

SHOWDOWN IN SIBERIA

An Amazing True Adventure!



“You must prove what you say!” The fierce Kirghiz tribal leader glared around the room at each of us. “One of our priests of the skin offerings tells us that you are liars and deceivers, and that you cannot prove that the day to worship your God is Sunday. If you cannot prove this, then we will certainly kill you, for we want no white man’s deception in this place!” With that, he whirled and left our little church.

A chill of terror swept through the little room. The Kirghiz were indeed much to be feared. These Mongolian tribesmen had the grisly habit of tanning the flesh of human beings. Whenever they were angered or did not receive justice, they would skin their victims, tan the skins, and make what they called “worthwhile items” out of them. The minister ran out of the church after the chief. “It will take a few days, but we will find you the text,” he shouted. We would be given three days.

Exiles, we had no way of escape in the frozen wastes of Siberia. The only method of transportation that we had were a few ponies that were still in a semi-wild state, having just recently been captured. However, we were not yet totally discouraged, for we thought that we knew what we believed. The minister summoned us all to our little adobe church. The Bibles that we had were given to each person who could read and understand what we were looking for—a Scripture that said to keep Sunday, the first day of the week, holy. It must be there. We believed it

as Christians, and we knew that there must be a text to prove our belief. It was now up to us to find it.

Those who could, began searching the Scriptures; those who could not knelt in prayer that we would be successful. Sections of the Bible were assigned to each of us. If we were to finish before we found the passage that we needed to find, we were to exchange sections, check, and double check our work.

Long hours of Scripture study and prayer failed to give us the text we so desperately needed. Much to our amazement, however, we did find many Scriptures that pointed to the seventh day as God's holy Sabbath. Nowhere, in Scripture, could we find that the Sabbath had been changed to another day!

There were 21 families in our exile colony—more than 100 people. The first two years of our exile were extremely difficult; and, many times, existence was a real fight. Many people starved to death, and the horrible cold winters took their toll of life, with no respect for age or sex. Only the most hardy were able to survive. But our living God heard the cries of His exiles, just as He had in ages past. He was a comforting Presence in the vast wastes of Siberia, and we never felt abandoned or without hope.

During the nineteenth century, more than one million of Russia's intelligentsia were exiled to Siberia to die. They were not criminals. All that they wanted was the freedom to live a free life according to the dictates of their own consciences, but they were not allowed to do so. This longing for freedom had cost untold thousands their lives, and many more would never see civilization again.

Now this same fate had come to us, a group of Christians with the simple desire to worship the God of our choice, in the manner that we felt was correct. For this we found ourselves deep in the heart of Siberia, with only the wild animals and a few Kirghiz tribesmen surrounding us. The natives with whom we had become acquainted were kind to us; but, for a long time, the language barrier between us was almost insurmountable. They could not speak a European language, and we could make absolutely no sense from their Turkic language. Time and practice were all that we needed, however, and one day we began to be able to communicate readily.

It was about two years before we really became proficient with their language, and it was then that our pastor called the elders of our church together and proposed a plan for a missionary endeavor among these people. The pastor felt sure that God must have had a reason for allowing us to be banished to this barren wasteland, and we were reminded that God's Word never returns to Him void. We were urged to exercise our Christian concern among these Siberian natives, and teach them of the living God and His dear Son who had given His life as a ransom for all men. We were encourage by their interest in our way of life, as many times the Kirghiz had expressed their dissatisfaction with their terrible pattern of existence.

They could not read or write, but the Spirit of God works on all hearts. For weeks our elders, sometimes accompanied by their wives, went to the Kirghiz village to teach them of God and the Christian way of life. After several months, the Kirghiz began to come to the little adobe church which we had erected for our worship services. It was at this point that we really began to introduce them to the three main points of doctrine that we, as a mixed group of different denominations, held in common.

Of course, the first point was that there was indeed a living God who cared personally for each one of the Kirghiz. This was not too hard to make clear to them, as all around us we had unspoiled natural wonders to convince them of God's existence. The second point was that there was a Word of God, rather like a group of love letters left for all men, to assure them of God's care for them and to remind them of their duties and responsibilities to Him as His subjects. We told them that although this book had been written by men, it was God's Spirit that had moved upon the authors to write the messages. The Bible was our guide to the heavenly land for which we are all looking, where there would be no more cold winters, no more freezing to death, no more starvation or exile. The third point we showed them was that they should not keep Friday as the day of rest as was their custom from their Mohammedan background. We instructed them that they should henceforth keep the Lord's day holy, which was called Sunday. This was not an easy subject for them to grasp, and we sensed their uneasiness with this doctrine from the very first. We also presented many other subjects surrounding these three major doctrines, such as baptism and the second coming of Christ.

It was then, after these natives had worshiped with us for several weeks, that we were visited on that fateful day by three of the Kirghiz tribal leaders, and their spokesman had made the demand that we prove from God's Holy Word that a man must worship Him on Sunday. If we couldn't prove our doctrine, we would certainly be put to death!

Now here we were, huddled together in our little church, unable to justify our beliefs according to the Bible, and with all the evidence pointing to the fact that we were indeed wrong and had been following the dictates of men and not of God. We had no place to escape, and nothing to escape with. Many wept and prayed, for we were certain that the morning dawn would bring our doom. How we longed for the wings of a bird, to be able to flee from our persecutors!

Solemnly our pastor stood and motioned for silence. "My dear Christian brethren, take courage! God will not fail us in this time of trouble! In honesty, we have prayed and searched the Scriptures, and He has rewarded us with a gem of new truth, hidden for centuries! Do not you think that if we are honest with our brothers, the Kirghiz, that our God will soften their hearts to believe? This is what He has sent us here for; and, live or die, we must accomplish His will! Let His truth be known! And trust yourselves to Him! Tomorrow we admit the truth and God will indeed be with us, I am sure!"

We spent the remaining time of our probation in prayer, promising God that if He would hear our cries and let us live, we would do His will as revealed in His Word.

Thursday arrived, perhaps our last day of life. Clouds appropriately veiled the sun as the members of our settlement gathered in the church for a final session of prayer. At noon, the cloud of dust grew thicker as across the steppes came a herd of galloping horses, more than a hundred in all! Brandishing their sharp knives, our native neighbors headed for the church. They knew exactly how many people were in our little colony, and there was one Kirghiz rider for each of us. It was indeed a terrible reminder of what they had in mind! They surrounded the church, jumped off their horses and stood beside them while the three leaders came inside for our answer to their question.

We had cried our last tears and spoken our last words of comfort to each other, assuring each other that if our appeal failed, we would certainly meet on the resurrection morning. Now we sat silent, at the mercy of these native men and of God.

Our minister arose and met the three men halfway up the narrow aisle. He told them that we had been misled in Europe. We had been taught falsely. We had now read the Word of God through for ourselves several times, and the only Scriptures that we could find identified the seventh day, and not the first, as the Christian Sabbath. True, there were eight mentions of the first day of the week in the New Testament, but not in a single case did we find any suggestion of holiness attached to it.

“We will not resist,” our pastor said. “You may kill us if you wish, but we hope and pray that instead you will join us in worship of the true God on His holy Sabbath.”

Then he stepped back and sat down. The three natives stood, conferring among themselves, then turned and walked out without saying a word in reply. The little door closed. It did not seem like a good omen. We sat in silence for another few moments with God. The quietness was broken only by an occasional sob. We felt as if time pressed down around us and stopped as we waited there.

Suddenly the door opened and the three men entered once again. “Don’t be afraid,” they said. “We will not kill you. We have come back to join you, and we will all worship on the seventh day as your Holy Book prescribes.” Then Hammemba, the chief and spokesman, began to tell us why they had made this request in the beginning.

When the caravan of native priests had arrived at the village for their skin offerings that the natives regularly supplied, the Kirghiz had nothing to give. When they explained that it was because of their friendship with the Christian exiles that they had not taken any skins, the priest asked, “Oh, then you have become Christians?”

“Yes,” the native replied.

“Then you have undoubtedly also given up your keeping of Friday, as you were taught, and begun to keep their Sunday?”

“Yes, we have,” was their reply.

The chief priest drew up to his full height, and a slow smile began to spread over his face. "Fools! Go back and ask your white friends to show you the proof that they are instructed by their God to keep the first day holy! If they cannot do that, then bring me their skins, for they lie!"

The native priests had heard about the Bible before, and some had even studied it. They told the Kirghiz that the Christians would be unable to find such a text and that they would get our skins. The priests told the natives, while they were waiting for our reply, that, if we were really honest about Christianity (they felt that most white men were liars), and wanted to live in the way our God prescribed, we would be keeping the seventh day holy and not the first.

Now these natives had heard our minister make an honest confession that we had all been misled, and that our Book had indeed pointed to the seventh day as the Sabbath of the Lord. They had to decide that we were honest, even though we were white! They really did want to be Christians; they were tired of such things as skin offerings. Their lives did not improve under the supervision of the heathen priests, while we helped them to advance in many ways and had asked for nothing in return.

After they had finished telling us this story, they said that they wanted to be real Christians and to follow the Bible and its sacred teachings. They returned to their village and told the priests to be on their way, that henceforth they would have no more skin offerings. The following Saturday, on God's holy Sabbath, our little colony, together with the Kirghiz, worshiped together in our mud-brick church.

