

Newsletter **CALLING**

Spring 2011

ODESSA
THEOLOGICAL
SEMINARY

*Equipping Christian servants
for the 21st century*

Odessa Theological Seminary exists to train members of the evangelical Baptist churches – brothers and sisters whom God has called to a variety of Christian ministries.

Graduates are expected to display Christian character, possess knowledge of the Bible and theology, and practical skills in ministry.



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A WORD FROM OUR PRESIDENT

Have you ever thought of how often miracles happen in our day? I mean real, obvious, incontrovertible miracles? I guess, everyone, even the weakest believer or the most hardened sceptic, if they really want to, can dig out of their memory at least one or two cases, when either circumstances came together in a way that produced a real miracle – buried Chilean miners, already regarded dead, being rescued; a pilot managing an emergency landing on the Hudson River in New York City, saving passengers and crew; or less newsworthy but equally valuable – a visit to the family doctor for the flu reveals a malignant tumour caught in time; or avoiding a serious car crash by only a split second.

In my opinion, miracles happen to us more often than we notice. But I believe that the greatest miracle happens when a grown man or woman, sometimes already elderly, with long held, ingrained opinions, changes them dramatically because of an internal change. As a pastor, I often see such transformations in people when they come to know God. It surprises me over and over again. Such things only God can do! “And I will take the heart of stone out of their flesh and give them a heart of flesh” (Ezekiel 11:19).

Recently some of the testimonies of our students caught my eye. While reading them, I recognized again that by bringing people to Himself, God is performing miracles in their hearts. And because we all are unique, unique is God’s approach to each of us. Some are familiar with biblical truths since childhood; some come to know God through many trials and hardships. I found it very interesting reading these testimonies and thought that you might too. Someone, at some-time, told them about God and they believed. Now they study so that they can share Jesus with others. Please, pray for them and other students like them – future workers in God’s field.



Volodymyr SHEMCHYSHYN
President of Odessa Theological Seminary

Victor YUKCHIMCHUCK, second-year Bachelor of Theology student:

“During my childhood, I never believed in God. Though I should admit that once, when I was a kid, I had problems that I couldn’t manage, and I called out to God for help. God did help me then, but I didn’t even thank Him and soon forgot about the instance. Even worse, I opposed God in many ways. As I was growing up, I quite “succeeded” in perfecting my sinful ways. I was sure that God didn’t exist. I even tried to convince other people about that!



Eventually I became so reckless that I started to climb on electricity poles and cut the current lines! Then I could sell the stolen wire. On March 3, 2001, being heavily drunk, I tried to “conquer” a high-tension transmission line. In such a way, I wanted to prove to everybody that I was worthy of admiration! But that transmission line turned out to be not as “easy” as I thought. Nevertheless, I was so blessed, because with these injuries, I was admitted to the hospital, while others usually end up in the morgue. Ten thousand Volt passed through my body, and when I fell down, I suffered a brain contusion and a broken spine.

Many Christians prayed for me. Maybe due to their prayers, 3 months later I was already learning to walk again. Three more months later, some local Baptist believers, seen by Orthodox people as sectarians, invited me to their Harvest Feast Sunday. It was the day I became a Christian. Since then I have become a new man. Now I can see that God answered my childhood prayer more fully than I could have imagined. All my life He has guarded me, so that I would eventually accept Him and believe in Him.”



Dmitry TREY, second-year Bachelor of Theology student:

“Before starting to tell how I became a Christian, I think I should tell how God molded me prior to accepting Him. I was raised in a very ordinary non-Christian family. I was a very ordinary boy and loved to do what other kids love to do: run, played different games, etc. Up until a certain time, everything was good. But when I was 7 years old, great tragedy happened in our family. My younger brother who was 6, died. My mother hardly survived that tragedy. That was the first and most serious shock in my life. This event greatly influenced the development of my conscience. The most traumatic part was that my brother was burned alive in front of my eyes and I couldn’t do anything. Later my grandmother attacked me with accusations that I didn’t protect my brother and that I was guilty of his death. I remember that my father arrived (by that time he did not live with us anymore) and I was scared that he would accuse me as well.

I think this terrible event somehow influenced my further behavior and formation. That core that every person has inside, was damaged in me. Later we moved to another place and kept moving constantly from one place to another. Every time I had to change schools (overall, I changed schools six times). And every time I had to build a relationship with a new class. Sometimes it was easy, sometimes – hard. In one class, I had lots of friends, in another – none. During that period, it was very important for me to be in good

relationships with my peers and to be accepted by my friends, and when I felt rejected by them, I didn't feel comfortable. I'm not sure I can say that I was growing up with psychological issues, but when I had problems at school, they affected me deeply. In 2001 our family moved once again, this time, to Semikarakorsk, in Rostov oblast, Russia. I was in the 11th class and had just half a year until I finished school. The class was already formed and accepted new pupils very reluctantly. I couldn't find any friends in my new school. Actually very often I had to fight to defend my honor.

All these events made me think about myself: who was I? I started analyze my life and found many unattractive things in it. I had thought quite well of myself and now this myth fell apart. I remembered events testifying against me and remembered how much evil I had done to other people. I wanted to set everything right, but didn't know how to do that. In my agony I turned to God saying: "God, if you exist, help me!" He did help. Not at once, but helped! I accepted Jesus and His forgiveness. Approximately two months later the guilt that tortured me started to loose its grip. I cannot see all the reasons why God let this tragedy happen in our family, but looking at my life, I can trace a certain link between it and my becoming a Christian. Possibly the same is true for my Mum and some other members of our family who have also become Christians.

I haven't become perfect, I still make mistakes, but I am thankful to God that in spite of everything He forgives and accepts me. I am convinced that He will stay with me and lead me till I reach heaven."

Alexander Ivanov* is a last-year student in one of our seminary programs.



** Because of a case when similar information in printed and electronic forms was already used by state officials to harm some local leaders of Evangelical Christians, we were forced to change the name of the student, as well as omit the name of the country in question.*

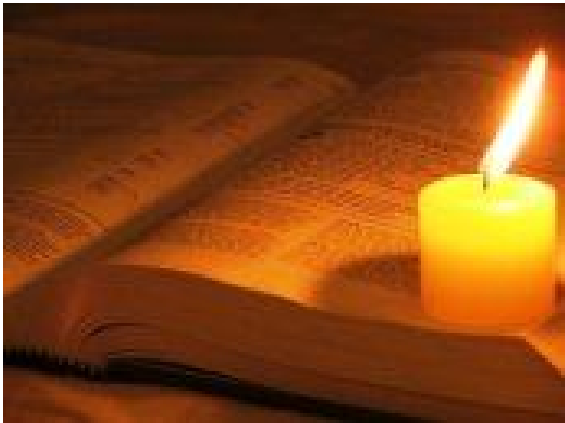
He is originally from one of the Muslim countries in Central Asia. As it is known, in such countries, Christianity is often persecuted by the state. We asked Alexander to share about his country, local churches, and his ministry.

– Alexander, could you tell us about your country, local churches and the relationship between the church and the state?

– In our country, it is against the law to share the Gospel. You cannot tell people about God and distribute Bibles. You cannot have more than one Bible, because it would imply that you are going to give the spare copy to someone else, which, as I said, is forbidden. If Christians want to gather together to pray and worship the Lord, they are obliged to do so only in the buildings of the regis-

tered churches. There are only 24 churches in the whole country. Local authorities do everything possible to block any effort to start a new church. In such cases, any reason would do, and they make up all kinds of obstacles. When believers meet their requests, they set up others, and so on. Once the members of the committee, which was supposed to give permission to open a new church, in a private talk with several Christians, plainly said: "We were told by our bosses by all means not to give you permission." When we talk on telephone, we carefully pick every word and topic in general, because from our own experiences, we have found out that our phones can be tapped.

When I came to Ukraine and saw what freedom Christians have here, I was very surprised. Immediately, as a contrast, I thought of my country. At home, there was a case when a believer was heavily fined for reading Christian literature in public transportation. For keeping Christian literature at home (except one copy of the Bible) or having a small group meeting at home, you could be fined. It means that if you and your friends meet somewhere outside the church for prayer and singing a few hymns, you should expect big problems. Taking into account that the economic state of our country is quite bad and most people are really poor, such fines lay a heavy burden on Christians. I know of a case in one of the villages when a group of poor babushkas were fined for meeting for worship not in the church building, but at home (each one of them was obliged to pay in local currency the sum equivalent to around \$500, while average pension per month is approximately 60 USD!). Of course the question is where should they meet, if it is next to impossible to open a new church!?



– *Many years ago in your country you had big churches, many Christians, and persecutions were not that radical...*

– Yes, once in our country, lived many Russians, who were Christians, but gradually, because of harassment and other reasons, they immigrated to different countries. Also, during the last few years, openly and secretly, local pro-Islam authorities toughened their policy against evangelical Christians.

– *Only against evangelical Christians? What about the Orthodox Church?*

– The authorities don't bother them. One of the reasons is because the Orthodox Church, which is attended mostly by Russian ethnic groups, is lo-

cated not far from the Russian Embassy. And it is rather risky to start quarrelling with Russia. Secondly, they don't actively spread the Gospel, and local authorities are quite happy with that.

– *Do you have, in your churches, many Christians from among the native Muslim population?*

– I believe about 20% of believers in the church are from the native Muslim population. A harassment system functions against those converted from Islam to Christianity. The main method of this harassment consists of their disgraceful expulsion from the home. Their family repudiates them, and ever after they are considered as traitors, strangers, and unfaithful Muslims. A person finds himself on the street, without family to support them, cut from his usual life, and with a very uncertain future. To take such a step in life, you have to be really brave.

– *So, how can you spread the Gospel in such circumstances?*

– Well, we are looking for different ways to tell people about Jesus. As much as we can, we try to work among children and young people. For example, last summer we managed to organise summer mountain camp for kids. Unfortunately, our permanent base, which belonged to our church and where we used to have camps, was confiscated.

– *Confiscated?*

– Yes, it happened three years ago. The base provided very good facilities for summer camps. We had a good kitchen and all the necessary equipment. But suddenly, a string of inspectors and different committees started coming to our camp and investigated every corner. They drew mass media coverage, and did everything possible to present the camp as a place of child abuse, where children treacherously turned into zombies, and where were forced to live in filthy, unsanitary conditions. Several church leaders were sued. They were found guilty and each obliged to pay a huge fine. They also could have served up to 3 years of imprisonment. Many Christians everywhere prayed about our situation and God showed His mercy. In several further appellate courts, it was proven that the facts, used by prosecution, were faked, and witness testimonies were recanted by those very witnesses. Our

brothers were discharged. Nevertheless, the camp base was never returned to us.

– *So, where do you now conduct your camps?*

– We have had to convert our camp into a “tent village”. We pitch our tents so far and high in the mountains that nobody knows where we are, even cell phones cannot catch a signal there. Sometimes we have to change our location because of the same reason: if someone finds out that we tell kids about Jesus and His love, another trial would follow. But praise the Lord, our camp is functioning. It worked last year too and lasted all summer long: from the beginning of June till the end of August. In this camp there were children from both Christian and non-Christian families, and even from Muslim ones. We all prayed together and worshiped the Lord! The unique circumstances of our camp mean a lot of physical work for the kids that come, such as working in our travelling soup kitchen, collecting firewood, etc. We also made some quite difficult mountain descents and ascents (officially, our camp is a tourist/alpinist club), and children played lots of games, but the main event was that, every evening, we had fellowship around the fire and the freedom to praise our God, read the Bible, and have discussions over His Word. I worked there as a leader and had the chance to make friends with all children. This camp gave us a good chance to show kids and teenagers life in Christ and tell them about love of God. We were so happy that, because of this camp, many of them invited Jesus in their hearts.

– *It looks as if your tourist/alpinist club is a good idea, which works well in your circumstances.*

Yes, of course. Thus we can draw in not only kids, but young people as well. Last summer, under the auspices of our “club,” we organized an ascent on one of the highest mountain in our country. It worked out! Everything was done very well. There were around 50 young people. Together with the professional alpinists almost everyone made it to the top! It took us three days to get to the highest point and during this time we made friends with the participants and told them about Jesus.

– *Do those kids and young people come to church afterwards?*

– Many of them do. With others we just keep in contact. But the main point is that we were able to share Jesus with them, and in the reality of our country it is good enough.

– *Alexander, what would you ask people who are reading this interview, to pray for?*

– I am about to graduate from seminary, and then I am going back home. Please, pray for me, for my country, for people, who are living there, for the freedom to preach the Gospel there, and for people in my country to accept Jesus in their hearts.

PRAYER REQUESTS

1. Please pray for the upcoming Board of Trustees meeting, which is going to take place on 9th of June 2011, and the Graduation Ceremony on the following day.
2. A number of our students are going to graduate this year. Please, pray for God’s guidance for them as they think over their next step in life.
3. Please, pray for those students who are preparing for summer mission trips or church ministry this summer.
4. Because of the rapid increase in energy prices, the seminary is considering the possibility of establishing, on



- its premises, an alternative source of energy, such as windmills or sun batteries. Please, pray for this project to be made possible.
5. Please, pray for the concluding session of the Bachelor of International Ministry program, which is going to take place this summer.
6. Please, pray for two of our students in the Bachelor of International Ministry program, who are living now in Syria, and for another student in the same program, who is living in Tajikistan, a Muslim country in Central Asia.