things of God. I completed all the lessons of the Bible course and then Duncan suggested I should be baptized. I knew I had to make a decision to enter relationship with God and Jesus and other believers, and so I was baptized, and never looked back.

Now you have asked me to talk about grace, God's undeserved kindness in giving us salvation if we believe, independent of our works, or according to the New Penguin dictionary: 'unmerited divine assistance to human beings for their regeneration and sanctification. In Russian and Latvian dictionaries issued in Soviet times this meaning of the word is not even recorded there, for God's existence was just hushed up - why speak of something that doesn't exist? But the idea of getting something for free, as it were, is foreign to most people. Of course people can be kind, can be nice; but grace; but grace as it is understood in the Bible is unknown to them, I suppose that is true of all societies in the world. But I think this understanding of grace was especially foreign to people from the Soviet Union. There was very much the mentality that by hard work there would be progress and personal advancement. There was a distrust of anything 'free, the common saying being "For free is cheese in the mouse-trap." The motto on every street corner was: "From each according to his abilities, to each according to his work." Kindness and generosity are one thing: but God's grace is another thing. Especially that we are sinners. I like most people have a conscience, but there is acceptable and unacceptable behaviour within society: but the idea of sinning against a personal God, and that He can forgive you and give you eternal life in His Kingdom, well, these ideas were quite foreign to people living under atheism and a materialist mindset.

I suppose that forgiveness is one key to understanding grace. Soviet regime made people very focused upon themselves, wary of keeping out of trouble, of keeping their thoughts to themselves, and not forgiving. I translated the talks given by Brother Steve Gretton about forgiveness, and I found the ideas very helpful in understanding grace. Those talks were a step upwards on the ladder for me. Also helpful to me was translating an article by Duncan about the good Samaritan. We are the injured man, we are to accept that we are the injured man and to accept the help from Jesus, who is the good Samaritan in the story. I also found very helpful the idea that we are to take full responsibility for our own sins. Without this, perhaps, grace can't be

understood. I think most people, and former Soviet people among them, consider themselves basically good, the fault is always with the others. That God could come into your life and forgive you and save you, as He saved me, it seems, when I was swimming as a teenager; this was very hard to take on board. It is still difficult, I think, for many people in the former Soviet Union, probably it is hard for all people wherever they are on earth.

It is hard to forgive people without their repentance, or saying sorry. To let go of others' sins as God has let go of ours, is very difficult. To forgive is to let go finally, to overcome resentment. If this were to be done, there would be no tension between Russian and Latvian people, there would be no continual reference to the past. But for the secular, agnostic people in Latvian society, there is perhaps no motivation to do this because there is no experience of having had their sins forgiven by God. Even if they consider themselves 'religious', attending Lutheran or Orthodox church, there is little awareness of having personally offended God, and therefore no real experience of forgiveness. And so forgiveness of others is hard for them, and understanding grace is hard for them.

All the time we are preaching grace. I have listened to very many talks by Duncan, many more than I can remember, and there is usually a reference to grace. But I am not sure that people understand it. It seems to me people understand grace only by personal experience. It is one thing to read of it, or hear it preached. But we have to see it in order to really understand it, and to be motivated to live like that ourselves.

As to my personal experience of grace, I believe all people are born with a vague feeling that there is a force above us/ whether you are born into a religious or an atheist family. And during your lifetime God knocks at your door, at the door of your heart, and if you are hard of hearing He is gracious enough to knock and knock again. I have been an avid reader and both Russian and Latvian literature abound in references to God, quotations from the Bible. That was what made me wish to read the Bible, but as Bibles were not easily available in Soviet time, that wish just lingered. And it was only after my baptism and those references to grace in Duncan's talks that I realized that my wondrous teenage experience was actually God knocking, trying to get through to me: I was bathing in the sea, I stood up and raised my eyes to the pines on the shore, the sky, the sand... the colours brightened umpteen times.... and I stood gaping at the scene in wonder. After a time all returned to normal. And the first person I spoke to of it was Duncan. Only after so many years did I realize it for what it was.

Our ecclesia in Riga has grown very much because of grace. Which leads me to question, whether grace can be misused, or even abused., For example, when we started providing food at the meetings for the street people and those living in night shelters, more people attended. It was grace to provide food for those people. The obvious question was, 'But many of those types of people are in that position from their own fault, their own bad decisions'. Our constant fear was, 'But aren't they just going to use us?' I suppose that is a risk, and so I would like to suggest that living with grace involves a risk. On the more personal level, we can forgive someone but they can misuse that, and end up abusing us. But does that mean we don't show grace? In my own life I see how God was showing me grace from my teenage experience and onwards, in fact, I suppose, right from birth. And maybe beyond that even, before the creation of the world we were known by God, by His grace. I could have not responded to that grace. I could have come to the end of my life without having responded to all the nudges and taps on the shoulder which God gave me. But in my case I have at least tried to respond. But God wouldn't have been wrong to show me that grace, to have tried with me. So maybe our showing of grace in Riga,

everywhere, is a kind of 'trying', just as God is probably trying with millions of people right at this very moment.

And then on a more simple level, it is also true that there are many very needy people in Latvia at this time and we need to try to help them. There is money, but only with a few, and there are people, especially the elderly and those without families to support them, who are not cared for very well by the state. There are also those without the right documents, there is discrimination, there are many factors and reasons which can mean that a person isn't covered by the state. And pensions for many people and things like child support are really very small. Child support is e.g. only about 8 Lats per month. Some of those who live in the night shelters get only 7 Lats a month. You can't live on this. So, as I say, on a more simple level, grace means being gracious to others without even hoping for a response. I know that there are hundreds of people, literally hundreds, in **Riga** who have been deeply affected by your grace in supporting the work being done. I want to thank you on their behalf, and on my own behalf, for showing me the right understanding of grace and the hope of eternal life in the Kingdom, which you have shown me. That somebody, by grace, put an advertisement in a newspaper, that God, by grace, led me to notice it and respond, that someone organized a seminar and Bible Schools, that God by His grace has promised to save me - from all my heart, thank you so very, very much, to God, and to you!

Sis. Irma, Riga, Latvia

[Note: 1 Lat = 2 \$]