

DAY 1

We arrived in Almaty on time Friday night, after an uneventful flight. We sat near a group of teenage girls from a Christian school on the way to Europe--I think Richie may have enjoyed the flight most!

Alexey, our guide (or babysitter) appointed by CALTC, picked us up at the airport. We crammed all our luggage and people into not enough space in a van, and proceeded to lodging. The rest of the team is staying in a hotel, while I am in the CALTC guest faculty apartment.

Almaty is a beautiful city. It's surprisingly advanced in some ways--beautiful airport, lots of new German cars on big roads--and yet in a walk I took today I could see how densely populated the city is, with many small houses, shacks, and decaying Soviet era apartments back off the roads in huge blocks.

Today Alexey took us out toward the mountains on our free day before we start working next week. We drove a couple hours into the country to a national park, where we caught trout from a fish farm where they cook it for you as you go. Keith proved to be the master fisherman, I believe. The mountains are truly spectacular sights. The countryside is interesting, with lots of rural farm animals, people out working, and lots of trees and a lush early summer green.

Sergey, the CALTC seminary's academic leader (who will also be grading my students' Russian papers, praise the Lord) got me set up today with internet in the apartment. It's a bit spotty, and the rest of the group may not have gotten communications up and running just yet, so I took it upon myself to post something.

Tomorrow we will go to Resurrection Church with the people the team will be working with. My friend Tim, who is CALTC president, also attends there, so I look forward to seeing him again, as well as the pastor, Andrey, a former student at DTS.

Thanks to all who are praying and looking after the home front for us!

DAY 2

We got a good night of sleep Saturday night (in fact, I'm told some members of the team hit the hay by 7:30!). It rained some overnight, and was sprinkling at times throughout the day today.

Our first order of business was attending Resurrection Church for their morning service at 11. They meet in Center City Almaty, in a very upscale club room for businessmen (read: "high class bar", though the interesting items on the walls didn't make it into "fellowship time"--and I don't think they even served coffee or donuts!). The church had maybe 100 attenders, a lot of young people, some older; they spoke in Russian, with some noticeably more Kazakh or Asian in appearance but clearly assimilated culturally together in this diverse melting pot that is Central Asia. They worshiped with a praise band and choruses that sounded very much like our contemporary service, with high quality musicians and the whole range of worshipers from enthusiastic to observers. Another American group from Virginia was there, they will be doing sports camps through the church this week so we'll kind of be teaming up with them for some things. We sat in a balcony with a set of English translators. The sermon was preached by a CALTC student who used a headset microphone (not exactly behind on technology methods here), and his topic was on wives loving their husbands (presumably following a series where last week was on husbands loving their wives).

After church, our team went out to lunch at a nice pizza restaurant with the family of Tim Simpson and some friends of theirs. We served 14 of us total, and had a good time getting their perspective on cultural and family life there. Their kids play in baseball leagues, and they are going to an American school that's right next to CALTC.

Afterward the team took a brief rest in my apartment, then went to CALTC for a planning meeting with the CE leaders of the Resurrection Church. These included Kalina, who is the wife of Pastor Andrey and speaks great English, and Max, who is on staff with the church and is a very nice man who speaks a little English, and another woman who also was fluent. Perhaps the team will get a chance to fill everybody in on their session sometime, as I went across the hall with my course translator for my own planning meeting.

My session with Yana began with me knocking her full coffee mug off her desk all over everything--which I hope will be my most embarrassing moment, as it wasn't how I really planned to start. But we talked through the course, going over difficult notes, planning what days to do what, etc. She had hanging around with her another young woman who was not yet a Christian. I have noticed that it seems everybody at CALTC is regularly sharing their lives and their faith with non-Christians in an open and refreshing way.

Now as I finish writing this, I realize the second service at FBCL is wrapping up. I hope everybody had a great day there, and that Todd had fun and was treated well, too!

DAY 3 - Richie

First day of actual work went well. Greg got off from CALTC safely. Have yet to hear from him. Other team from VA says they had a good day as well. Well, I have to get to our evening meeting with the kids. This is our time to share the gospel. We will be doing this every night for the next week. Pray that the kids' hearts will be touched

Day 3 – Pastor Berghuis – Class Begins

This morning at 8 AM I began my first Trinitarianism class at Central Asian Theological Seminary (CATS), the higher level division of CALTC. 26 students from 5 countries gathered in an upstairs room, and many of them were good friends as well as some who were just starting the program. I must admit I was a bit nervous walking in, especially with the onslaught of foreign languages before a translator arrived. But there were soon enough English speakers to make me feel welcome and to learn what was going on.

We began with a devotional testimony by one of the students. He had recently helped to start a church in the city of Tashkent, Uzbekistan, where there has been some political unrest of late. He spoke about how God was bringing many people to faith, that the people were very ripe for Christianity especially if more passionate Uzbek leaders could be trained (he himself was of some Kazak ethnicity, I think). In his church they now have 3 cell groups of Uzbeks and 2 of Russians. He talked about how the people do live under the threat of persecution there, but that's not all bad. He said if we don't have persecution, we have to choose whether or not to be a Christian testimony, but when persecution comes, the choice is made and we have to be what we are. He joked about an American family that was being hassled by the government, told not to do this or that, which really scared them, and for 2 years they tried hard not to do anything wrong, then they got deported anyway. Better to be who you are was his message, I think. He even said that persecution of Christians is not so bad, they've only been giving the most aggressive leaders 6 month jail terms, and that isn't so long. He said that compared to the radical muslims, who can get 80 years, that looks pretty good! (These former Soviet countries have secular governments who are trying to reign in all religious extremism, especially Islam, but also Evangelical Christians who seek converts draw their attention as well, though societally they are not as much a threat.)

I began my teaching, drawing from notes and powerpoint presentations that I had prepared not too long ago. My translator, Yana, had done a wonderful job converting the slides and notes into Russian, so I had my computer up with English screens in front of me while she projected the Russian onto the wall. She is an excellent translator, though it takes some getting used to. It actually is making me more concise, which is a good thing. I get to think about my next sentence while she is translating what I just said, which tends to minimize my natural rambling tendencies...

The students were rather attentive, and I often entertained their questions or comments, and they were pretty free about joining into the conversation. It is humbling to think of all the amazing ministries represented there, and to have some part in shaping their understanding of God and the work of the church. I really look forward to getting to know them better at evening meals at my apartment, which are scheduled for Tuesday and Thursday both weeks.

At lunch today we ate at a cafe the school has an arrangement with. We walked in and several tables were already set with plates and food. The meal was delicious--it resembled a Mexican chimichanga, filled with various meats and sauces, with rice and some unidentifiable greens. The drink was some concoction with dried fruit (apples?) floating around in it, which was different but good. I loved the meal, and would be happy to order such a thing in any restaurant. When I asked what it was called, nobody seemed to know, somebody finally said "rice and stuff."

After lunch some of the students urged me to join into their volleyball game. It was a pretty typical men's volleyball kind of thing, with some good players and some not so good. I wonder how many Americans can say they've played volleyball with Uzbeks, Kazaks and Tajiks?

After class finished at 2, I went back to my flat and took a long (and needed) nap. I went back over to CALTC in the evening to meet with my translator and see some of the rest of our team "in action." I poked my head into a room where Dottie and Richie were leading kids in English Bible verses and songs, and the kids seemed very eager to join in and learn. The team also did some neat things in the morning, and they have a very full slate of activities being planned for them. Greg also took off earlier in the morning on a trip with some business executive teachers to go and lead seminars in other cities, and I can see how wonderfully suited he is to such an experience. I think today everybody was excited about getting into the groove of why we came.

I think I can see that our purpose on such a mission trip is not the stereotype of going overseas somewhere to try to change the world. Rather, when we go, we can hook up with some incredible people, and our presence helps create opportunities for them to minister. They make contacts, create good will, and are helped along as they change a little bit of their own world with the message of Christ. Such things have incalculable value, though it is so much more a team effort than we might imagine, and in the end we can't claim really any credit. I think that's kind of beautiful, actually.

Day 4 – Pastor Berghuis – Second Day of Class

Today's weather was spectacular. Not a cloud in the sky, low humidity. The mountains were absolutely stunning.

Today was my second day of class, and I'm really enjoying things. I felt a lot freer teaching already, just getting used to the rhythms of the translation process. The whole day was spent on the topic of "revelation," that is, the various ways God reveals himself to us. The morning devotional was by a student who spoke of his ministries and how hard he was working as an assistant pastor until he felt he had to leave, and he asked for prayer because he felt tired and was in need of the right new ministry job. His openness was refreshing, and I was reminded of how similar we all really are, even though there are such big cultural differences on the surface.

I thought I was hosting dinner for the students in my apartment tonight, but that's been changed to tomorrow, so I'm looking forward to that.

In addition to volleyball, today I got into another serious athletic pasttime here--table tennis. Some of these guys are like pros. I knew I was in trouble when they brought out their paddles in protective designer carrying cases.

Lunch today was lovely to look at...a cold, white cucumber soup with boiled eggs and peas on the side, everything sprinkled with green seasonings of some sort. Not exactly the kind of fare my meat and potatoes palate naturally goes for, but hey, I gave it a shot.

The children's ministry team is very busy with their work. In the mornings they are with kids from an English day camp in a public school, and today they went to a play ("The Frog and the Princess") which the kids were to translate for the Americans. Apparently our group is being treated like celebrities, and they are getting to develop some relationships. In the evenings they are doing a VBS-like ministry with the Resurrection Church leaders at the CALTC facilities. Pastor Andrey told me tonight they are very pleased with all the things going on, and they are making lots of contacts with the community. The team from Virginia is doing sports camps in the mornings, so the church is really a hub of activity right now.

The other team members don't have ready access to internet or email at convenient times, so don't be disappointed if they don't answer things right away. They're all doing very well and are busy in the work!

Signing off for another day.

Day 5 – Richie

I'm sorry I didn't write yesterday. Things were soooooo busy. Yesterday we went to a Russian theatre (a play, for those of you who aren't knowledgeable of drama) to see "The Frog Princess" with the kids. It was done very well, and we could pick up the main story line, even though it was in Russian. Keith got most of it on tape, so we can show it to you when we get back. We are hoping to hear from Greg soon, maybe tomorrow. Yesterday evening our group of kids was a little larger. This is great to see. The kids here are so active and full of energy. They are ready and willing to do whatever you have for them, WITH ENTHUSIASM, unlike some of the American kids, unfortunately. Things were so busy. We are at the school for day camp from 10 until 1, come back to the hotel and have a meeting, then leave again to go eat and start the evening camp at 6. This tries our patience, but we just think of our group devotion from Monday night, which was James 1:1-6 (I'm too tired to quote any of it, so you can feel free to look it up *** Note from Rob: Click the Verse to see it online***). It basically says that patience should be a part of our life, especially when trials come before us (we've certainly had a lot of those!)

Today went very well at both camps. The kids continue to show enthusiasm toward everything we have for them. This morning we had an American Holidays theme. We got to teach them about our country, and in turn we learned some things about Kazakhstan as well. This evening was great. We're having some keyboard problems but it's nothing that can't be worked out. We took the kids outside for a game that they enjoyed very much.

I just wanted to mention a little bit about the food here. It is so good that when we first came here it caught all of us by surprise. We brought all of our own food for breakfast and snacks, but we haven't even eaten any of our breakfast food yet. Here's something interesting for all of you students and parents of them: the cafeterias here are much different than ours. We eat lunch every day in the school's cafeteria. Instead of getting burgers, pizza, and so on, we get a traditional, 2-course Kazak meal, first course being soup, second course being something with meat. Today it was these little dumplings with meat inside, and the soup was borsht (for all of you that attended the Russian dinner.

We'll try to keep you posted on all of our activities as often as we can. Time for me to get some sleep.

Day 5 – Pastor Berghuis - Student Stories from first class dinner

I just finished my first of four student dinners at my apartment. They had told me I'd be hosting the whole class for dinner, I thought that meant everybody at once--but it's actually being broken into four sign-up evenings. So we had 3 students, two of their wives, one with 6-month old twin boys, and my translator here.

My translator Yana had been telling me that I had to cook for everybody, though I was under the impression someone else was--so I was really, really glad to find out she was just messin' with me. I came home at 3:30 in the afternoon after the regular day's teaching (subject today: the incomunicable attributes of God) and yet another rousing volleyball game in the blazing sun. I was surprised to open my door and find a couple women already in there, busily preparing supper (wish I'd cleaned up a bit before, I've kinda been making this a sloppy bachelor pad). The meal was fabulous--chicken breasts baked with corn, cheese and sun-dried tomatoes, noodles and potato salad. Dessert was tea, cookies and candies.

The highlight (and real purpose) was getting to hear different people's stories. There really are amazing people here. A lot of the conversation somehow turned to demonic encounters--it sounded kind of like campfire stories. One guy told about troubled people they had met and prayed to cast out demons--at a Presbyterian Church. Another man said his ministry was almost like the apostle Paul, as he and his friend have been going into areas almost completely unreached by organized Christianity. He talked about just sleeping in their car (and complaining of his friend snoring--I don't recall that in the Book of Acts, but it makes you wonder about the human element of stories about Paul and Silas and Timothy). They held a youth camp at an oasis near the Afghan border of Uzbekistan, and after a number of days authorities came and arrested folks and sent them all away, saying the land belonged to a military officer from Afghanistan (even though they thought they had paid somebody to rent the place, but he had sailed away in a boat!). The Presbyterian man helps to run a CALTC extension in Uzbekistan, and he said many Muslims are converting to Christianity--faster than they can raise up qualified leaders to train them.

Another student testimony was given this morning during class devotions. A young Central Asian woman with hair dyed blonde (there's a lot of hair-dyeing popular with the women here, of all colors) from Kyrgyzstan shared how she became a Christian, and when she wanted to attend CALTC to train for leadership her parents moved her far away to another city. Eventually, though, she was able to enroll, and she went back to Kyrgyzstan to work with young people and now with a CALTC extension there. She's here for the summer to get theology training.

It really is amazing to be part of this group of folks. It dawned on me that I'm supposed to be a missionary to Lansdale. Do I pursue my ministry with anything like the kind of purpose these folks have? Granted, the situations are very different, but you can't help but feel inspired in the presence of such eager, idealistic people who are so actively changing their world for the better through the gospel of Jesus, often in the face of such challenges. And yet they so need training, and theological education, so that the message they send is genuinely Christian, as it is so easy in such a tumultuous environment to get caught up in all kinds of strange ideas and doctrines. It has made me feel very humble, but also grateful to have something to contribute. This morning during devotions they were singing "How Great Thou Art" in Russian to guitar accompaniment. As they belted it out with the windows open under the gaze of those glorious mountains, I sang along quietly in English. I couldn't help but be moved to tears at the wondrous and mysterious unity of the body of Christ.

Day 6 – Richie

Today went very well at the morning camp. Today's theme was "Education and Vocation". We took the kids outside for a little "Field Day", which was just some fun relays. The kids made graduation caps and continued to work with the bells and chimes. We're now setting up for the evening camp. Please pray that these kids will understand the Biblical concepts we are teaching them tonight and will be interested in learning more. Thank you for all of your emails and support and prayers. Your presence is always being felt, even though we are separated by great distances. Please be in prayer for our safety and that we get enough rest as this week has been very trying on our energy and willpower, but we are enjoying everything we do to the fullest. Please pray for Greg's safe return to us on Saturday as well and for Pastor Kent as he has his second dinner tonight.

Day 6 – Pastor Berghuis - More Student Stories

Today was another great day. The weather seems to be in a holding pattern, sunny and highs around 90, lows around 60. Class today was mostly me giving expositions of biblical texts, around the theme of Christ as fulfillment of the biblical covenants. I ate lunch with a couple men, one who works for CALTC, the other a children's minister at Resurrection Church. He seemed thrilled with our team of children's workers and the ministries they are doing, saying they are "very professional." Lunch was "rice and stuff" of a different variety...kind of a spicy beef stir fry.

I hosted the second of our student dinners at my apartment tonight. Six students, two wives and a baby attended. The meal was once again delicious, beef dumplings meticulously hand-prepared.

Student stories again seem to be the highlight of the day. One of those here tonight was an older Korean woman who is a church planter in Uzbekistan. She was very pleased to speak of her three children, each of whom is also in ministry or seminary as well. This woman is currently leading a church of something like 250 people that includes many cell groups, Korean, Russian and now many new converts from Islam, all of them having become Christians in the last decade. This remarkable woman spoke of God having given her dreams and visions about where and how to start churches, and she is currently working on developing a missionary training school. Her daughter had the same dream (and I mean that literally), and so they believe this is one of their next works. The Muslims are often very hostile to Christians in Uzbekistan, and she said she likes to come to Almaty because she feels so free. She said that there in Uzbek they are scared even when meeting in homes that someone might overhear their conversations and get them in trouble or whatever, and they are always thinking about that sort of thing. Once people came and took kids out of her Sunday School and beat them, because they were Muslims and weren't supposed to be visiting the church. It's hard for us Americans to think about religion being maintained by force in the 21st century, but that's certainly the case in parts of Central Asia. She is sure many or most people would leave Islam if it were not for the kind of grip of fear that holds them there. A couple of the other students were leading churches and training ministries in Uzbekistan, and they are creatively developing their churches along the lines of cell groups. By doing so they often avoid the political hassles of official registration and the scrutiny that is entailed, and they also reproduce themselves informally and rapidly. Now there are Christian groups all over the country, where 15 years ago there were almost none. So think of a Christian movement of tens of thousands, where almost all the believers are converts from Islam or atheism, and within the last decade! In many ways I think these people offer real hope for a stable future in a politically tumultuous climate, but in the meantime, those in power will likely make it very hard for them. Often the governments are so corrupted, and then they refuse to let go of power to democratic reforms, prompting violence and different kinds of revolutions.

Another student told his story during morning devotions. He is a Russian and has been doing mission work in Siberia among the kinds of tribal people Pastor Sasha Yuchovski showed us videos of in Lansdale at the Russian dinner last month. This man has been helping with teams who visit reindeer herders in remote villages and very primitive conditions.

Today Debbie and our kids are leaving on a plane for a visit to friends in Dallas. So our family is flung far and wide for a little bit, and my thoughts are with them. It's funny how much the folks here at CALTC talk about Dallas, as they were founded by Dallas people and several of their leaders attended the seminary there--it's kind of like Mecca for them, I think. I joked with them that I thought I left Dallas behind, but here I found it again in Kazakhstan.

Day 7 – Richie

Today was our last full day with the morning camp. We will be there for two days next week to speak with the English teachers and the kids are giving us a farewell performance Tuesday morning. It was so good to know that we made a 100% positive impact on all of the kids there. One of the teachers took me aside for an interview, asking me for my impression of the school and my wishes for them. It was a little difficult because I couldn't say anything religious, but I got through it. This evening is the last "structured" evening. Monday we will hopefully watch the childrens' Jesus video and Tuesday we will prepare for our closing concert on Wed.

Tomorrow is going to be very exciting. We have successfully made it through the week without Greg and we anticipate with excitement his return tomorrow, even though we won't be around. Kalina and some other folks from CALTC and the church are taking us for a picnic in the mountains tomorrow. It is a great relief to know that Greg will get back and we can spend more time together. This week the four of us here have grown so much closer than before and I am so thankful for that.

Thank you again for all of your prayers, encouragement, and updates from back home. I'm so glad we have a church whose heart is in all of the right places. We miss you all and can't wait to see you. We look forward with great anticipation towards this next week and what God will do in our lives as well as in the lives of others we meet.

Day 7 – Pastor Berghuis - A week gone by

It's hard to believe a whole week has passed. Today I taught on the biblical theology of the Holy Spirit, using the presentations I used at FBCL on Wednesdays last fall. I gained popularity by letting the students out early. They looked pretty tired, having worked on their first paper the night before to turn in today.

I lunched with Tim Simpson. I had a plate full of beef chunks (must have been more than a pound) fried in some almost tasteless spices; he had rice and stuff. We talked about culture and adjustments, the politics of Central Asia, and the work of CALTC ministry, as well as family and such. He is so heavily involved in administration--trying to organize staff here as well as those spread out through Central Asia, almost 100 at some level under his management. He spoke of how much the churches need training for leaders, and how their focus is moving from academic education to more practical training to try to fit models where the people are here. Yet many students want stronger academic stuff, and some of them go to America, then it's hard to assimilate back here after living comfortably off scholarships and what not. While it's great that Americans can be involved in these projects, I wonder if we often realize the challenges our involvement can cause--for instance, the students here don't pay for their educations, or even their transportation, and even many of the churches and their staff and ministries are heavily subsidized by outside dollars. If that is ever pulled away (and with the uncertain political climate that's a very real possibility) everything will have to change dramatically.

Tonight Sergey, his wife Anya and 2yr old daughter Sophie took me to dinner. We walked to "exposition park", kind of like a state fairgrounds, with a nice woods, a fun kids waterpark, etc., and we ate at a very nice restaurant where we sat at a table outdoors and I could stare at a perfect mountain panorama. I had a smothered steak (wonder if I overdid the beef today, better not check the cholesterol count), and all this nice meal for the three of us came to around \$25.

Tomorrow a student who works at CALTC, Ivan, is going to take me to the mountains for some serious hiking. Sounds like a lot of fun, though since he speaks little English, it could be a nice peaceful time!

I ran across the children's ministry team briefly a couple times today, though I haven't been able to spend significant time with them. I keep hearing good things of their ministry, though, and look forward to comparing notes sometime, maybe Sunday.

Day 8 – Pastor Berghuis - Hiking in the Mountains

Today was a free day, and one of my students offered to take me hiking in the mountains. I was a bit torn, as our team was going out on a picnic, too, but this student knew I enjoyed hiking and he will be in class on my free days after the course is over. So I decided to go with him, just the two of us. Ivan claims to not speak much English, but we communicated quite well (I'm getting fairly good at redefining big words into strings of common ones that relate to each other), and had a good day getting to know one another.

We started at a ski resort on Mt Shimbulak, which is really a world-class kind of place (makes me want to come in the winter...). This resort is maybe 30 miles out of Almaty, and several thousand feet up. When we got there, we scoped out the terrain, Ivan pointed at a peak and said "there's our mountain," and off we went.

It was what we would call a "scramble," with no formal trail, just making your own as you go. It was very steep and hard work at times, and now I'm kicking myself that I didn't make the extra space for my hiking boots. However, my good tennis shoes held up just fine, and I don't think I even have any major blisters. My major stroke of sanity was listening to Ivan's advice to wear jeans and not shorts. I debated this in the morning, thinking it would be warm and all, but in reality for the kind of hiking we did it was definitely the right thing.

The hike began in the morning while the dew was still on the flora, making the traveling a bit slippery. It really was neat though, to be wading through exotic wildflowers that were often waist-high. There were some nettles that stung my hands occasionally (nothing serious, like mosquito bites), hence the wisdom of the jeans. We went through huge pine forests where trees were dusting off pollen, and through open meadows where you could see forever. The tall mountains all around us were of course incredible, with snow-caps in every direction and some truly massive things way off in the distance.

Ivan is in a lot better shape than me...he walks to CALTC 40 minutes every day, and is a long, lanky character. He grew up in Kyrgyzstan, with his family being geologists, and was in the mountains often. It made me feel like I was with a Sherpa or something. My usual rule of thumb is the easiest possible route, and never give up elevation once it's attained--stay on ridges, avoid technical climbing, etc. His basic idea is mathematical--the shortest distance between two points is a straight line! This made for some rather rigorous hiking. The words of Cheryl Swingle before I left came to mind..."Don't do anything crazy, we want our pastor to come back." At times I felt the guilt of disobeying that advice, and am glad my mother wasn't watching. But really, nothing we did was out of my skill level, and I was very careful to know my limitations. Often I would create my own alternate, winding routes to get where I was going.

After several hours of mind-boggling scenery and burning muscle hiking, we got to the top of "our mountain." We could have gone on forever to higher and higher peaks, but the Socratic wisdom to "know thyself" made me content with reaching the top of the first medium-big one. We took a number of pictures with my disposable camera (hope they turn out). We headed down the mountain, which included a fun stretch of several hundred yards of "sneaker skiing" on a snowfield.

We made our way back down to the Shimbulak resort, got some drinks, and kept on walking down the road. After maybe 7 kilometers (!) we stopped at the "Medeo," an ice-skating stadium where they train for the Olympics. Apparently it's the place to get married here, as row upon row of white Mercedes kept coming through with wedding parties. At Medeo we caught a bus back into Almaty, then a taxi from the bus stop back to our neighborhood.

I treated Ivan to dinner at a "Shashlik" restaurant--a common Russian/Asian version of barbecued shishkabobs (we had lamb) that is extremely popular here and basically a synonym for "picnic." Afterwards I made my way home, where I enjoyed a cool shower and sat down to write these reflections.

Day 9 – Richie

Hello to all once again. Thanks for your prayers through this very busy first week, but I can confidently say all went very well this week.

We still have some things to do in the coming week, but on a more relaxed schedule.

This weekend has been very enjoyable. We've been able to relax a lot and get some much needed rest. Saturday some people from the church took us up to the mountains near a ski resort for a picnic. Several of us walked up the mountain nearby using a road to an observation walkway on the top of the ridge. It was really beautiful. You could see the city of Almaty from there. We then went back down the mountain using a staircase running straight down the slope (over 800 steps!).

The picnic was excellent. We had lots of different salads and Max and Andrey made lamb and pork kababs. They were so delicious! We then spent the next couple of hours just relaxing in the picnic area which is right next to a stream made by the runoff from the mountains.

When we got back Greg was at the hotel. We were so happy to see him and know that he returned safely. He said he had quite an experience, but I'll save the stories for tomorrow's entry, when he gives me a summary of his trip. You may also be able to read comments from our other team members tomorrow as well.

Today we went to church. We actually knew three of the songs they sang this morning: "Shine, Jesus Shine", "Give Thanks", and "Oh, How He Loves You and Me". Greg went with his friends from his trip to another church. We all met for lunch at Mad Murphy's, an Irish pub and one of the only American restaurants in the city, and probably some of the best food, too. I am now hanging out with Pastor Kent until I meet a lady from the church to go to another church where her daughter attends. Greg is at the hotel and the others are going to a craft fair with Kalina.

Happy Fathers' Day to all of the fathers back at home. You are deeply appreciated.

God bless you all, and continue to pray for us as we enter our second full week here. Please continue to pray for the children we are working with in the evening and that some will come to know Christ. Please pray for us and the adults we are working with to help everything to run smoothly, as we are still getting used to "flexibility".

Day 9 – Pastor Berghuis - Second Sunday here

Today was our second Sunday here. I hope everybody from FBCL is having a good time at church or at family camp, as it's Sunday morning there and evening here. And a happy Father's Day to everyone to whom it might apply!

We went to Resurrection Church again today, along with yet another Athletes in Action group from America--lots of them, maybe 30 or so? They will be going off to another village to host ministry sports camps and stuff. Sergey said it was like being in church in America--he didn't know most of the folks there!

Dottie played a bell number in the service with Richie accompanying. It was neat to see our folks taking part here. I've been asked to preach next Sunday, so that will be an honor and yet another interesting experience. I hope I can have something of value to say to these dear folks...then again, I guess that's what I have to do each week, and the folks at FBCL seem to put up with me ok.

Today Pastor Andrey preached, and the topic that concludes this series on the family was on how Christians should view divorce. It was a solid, balanced, biblical and compassionate approach, I was proud to think that he had once been my student (though by no means could I take credit for his talents, I think he was in maybe one of my classes). I was also happy to see that he preached for a full hour, compared to last Sunday's preacher (a student in my CATS class) who only went 20 minutes. So I feel like my long-windedness might strike a happy medium here! Andrey is leaving with his family soon to return to Dallas for further studies, so his congregation and the folks at CALTC will be grieving his absence.

After church we met up with Greg, who had gone to church elsewhere with his traveling companions. He's full of stories of his adventures in the wilder parts of Kazakstan, which make Almaty look like a different world. We ate lunch at Mad Murphy's, an Irish pub bar and grill kind of place. It was nice, like the fare at Bennigans or something, and we sat outdoors under table umbrellas. On stage was a live Kazak jazz ensemble, and they were pretty good--playing American songs, and a penchant for the Beatles...

It is weird how my brain is working on language. It's like in all my quiet moments, or in dreams, I hear the tapes of Russian language just firing away from all the conversations or translations I've heard (Yana becomes my sort of alter ego here, having listened to her vocalize my words for 6 hours per day all week). It's a weird dynamic. It's like there's a stream of data, like maybe in an electronic conduit, trying to connect into a plug-in to the other side, but the interface doesn't work. But it's almost like I think I could understand the gift of tongues--suddenly God just lets the synapses fire correctly, and voila, the language connects. But alas, that gift has not come to me yet. So I walk through the day confronted constantly with this barrage of sounds I think I could make sense of, if I just had enough clues...

Not really much more to report here, except that the skies have broken loose with a cleansing rain. I plan to spend the evening preparing for my week of class, and will stay in touch. (I'm actually surprised at my diligence at this blog thing, it's become a good way for me to journal my experiences, and that isn't one of my normal habits.)

Day 10 – Richie/Greg

Great to be able to talk to you again. Just a little update about yesterday. The church service I went to last night was excellent. The pastor talked about building walls in your life and strengthening the stronghold in your heart. It was a very spirit-filled message. The others enjoyed the craft fair and Greg enjoyed staying at the hotel and catching up on some things.

Here is a summary of Greg's trip last week:

This post is by Greg. My first week in Kazakhstan was an amazing time for me. On Monday morning (6/13/05), I left the CALTC offices with a full time business staff member from Holland named Johan and a local interpreter from CALTC named Ruslan. We flew to Pavlodar in northern Kazakhstan not far from the Russian border. There we met with a pastor and went to his church to conduct a preliminary business seminar in the evening. There were six participants. Our purpose was to work with them, have them participate in some exercises and determine if they were viable candidates for the 5-day business course that is held periodically at CALTC in Almaty. I participated as an observer and assisted Johan with the evaluations.

That night (Monday) we took an overnight bus ride, eastbound, to Cemen. There we met with believers from a church that was struggling with division and had stopped meeting for worship. We visited a music college there and were treated to an impromptu recital of string students. It was a treat for me. I was also introduced to the trombone students and was shown their instruments. I met a young woman of about 35 years old, a believer who teaches at the music school. We had tea with her in her apartment where we talked with her about leading her church and getting at least some of the believers to meet and worship together. Her reaction was exciting. She felt called to try and get them to meet and worship. She asked us to worship with her in her apartment. She played her keyboard and we sang in Kazakh. It was an amazing experience to share her joy and love for the Lord. I was later told that this young woman was the first Kazakh believer in the city of Cemen. It is difficult to imagine that I had tea with a woman who was the first local believer in a city of hundreds of thousands of people. We had dinner in Cemen with a very young American couple and their two kids. They live in a simple 3-room apartment among the Kazakh people. They work as teachers by day and in their spare time, they share the gospel with individual Kazakhs, leading them to Christ one by one.

A long taxi ride took us to Georgifca (headed farther east) to a church in that small rural village. We slept on the floor of the church. There was no running water anywhere, but still, we were treated to the finest food they could obtain. At this home, since I was the oldest person there, I was given the honor of the preferred place at the table and was served first. It was humbling. We spoke with this pastor about his church and found that he was having good success. We also met with a taxi driver who was requesting a CALTC business loan to buy his own car. He took us to Ust Gorminigost (moving farther west, and arriving at about noon). We met with a pastor named Marot. I had seen him back home when we viewed the East West Ministries Video about Kazakhstan. Marot has had amazing success planting various churches in the northern regions of Kazakhstan. At his church we met with several businessmen and businesswomen who have or are applying for business loans from CALTC. We conducted a simulated businessperson's breakfast to show the businesspeople how they could gather to share concerns and encourage each other. It was amazing to see what these hard working people were doing with small loans of two to three thousand dollars each. There was a macaroni factory, a wholesale grain business, and small retail shops. It was at this church where we did our teaching. Johan taught a session on finance, record keeping and budgeting in the afternoon. After dinner, I taught human resource management. The students were so attentive and eager to learn. We stayed in an old Soviet hotel guarded by soldiers dressed in battle fatigues. The next morning (Thursday) we visited businesses and were ready to teach again in the afternoon. Johan taught a session on customer service. We went to dinner for a feast at Marot's apartment, prepared by his wife, Clara. It was delicious! Then back to the church for my class on production management. It was one of the most amazing three hours of my life. These people are so eager for knowledge. There respect for learning spoiled me - someone should warn my prospective students in the USA that I now have a new standard for student eagerness. Some of the students were Russian speaking and some were Kazakh speaking. Ruslan translated everything I said from English into both Kazakh AND Russian. He is a gifted translator and cared for us during the travel in such a protective way.

The next morning (Friday) we met with the local Russian Pastor and with Marot (the Kazakh Pastor) to ask them for their comments on the CALTC business programs and to ask that they encourage the business people in their respective congregations to gather for a business breakfast "club" periodically.

We were taken by taxi back to Cemen for our overnight train trip to return to Almaty. The train ride was almost twenty hours. The temperature in the train never got below about 95 degrees. I was a sticky, sweaty mess, but I was pleased to be headed back to Almaty and our team. I arrived back in Almaty at about 12:30 PM on Saturday.

The parallels to the first century church as described in the Book of Acts and in Paul's letters to the various young churches of his time are astounding! You can read those accounts in the Bible and I can name people that I have met and worked with who are the Kazakh equivalents of first century church members mentioned.

I am enjoying this experience in ways I never could have anticipated. The people have been so good to me. I feel safe and healthy. I am well fed and have enjoyed morning runs on several occasions. Your support and prayer for us and for our families is so appreciated. I have taken 120 pictures so far and have stories to tell that will make you laugh, and stories to tell that will make you weep. This is an amazing experience. We are making a difference here, and we feel so blessed to have this opportunity to serve. I miss my family and my friends at Church and look forward to seeing you all in about a week and a half. Until then, I am excited for the opportunities the Lord will set before me in coming few days.

God bless all who are read this.

We are so thankful that his experience was well worth the time away from the rest of us, and he will be jumping right in to the evening camp tonight. Everyone else here says hi. It was great to be able to call home Saturday and talk to our families and for Greg and I to call home yesterday to say Happy Fathers' Day to our Dads.

It is very exciting to hear how interesting all of this is to you. It is my pleasure to bring you daily updates. We are all thankful for all of the support we are receiving from you all. God bless you all.

Day 10 – Pastor Berghuis - A Small World?

Another work-week has begun, and I taught this morning on a "Trinitarian Worldview" and history leading up to the Nicene Council. That's where the first great doctrinal controversies of the church were decided in the early 4th century.

The student who gave his devotional testimony this morning was a man from the Siberian tribes, as described in a previous post. He spoke of his life growing up in a nomadic culture, wanting to leave that and their traditional superstitious beliefs for the army and the vagaries of no religion. At this point he used an expression I thought was very profound, at least as Yana worded it, he felt like "a middle-of-nowhere kind of person." This seemed so apt, not for merely the geographical isolation, but for his sense of his spiritual condition. He became a believer and began sharing his faith with his family and people, with mixed to negative results. But over time he has had inroads with his family and has teamed up with other Christians and they frequently see fruit for their labors. After his testimony I asked him and the other gentleman if they knew of the work of Pastor Sasha Yuchovski whom we support, and indeed they did. In fact, one of them said he had been involved with Sasha in one of the first baptisms in a village, breaking through the ice...I said I had seen a video of that, and the man who gave today's testimony said he had been running the camera! Isn't it fascinating that I've actually seen these people on a video that our church has found so moving and powerful, and here these guys are in person in my class?

Today Greg, Richie and I lunched with Tim Simpson for more lamb shashlik. The afternoon has also brought some incredible news about our team's work with public school teacher training--it would seem that there is the possibility of a return invitation for them to do more teacher training, this time maybe even paid at the expense of the public school system! I hesitate to even write this because it sounds so miraculous and like such an unbelievable opportunity, whether for our own folks again or even to send others in the future; God must really be doing some behind the scenes work here. I'll have to let the details filter out through those most closely involved, but it shows the kind of overwhelmingly positive reception our church people have been receiving, which really goes beyond all our expectations. So thanks for all your prayers, there is certainly evidence of the Spirit's work in ways we could not have imagined ourselves.

On a cultural note, today Yana took Richie and I to visit a store. The "Ramstore" is truly a modern supermarket/mall kind of place--think Super WalMart meets Montgomery Mall, only scaled down considerably. It was nice to visit a store with aisles fully stocked with everything possible, the floors shining, the service impeccable (I was even asked if I had a "Ramstore Card," which after I figured out what was being asked, managed a "nyet.") It's interesting how this stands in such contrast to the numerous small shops at the corners of every block. One wonders about the megashifts that will be going on in years to come in such an economy, but this certainly looked like we had seen the future for here.

Day 11 – Greg

This is Greg. I attended a concert at the school given in honor of Dottie, Keith, Judy, and Richie. The concert was amazing. Those kids are so kind and very talented. After the concert, they treated us to a feast in the Principal's private dining room. I am still stuffed and that was 4 hours ago!

Tonight we have VBS at CALTC.

I can't begin to tell you how much we appreciate the support we continue to receive through this site and the e-mails. We are so blessed to have you all as friends.

I am having no trouble at all running at altitude. In fact, my mornings start with a 3.5KM run uphill, toward the mountains and return. I estimate the rise in that uphill half to be about 500 feet. It is a test, but I feel good afterwards.

Laundry is an interesting issue. We clean our clothes in Dottie's bathtub (we have a shower only). We do some smaller stuff such as socks and "unmentionables" in the sink in our bathroom. Then we hang them to dry on the balcony. As you know, I am very happy to be wearing clean clothes after my adventure last week!

That's all for now. Please feel free to add your comments or questions to these posts. We love to read them.

Blessings, Greg

Day 11 – Pastor Berghuis - Is your wife worth 50 reindeer?

The teaching topic for the day was a continuation of the history of the Nicene Council and its creed, as well as biblical passages describing the relationship between Jesus as God's Son and God the Father. I feel like I'm learning my theology afresh again, and I always enjoy that in the teaching process. Nothing very out of the ordinary took place today, it seems I'm in a certain routine. Once again I played some volleyball and table tennis (getting beaten, of course, and he said he was taking it easy on me since I'm a professor, so he let me score 17 points).

Another student dinner was held at my apartment tonight (had rice and stuff for both lunch and dinner). My translator tonight was Jenya, a young woman who works for CALTC and is taking my course. She's getting married this summer, and had just gotten a message from her fiancé. The discussion around dinner turned to all things romantic, and it was fascinating. We all told how we had met our spouses. One of the men who works for CALTC and who brought his wife to dinner told how he was doing missionary work, and met his wife in a village. He noticed her and prayed that she would receive Christ; but after that, he also prayed that he could get to know her better, and of course they ended up in love and married, and now have 2 children. One of the couples was the man from the Northern Siberian traditional tribal peoples mentioned yesterday. He said in his culture, the men had to provide a dowry for a wife, depending on a lot of factors, but a common rate was about 50 reindeer (the reindeer are worth about \$100 each, he said). Everyone thought that was pretty expensive, and joked that you could get a Kazak wife a lot cheaper!

I said I had heard about a custom of bride stealing in Central Asia and asked about that. Sure enough, they had plenty to say about it. Apparently in some parts, like in Uzbekistan, a bride might be stolen before she's married by a rival groom, and he might initiate a kind of barter negotiation. They said nowadays those kinds of things don't happen much except with the consent of the parents, but it's part of their cultural past. But one man said he knew of some women who had become Christians who were sharing the gospel in their town, telling people Jesus loves you, and we love you, and they were misunderstood and were kidnapped for brides. They had to begin a policy of not having women witness to men alone, which sounded like a good idea to me.

Perhaps the youngest member of our class told how he had come to Christ along with his family. He has 8 siblings, and along with his parents they are all Christians now except maybe one. Another lovely young couple that is in the class together have spoken of their ministries in churches and prisons. It really is eye-opening to hear all these Christian leaders telling their testimonies, because they are so fresh. The vast majority of these folks have come to Christ in the last decade. They have very few patterns of what it means to live out Christianity over a lifetime, or to develop a Christian culture, or whatever. So at the same time it can be very vibrant and alive, while they're also just beginning to tap into the values of Christian tradition and the churches are often lacking in leadership or depth. The Spirit is so alive and at work among the people here, it's very inspiring to observe it all.

Day 12 – Richie

Today we had our first LONG morning at the hotel. We didn't leave until noon. What a relief! Tonight is our closing program for our evening camp. After this we have just a couple of responsibilities. Hopefully all will be done by Friday, and we can finally relax fully after that. What a busy week. But it is all in Christ's name, and we were so glad we were that busy. We were so thankful to see that our ministry has made an impact on the kids and teachers here in Almaty. Thanks for all of your prayers about this, for they have been answered in ways that you don't even know. Please continue to pray for our team and our health. Pastor Kent is having his final dinner tonight, so pray that it will be fun and relaxing and that he can make connections with his students. Please pray for the kids and parents that will come tonight. Some of these parents might be hearing of Christ for the very first time, and some of the kids might be hearing of Him for the last time. Please pray that we can make an impact in the lives of everyone that comes tonight.

Day 12 – Pastor Berghuis - Humbling moments

Today's student devotional this morning was from a man raised under Communism. He had bought into the whole system, and was a history teacher and leader of youth movements to promote atheism. But as he got older and the USSR began to split apart, he reconnected with his Kazak roots and started appreciating his Muslim heritage. He had a tendency to start defending religion with his communist students, and they would chide him that when he was with them he was a believer in God, when he was with the Muslims he was an atheist--he always seemed to be playing the "devil's advocate." Someone gave him the gospels of Luke and John that had just been translated into the Kazak language, and he read them to see what they were about. Now he began sticking up for the Christians, too. After awhile he knew he needed to commit himself, and he received Christ. Now he works at helping to pastor and strengthen churches, and is married to another student in the class.

The class topic today was on the deity of Christ and the history of Trinitarian thought in the East and West. I hope it's helpful long-term for these students to study some of the facets of Eastern Orthodoxy, because there has so often been hostility between the EO churches and other kinds of Christians, so much so that they make it difficult for other churches to get registered and what not. Hopefully over time more Orthodox people will become sympathetic to these new Christian movements, especially if they see that we hold to the same core of beliefs they do. That will be a long-term project, but I hope some of those seeds are being planted here.

Tonight we had our fourth and final student dinner. It was a large and talkative group. Unfortunately, the couple assigned to translate didn't make it, so I was left rather in the dark. One very sharp lady, a wife of a real leader in the Uzbek churches, had studied English in business school and during her law practice, so she gave it a shot. She was really rather good, but I could see the effort she was expending to try to communicate. It was humbling to be in a room full of people I'd love to talk with and feel so impotent to do so.

At one point an interesting string of questions was posed to me by the guy who gave devotions this morning. Several of their churches use evangelism explosion materials. "Are you familiar with them?" Yes, I replied. "What does your church use for an evangelism program?" I had to honestly reply that we did not have any intentional evangelism programs going on. This seemed rather odd to him. "Do you have cell groups that meet in homes?" Not really, I had to honestly reply again. I think we could use such things, but we really don't have much going on in our church by way of intentional discipleship or evangelism. "It sounds like you need revival." Yes, I had to agree. We are an older church, with only one third of our membership regularly attending services. There is good fellowship among many of those who attend, and we have a good base, but there is no question we lack the spiritual vitality and mutual commitment that is so expected of the young churches here. "We will pray that the Lord will bless you and your ministry there." And the group stopped and prayed over me, and for the spiritual life of our congregation. While this moment was humbling for me, I realize too it may be one of the more important lessons I bring back from Kazakhstan.

Day 13 – Greg

This morning I met with 10 businessperson's in a meeting similar to an American Christian Businessperson's Breakfast. I read scripture and we discussed its application to running their business (James 1:16-17) The discussion was good. We shared concerns that they had about their businesses and we prayed together. The goal is to get them to meet regularly so that they can be a sounding board and encouragement to one another.

Tomorrow morning I will meet with as many as can come and teach various management topics and have a general discussion regarding business management. I look forward to that opportunity. Tomorrow is also Judy's Birthday - a party is planned!

Kent is teaching today and the balance of the team is visiting some sights in the City and perhaps doing a little shopping.

Saturday evening we will host a forum at the Church on family life and marriage in America. We will all speak and then answer questions on the topic from those in attendance. Sunday, Kent is preaching and we will be doing some of the music and presenting a slide show of the kid's camps. Monday, we plan to visit the mountains and enjoy the cool fresh air and views.

Your prayer and encouragement is felt and important to us. We miss you, but are so happy and blessed in our work here.

God's blessing to all who read this. Greg

Day 13 – Pastor Berghuis - Christians among our neighbors

It's hard to believe today was my next-to-last teaching day. I let them off from the hour of class after lunch so they could work on their papers and reading, and loud cheers went up. I think I'm more popular the less I teach. Hmmm...

We talked today about our response to groups who don't hold to the doctrine of the Trinity, in particular the Jehovah's Witnesses who are very present in missionary endeavors and the Muslims. It was so interesting to listen to student accounts of their encounters with various people. The main kind of Islam here in Central Asia is folk Islam, with relatively little contact with the kind found in Arab nations (although that is changing, as they too are involved in their own missions since the breakup of the USSR). Many Muslims are converting to Christianity, while some are hostile. I was so pleased to see the students' Christian attitudes. I couldn't detect a hint of anti-Muslim sentiment, but a genuine sense of a desire to love one's neighbor and share their faith seemed to be their spirit. Perhaps it's partly because they all remember not too long ago when they were not Christians, and therefore they are sympathetic to those who are still not and they hold out love and hope for them.

This evening I've spent quietly in my apartment, preparing to preach at Resurrection Church Sunday. The theme they've assigned me for the day is 'The Truth About Scripture.' Our group will do some music, too. So pray that we will be able to make a meaningful contribution to their service.

Thanks to everyone who helped make Debbie's birthday special in my absence! I feel bad that I've missed that, Jani's birthday, and Father's Day. June's a big month for special days for several of us on the team, but in some ways every day here has been special.

Day 14 – Pastor Berghuis - Final day of class

Today was the end of my theology class. We talked for a couple hours about practical implications of our doctrine to how we relate to one another, then I gave them their exam. It was quite simple, write out a couple of the creeds from the ancient church, and they knew what it was to be. Afterward, the class presented me with a nice gift, a ceramic, hand-painted candle holder in the form of a "yurt," the traditional Kazak tent-home.

It really has been special getting to know these students. We heard yet another challenging testimony today. There's a group of several really sharp Uzbek students--real go-getter leader types--who were friends from way back, and they became Christians about the same time a few years ago. They started attending a Korean church with a bunch of little old ladies in it, it was really unusual for everyone. The student said once they were talking to a lady there about how much they liked their little church, and she said that they would one day have a much larger church of their own. That turned out to be a prophetic word, now these guys have started their own church that has like 800 people in it. They are real pioneers in figuring out how to go about doing church work in Central Asia, with very winsome, magnetic personalities. God must be planning to bring in quite a harvest of people if he is raising up this kind of people to lead the work.

This afternoon Greg, Yana and I visited a coffee shop that's a lot like an upscale Starbucks (complete with big \$3 lattes and wireless internet service). It's interesting to see the different things juxtaposed in a culture like this. But then again, I guess we have such contrasts in our own culture, but we get used to seeing them.

Tonight Pastor Andrey, his wife Kalina and their friend Irina threw a birthday party for Judy at the Muzschils' apartment. They treated us to a wonderful stir-fry meal, a couple salads and a couple desserts, including a multi-layered cake with Judy's name spelled in nuts and sugar and a big "#1" candle on it--maybe for her first Kazak birthday? It was a fun evening of socializing and being invited into a home.

We are reminded of some of the social conditions that are a bit different here than what we are used to. Today at a shopping area, a pickpocket managed to steal Keith's cell phone out of his bag. Also, another guy cut the string of Kalina's valuable's pouch she had around her neck and ran off with it; she actually caught the guy, confronted him, and he gave it back! Tonight as we walked through long, dark alleys to the Muzschil's home, and up flights of stairs in pitch blackness because the hall lights were out (the same is true in my apartment building), I couldn't help but feel some of the uneasiness of a land that is still underdeveloped for most people's basic living conditions. Though the temps in summer here are usually well into the 90's, few people have AC, so we are getting used to sweating a good deal in the sweltering heat. Many, like the Muzschils, have no car, and rely on walking (sometimes rather astonishing distances), buses or taxis for all their transportation. While there is clearly some wealth here and a great deal of new economic development, it's also clear that the vast majority of folks live in ways that only the smallest minority live in the US. But people can indeed live very differently and get along just fine. I suppose we take a lot of our "things" for granted, and could do without and still be happy; on the other hand, I also can see the toll in energy, safety (electrical wiring is amazingly shoddy here; no one wears seat belts while reckless driving is the norm, etc.) and other intangible effects that come about when life's basics are simply more difficult to accomplish.

Day 15 – Pastor Berghuis - Taxi to the mountains and family life seminar

Today, Saturday, brought two very interesting and different experiences my way here. The first was a trip back up to the mountains, and the second was a "family life seminar" for some of the folks from Resurrection Church.

Greg, Richie, Yana and I took a taxi up to Chimbulak, the ski resort and easiest mountain access around here. We had a bit of a time figuring out how we were getting there--a story for another time. But very providentially, Yana hailed a cab, and the driver was happy to take us up there. He was a hiker himself, and wanted to spend the day with us and would bring us down, too, making the transportation haggling a whole lot easier for us (and all for a very reasonable price).

The morning was a bit cloudy and cool, but as we rode the three lifts thousands of feet up to the top of the ski area, we saw a few breaks of sunshine. We followed a trail toward a pass that goes over a glacier on the way to Kyrgyzstan, which some people take as a 3-day hike to a huge lake and resort across the border. We contented ourselves with climbing to the top of a manageable rocky promontory. Actually, only 3 of us went all the way to the top--the taxi driver, who proved to be basically a mountain goat, and Yana and me (I won't tell you who didn't feel like making it, so that their athletic prowess won't be called into question). As the afternoon came, the clouds parted and we saw glorious blue skies as a backdrop to lush green mountainsides, various colors of rocky moraines, and huge brilliant white snowfields. It was a real big bite of eye candy, to be sure. We rode back down the lifts to a meal of sizzling steaks on a patio at the base.

By the time we returned to Almaty, we had developed a really good relationship with our driver, and Yana was inviting his kids to their English clubs and to their church. He seemed genuinely very interested in religious things, and though he was Kazak, said he had studied Eastern religions some. He appreciated the Baptists and Jehovah's Witnesses, he said, because they seemed to be the most interested in using the Bible. I tipped him generously for his great service and companionship, telling him to do something special for his wife and family with the extra cash. Hopefully our day with him might even result in his interest in Christianity being piqued--you might pray for Ravid.

Back at CALTC, there was the marriage and family seminar. Everyone in our group shared about the ups and downs of marriage and parenting, and there were plenty of very interesting questions. It was so neat for me to hear each of our group members sharing, and my appreciation for the collective wisdom there really grew. Everyone was very open and honest. We were asked very directly about what problems we had encountered in our marriages--I wondered if I wanted my church folk to hear about my own problems! But in the end I think we all came away feeling like the open sharing is just what we all need. Marriages in the former Soviet Union are very cheap--someone told me over 75% divorce. Also, these first-generation Christians have very few role models of long-standing Christian marriages that have weathered life's storms.

Tomorrow I'll be preaching and our group will be participating in the service with songs, a chime choir, and a presentation about the children's ministries. Should be a rather interesting experience!

Day 16 – Pastor Berghuis - Sunday at Resurrection Church

Our team really participated fully in the Resurrection Church services today. After their regular time of praise and worship (which is rather rousing), we did several things. Max, the assistant pastor who has been working with our team a lot, presented us all with gifts in honor of our time with them--traditional Kazak hats (that we haven't actually seen people wear...I must say Greg looked pretty cool in his); little stuffed camel souvenirs; and then a nice cloth hanging for our church that will be fun to present when we get back. A chime choir that Dottie had taught rang a couple of hymns, and Dottie presented the chimes to the church as a gift. This was all nicely received by the church, the chime choir did a great job and everyone joined in with them in the singing. Then there was a powerpoint presentation of pictures from the ministry times that Richie had put together, and he sang a couple of moving solos in the background as they projected. Our group together sang the song "Ancient Words" to go along with the theme for the day, "The Truth About Scripture."

After that I preached my message, "Hearing God's Voice in Scripture," similar to one I preached last fall at FBCL (anybody remember?) *** From Rob...Here is a link to the sermon at FBCL Pastor Berghuis mentions ***. I spoke of how we enjoy receiving letters [in our case emails] from home when we are gone, and how the Bible is God's love letter to us while we are waiting to come home. Also, Scripture is inspired by the Spirit, who is like the oxygen we need to breathe, and Scripture can be like the hose that brings the oxygen to the diver. I told a little bit about Joyce Wetherill's story and how it has been so inspirational to our church even in the midst of the difficulties of her passing; that we need the Spirit of God to continually fill us in order for us to have true spiritual life. Then our group closed with the praise song "Breathe." I think it was a very powerful service, and sensed there was a strong connection with the folks there, as well as hopefully some continued inspiration for our group, too.

After church Yana took us to the big Ramstore mall, and we ate in the food court. This one even had an ice-skating rink in the center, very neat place. We then walked to the National Museum, where we saw cultural and historical displays for a couple hours. We visited several other nearby landmarks--statues, fountains, and a plaza with original art for sale on the sidewalks as well as lots of shops. It was a very fun afternoon, and nice to see so much more of the city.

Day 17 – Pastor Berghuis - Finally a completely free day

Today was probably the first day our team had completely free of ministry responsibilities. Well, except for Greg (sort of), who took the opportunity to visit a farm with one of the businessmen he met. The rest of us went up to Chimbulak to the mountains--first time for Dottie, Keith and Judy, though I feel like a regular now. It was a lovely time, with a little hiking, great scenery, and a satisfying meal below again. Some clouds did come over while we were on top, making it a bit chilly, but in all it was a beautiful day.

We stopped at the Ramstore mall again, which led me to another highlight. All week long Yana has been pulling out a little squirtgun and shooting people. So today I bought a soaker gun, and then Richie and I surprised her in her office. She responded by dousing me/us with a liter of water she had handy. I'm wondering about the effect on me of hanging around with all these young people here...

Tomorrow we are planning our last excursion, a visit to "the Grand Canyon of Kazakstan" a couple hours out of the city into the desert. Then we'll be packing up and heading for the airport. Hard to believe it's coming to an end. In many ways, Lansdale, PA seems a world away...

Day 18 – Pastor Berghuis - Good-bye, Kazakhstan

We awoke early this morning, leaving at 6 AM to go to Charin Canyon. We drove out of the urban area of Almaty into rural farmlands. A whole mix of giant machinery (government owned?) all the way down to donkeys and wooden wagons filled the sides of the roadways. Often people would be selling produce (or even fish) at roadside stands.

Gradually the farmland turned to wasteland, and the desert resembled Arizona a good deal. That seemed fitting, as Charin Canyon is certainly reminiscent of the Grand Canyon--though not quite so massive in scale. We walked along trails with fabulous scenes of arches, balancing rock formations, and the giant gorge. We saw their fun version of prairie dogs. A brief thunderstorm rolled over, managing to soak us. We had prepared for heat, but instead got a mostly pleasant day, except for that sudden storm. In the afternoon we headed back to Almaty and stopped briefly at the Central Mosque and the Russian Orthodox Cathedral.

Now it's time to pack up and say our good-byes. I need my wife's expertise at packing! In a few minutes I intend to go over to CALTC and give some gifts to special people there and say my good-byes. There's a final student dinner at my apartment tonight, then we'll be leaving for the airport at midnight.

I must admit to feeling a bit misty right now. We've gotten to know so many wonderful people, and I've felt so much like a part of the ministry team here. My world is both smaller and bigger because of this experience. No doubt my reflections later will add perspective, but I hope to continue in the theme of being a changed person because of this trip.

Good-bye, Almaty, Kazakhstan; and may the love of God, the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit fill this city, and country, and spill throughout Central Asia in a sweeping, rushing wind of a movement.