

Dear friends,

July 22, 2014

Sometimes words are inadequate to express what the eyes have seen, the ears have heard, and the heart has felt. They are especially inadequate when those to whom I am writing are a world away from the need that I pray will touch their hearts.

In fact, even though I live so close, and so recently saw the needs with my own eyes, the peace and comfort that now surrounds me makes the suffering of eastern Ukraine seem distant and far removed. As I write, the happy voices of my children play in the next room. An air conditioner keeps me comfortable. I sip my tea, and gaze out my window over a city that lives in peace. Sitting here, it seems surreal that just a couple days ago I was walking through so much broken glass and rubble. Listening to the everyday sounds of a happy home makes it hard to believe that just a couple days ago I was hearing artillery, rocket, and machine gun fire in the distance. The serene scene of the sun setting over the Black Sea stands in incomprehensible contrast to what I saw and heard in the recently liberated cities of Sloviansk and Kramatorsk:



*I saw hundreds of homes damaged and destroyed. I saw shell-craters, shrapnel, burnt-out stores, and bullet-riddled fences. I saw a child's notebook buried in the rubble of her home. I saw flowers placed near a concrete slab which was blown off an apartment building and crushed an old lady to death.



*I saw the mangled remains of someone's car riddled with bullet holes which had crashed into trees in front of someone's house after being attacked. I saw the turret of a tank which had been blown off, and the charred remains of several armored personnel carriers. I saw returning refugees anxious to find out if their homes had been damaged or destroyed in the fighting.



*I heard many stories of near-misses. One lady's cat ran outside, and she went to look for it. Less than a minute after she left, her apartment took a direct hit from an artillery shell and was completely destroyed. A church member was delayed on her way to work, and therefore arrived minutes after a mortar had killed her co-worker. A pastor was driving towards a gas station when it was hit. Had the station's tank exploded, he would have been killed.



*I also heard stories of horrible suffering. A church member told us about two brothers who were abducted by the pro-Russian terrorists and forced to dig trenches on the front lines. A shell fired by the Ukrainian army wounded one of the brothers. The pro-Russian fighters, to silence his screams, finished him off with a rifle shot. His brother, seeing this happen, yelled and ran towards his brother. So the pro-Russian fighters shot him as well.

*Another church member personally witnessed a mother holding a baby running towards a nearby basement entrance to escape incoming shells. Shrapnel from an explosion instantly decapitated her and killed the baby, but somehow her body took a couple more strides before collapsing—as her head rolled down the street.

As I reflect on what I've seen and heard, I ponder my own response to similar reports in the past. Why is it that we can hear of such suffering and yet remain unmoved? Does the scope of the suffering around the world overwhelm us and cause us to conclude that since we can't meet every need, we need not meet any need? Does the fact we can't solve everything justify our failure to do something? When suffering is out of sight, why is it so easy to keep it out of mind? Why does human compassion seem to be so near-sighted?

Certainly, when we hear of suffering in some far-off place, we need to examine our hearts to make sure we have not grown cold and indifferent. But I also think there is Scriptural evidence that compassion is inextricably linked to what we see, hear, and touch. The heart of the Lord Jesus was certainly never cold and indifferent. Yet every time the gospels say

that He had “compassion” on someone, it was because he had seen them (Matt. 9:36, 14:14, Mark 6:34, Luke 7:1), talked to them (Matt. 20:34, Mark 1:41), or been with them (Matt. 15:32, Mark 8:2). Jesus taught that the good Samaritan had compassion on the injured man when he “came to where he was” and “saw him” (Luke 10:33). He taught that the father had compassion on his prodigal son “when he saw him” (Luke 15:20). There is a consistent link throughout Scripture between compassion and seeing.

Compassion is the reaction of a loving heart to the suffering it sees, hears, or touches. But compassion is near-sighted. It cannot reach beyond what we are willing to see. Compassion is hard of hearing. It cannot reach beyond what we are willing to hear. Compassion is numb. It cannot reach beyond what we are willing to touch.

The reason we so often have so little compassion is not that our hearts are cold. It is that our feet are immobile.

How much suffering can we see from inside the walls of our homes and churches? How can we have genuine compassion for unseen suffering? And how can we see suffering unless we get off the couch, off the pew, and go to where the orphan cries and the widow mourns?

When I was considering making this journey, I had many people advise me against it because of the possible safety risk involved. While it is certainly never good or godly to take foolish risks, I also believe that excessive risk-avoidance has become a major hindrance to world missions. From the safety of our homes and churches, we can't see, hear, or touch the suffering that would cause us to “be moved with compassion.” We don't go to where suffering is because of “what could happen.” But why fear what *could* happen? Nothing *can* happen outside of our Lord's sovereign will. The hairs on our head are all numbered. And if we suffer because we went to the suffering, the eternal weight of glory will outweigh our momentary trials. Perhaps the real thing we fear is not “what could happen to us,” but “what will happen in us” if we go.

I think we are more afraid of compassion than we are of suffering. We are afraid of what compassion will do in us. Afraid of what compassion would require of us. Afraid of where compassion may demand we go, and what it will cause us to do. Afraid of what it may ask us to give up. Compassion is terrifying, for it threatens all our previously held notions of personal security and comfort. It threatens our personal and financial boundaries. It directly threatens the safety, affluence, and comfort of our families and lifestyle. It is a clear and present danger to the things we hold most dear.

But the danger posed by compassion is easy to avoid. Just stay at home. Don't look, listen, or feel. Hear no evil, see no evil, and feel no evil. Compassion is easily avoided by simply cutting off its source. Be too busy to attend that missions conference. Don't stay after church to talk to the members of that short-term team that just returned from Africa, and by all means, don't sign up to go yourself! Put down that missionary biography. Avoid, at all costs, prayer guides, newsletters, videos, photos, and first-hand testimonials. Cut compassion off at its source by remaining safe inside the walls of your home and church. Stay in your comfort zone where you can't see, hear, or touch the needs of the suffering.

That, dear friends, is why I knew I needed to go to Sloviansk and Kramatorsk. Watching the headlines day by day, my heart was filled with natural and proper indignation towards the lying propaganda and terroristic aggression happening in eastern Ukraine. But my understanding of the suffering of the civilians caught in the middle was only intellectual. I did not have true compassion because their suffering was several hundred miles away, and my daily life here in Odessa has been almost completely unaffected by the fighting.

But now I have seen, and heard, and touched. And so compassion now demands action. It demands that I do what I can personally, and also help share the need with others. A “Crisis Evangelism Fund” has been created by SGA's leadership to respond with evangelistic compassion to both the spiritual and physical needs of the suffering people of eastern Ukraine. In the coming weeks, Lord willing, I will be traveling to the USA to assist SGA president Robert Provost's efforts to raise funds for this vital need.

Thank you so much to all who have given so sacrificially to need after need, for praying for my safety, and for helping us spread the word to others who may be able to help. With deep gratitude, Bret





Slavic Gospel Association's "Crisis Evangelism Fund"

Bringing real hope and real help to the war-torn areas of eastern Ukraine



Our Partners:

- 1) The role of the local church in evangelistic mercy ministries is vital, so we work closely with local pastors
- 2) Projects are designed to build evangelistic relationships between church volunteers and unbelievers who are in need
- 3) Since evangelical churches have been continually slandered by pro-Russian propaganda, mercy ministry projects can expose falsehoods, restore the spiritual credibility of the local believers, and re-open doors for gospel proclamation.

Our Priorities:

- 1) Members of local evangelical churches who are in need: Gal. 6:10
- 2) Where the gospel impact and connection to the local church will be greatest: Matt. 15:32, John 6:5 cf. 6:27
- 3) Orphans, widows, and the poor who are not receiving needed help from the government: James 1:27 cf. 1 Tim. 5:3-5

Our Procedure:

- 1) Needs are assessed and prioritized by SGA through site visits and consultations with local pastors
- 2) A project cost estimate is prepared, and the limits of the project are carefully communicated
- 3) Funds to purchase materials are raised from churches, individuals, foundations, and corporations
- 4) Those receiving the help are required to obtain any needed permits, and to participate in the work
- 5) Members of local churches work alongside the local residents and witness to them in the process
- 6) Project completion is celebrated with a picnic at which the local pastor shares the gospel
- 7) Members of the local church visit the residents regularly in the months following project completion



Our Projects:

1) *Roof restoration:* Many homes that were not structurally damaged had their roofs blown off by shockwaves or punctured by shrapnel. If roofs are not repaired extremely soon, fall rains and mold will destroy what the shooting did not, leaving thousands of people homeless. Though damage varies greatly from house to house, we estimate that the average repair cost for a single-family residence will be approximately \$500; for a two-story apartment building housing 10 families, approximately \$2,500; for a five-story building housing 40 families, approximately \$5,000.

2) *Window panes:* During the fighting, literally thousands of windows throughout the city were shattered by shockwaves and shrapnel. The poor, particularly the elderly and large families, have little chance of saving enough money to replace their windows before the freezing rains of fall begin. Replacing one window pane costs approximately \$20. If the frame is destroyed the cost of replacing the whole window will be approximately \$50.

