



My Bible School Lessons

Exploring the Word of God

Lesson #17: "Sabbath Questions"

The Stolen Bible

Deep in the forest of the dark Silesian mountain, nestled a little cottage. It belonged to Grimez, the forester or keeper of the wild tract of woodland. Night fell, but a warm glow of candlelight shone out through the cottage windows.

Inside, Stephanie, Grimez's wife, sat sewing, her nimble fingers fashioning a coat for her husband. Her mother read by candlelight. The hours wore on and the darkness deepened. Stephanie's face grew anxious with the passing of time. Finally she broke the silence. "Mother, I wish he'd come. It's unlike him to stay out so late. The woods are not safe at night."

The grandmother looked up. "Are you worried my dear? Grimez is a capable man. Don't you think he can protect himself from wild beasts?"

"It's not beasts I fear so much as men!"

"Didn't he capture the robbers that trouble people on the roads?" Grandmother queried, "I thought they were all safely behind bars."

"They are, except one. Their chieftain escaped. I try so not to think of it, but he's furious with Grimez for catching his band. They say he's sworn revenge. If it were not that I know the God of heaven is with us to protect us, I wouldn't be able to sleep at all. I only wish Grimez would pray too. All I can do is plead that God will have mercy on him, even in his unbelief and rebellion."

Grandmother picked up the big family Bible. "Let's worship together, dear, and read the promises of God. Then you'll find peace for your soul. You can safely trust your husband to the care of our merciful Lord."

Stephanie opened the big Book to one of her favorite passages: "In thee, O Lord, do I put my trust," she read. "Be thou my strong habitation.... Deliver me, O my God, out of the hand of the wicked, out of the hand of the unrighteous and cruel man."

Finishing the seventy-first psalm, the two women knelt together. "O God, have mercy on my poor husband," Stephanie prayed. "Protect him, and may he come to trust in Thy almighty hand. Protect us as well, as we lie down to rest. And have mercy on this robber chieftain. Turn him from his wicked ways, and may he also find peace in serving Thee."

As they rose from their knees Stephanie's eyes shone with hope and courage. "Now 'I will both lay me down in peace, and sleep: for thou, Lord, only makest me dwell in safety.' "

She was still quoting the Bible as Grimez opened the door. "My dear husband," she cried, "I'm so glad to see you. I wish you wouldn't stay out so late, especially with this robber at large. We were just praying for your safety."

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Grimez laughed, sweeping his small wife into burly arms. "Pray if you wish, my dear, but I'm glad my safety doesn't depend on your prayers. I'll put my trust in well-trained dogs and fine weapons."

He went to each window, examining the locks and making sure that all was secure. Then he checked his weapons. Having put his defenses in order, he bade Grandmother good night and retired with Stephanie to their small loft bedroom.

Next morning Grimez came down as usual to build the morning fire. Seeing a window open, he exclaimed in amazement. Stephanie flew down the stairs. They scrutinized the window and lock, but nothing was broken. Something had simply opened it. Puzzled, they searched for anything else that might have been disturbed. Suddenly Stephanie cried out in terror. "Oh, look!" There on the table, where the old family Bible always rested, lay a gleaming dagger, and the Bible had vanished. Stephanie sank in a chair, half fainting.

"The good Lord had mercy on us, or we would surely have been murdered in our beds," she gasped. "Oh, thank You, gracious Father, for your protection!"

"I don't understand it!" Grimez muttered. "I just don't understand it. How could he have gotten in? Small good my weapons did me! What on earth did he want with the Bible? Let's look to see if he took anything else.

They searched carefully but found nothing else missing. They talked and puzzled over the matter for weeks, but it remained a mystery.

Many months later the three of them sat together at a quiet evening meal. Grimez ate in silence, his face troubled. At last he spoke. "I fear I'll have to be gone for a time. You women will be all right. There's the money hidden in the cubbyhole. That will keep you in food for some little time, and I've stored plenty of wood in the shed."

"Oh, Grimez, whatever can you mean?" protested his wife. "Where are you going?"

"War has broken out on the French border. I hate to leave you alone, but I'll have to go and help with the fighting. At least you should be safe. There's little or no chance the war will come this far, and we've had no trouble with robbers since the night the Bible was stolen. I should pack up and leave tomorrow. I don't know just when I'll be back, but the fighting shouldn't last long."

His wife clung to him in sorrow. "If you come back," she murmured. Then, with tears in her eyes, she gathered her courage to face the emergency. "May God, who protected us on that terrible night, go with you and keep you, and bring you safely back to me," she said.

For once Grimez didn't laugh.

The days and weeks that followed were grim. Fighting was intense along the border. Step by step they drove the invaders back until the enemy made a stand beside a sun-drenched lake.

All day the battle raged. The boom of cannon, the shouts of warriors, the cries of the wounded, mingled in terrible confusion. At last the sounds subsided, and the smoke cleared away. The living were gone; evidently only the dead remained.

After a time of silence the soft splash of oars came over the water. Almost noiselessly a fisherman guided his small boat along the shore of the lake. As he neared the battlefield his ears caught a whisper of sound. He lifted his oars to listen. Yes, he heard it again, the low moan of someone in pain.

His eyes searched the shoreline for danger.

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Seemingly satisfied, he eased his boat up onto the sand. Walking with mournful steps among the dead, he examined each apparently lifeless form. Ah! This one was warm, and moaned softly at the fisherman's touch.

Standing, he put his hands to his mouth and shouted to his companions around the bend. In a moment two more small boats appeared. Together the fishermen lifted the injured man, a captain by his uniform, and bore him gently to a boat. Two miles away, across the lake, stood a row of neat cottages. Into one of them the fisherman carried the wounded stranger.

"Katrina," he called softly, "we have a guest."

A pretty, round-faced woman appeared. Wiping work-worn hands on her snowy apron, she took charge immediately. "Here, bring him in and lay him on the bed. I'll fetch water to wash his wounds. Poor man, he seems scarcely alive. We must work quickly."

With tender touch she washed him and bound his wounds. Her husband built a fire to warm the cabin. Together they nursed him through the long night. In morning light his pulse beat stronger, and by the afternoon he awoke.

"Where am I?" His eyes searched the simple cottage.

"I found you nearly dead on the battlefield and brought you home," the fisherman told him. "And who are you?"

"My name is Grimez," the captain answered. "I am a forester from the mountains. If you would send for my wife, she could care for me."

And so they arranged it. A messenger went for Stephanie, who came at once to nurse her husband. The fisherman and his wife moved in with a neighbor and told Grimez and Stephanie they might use their cottage until the captain was well enough to go home.

Grimez suffered agonizing pain, but Stephanie nursed him day and night, soothing him in every way she could. On one such occasion he caught her hand in his while his eyes caressed her face.

"My dear wife," he said, "how often these days I think of your prayers for my protection. It's remarkable that anyone came to my aid when I lay wounded. My own friends had left me for dead. And then there was the night someone stole the Bible. Whatever happened that night, I'm certain that some stronger hand than mine was guarding us. I fear that you've been right, and I've been wrong. There is a God in heaven who has heard your prayers. He's had mercy on me despite my unbelief and wickedness. From now on I mean to serve Him."

Stephanie could only weep for joy.

At last Grimez was strong enough to go home. He and Stephanie went to find the fisherman and his wife. Grimez clasped his hand. "Friend, I owe you more than I can say. But for you I would not be alive today. I can never repay you sufficiently, but I do wish to offer you something for your trouble. Here is . . ."

But the fisherman would not let him finish. "No, no, I will take nothing. I'm only glad I could help you. Now go to your home in peace."

But Grimez persisted. Again and again he urged him to accept the money.

At last the man replied, "I can't take your money. I owe you much more than you owe me. In fact, I have a great treasure of yours that I want to return to you."

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He went to a closet and came back with something in his arms. Stephanie cried out and caught it to her, hugging it with joy. "My precious Bible!" she exclaimed.

The fisherman turned to Grimez. "I see that you don't recognize me," he said. "But I'm the robber chieftain whose band you captured. I hated you bitterly and swore revenge. One day I crept into your home and hid, intending to murder you and your family during the night.

"You were late returning, but your wife read from this Bible. I had no choice but to listen. Never had I heard anything like it before. It made a great impression on my heart. Then she knelt and prayed for protection. She even prayed for me!

"After that I couldn't carry out my plan. But I wanted that book. I took it, leaving my dagger in its place. For weeks I hid and did nothing but read. It made a new man of me, and I've begun a new life. My wife, Katrina, is helping me. We've all we need for this life, and a hope for the life to come.

"You trusted in your guns and your dogs, but they couldn't save you. It's the Word of the living God that has saved us both."

THE DARK CLOUD

Paula paused for a moment in the shade of the maple tree. Already the morning sun fell with breathless warmth across the little Minnesota farm. Dust rose from the hooves of a neighbor's horse bearing his master on some early errand. Beyond the road to the north and east lay Benson Lake, its waters catching the blue of the cloudless heaven.

That is, it had been cloudless only moments before. Now a dark swirling mass like smoke boiled over the eastern horizon. The girl froze, puzzled, fear tickling her spine. She spun around and dashed for the house, the eggs in her basket clattering dangerously.

"Mamma, Papa, something's coming! Come look, quick! Something's coming!"

Two small boys tumbled through the doorway, nearly tripping her. She set the egg basket on the table and caught Mother's thin hand in her own.

"Come on, Mamma. I don't know what it is!"

Mother left her biscuit making to follow Paula outside. There the four of them stood watching the growing, swirling cloud that shadowed the landscape like an omen of doom.

Father appeared behind them in the doorway, leaning on his cane. His eyes narrowed as he surveyed the scene before him and spoke one word: "Grasshoppers!"

How long they stood there Paula didn't know. For once even six-year-old Roger didn't ask questions. The young ones, too, seemed to sense the threat that hung over them. Finally Father called them in, and they shut the doors and windows. It was hot inside, but the heat was better than sharing their home with thousands of grasshoppers.

The biscuits lay unbaked and dry on the table. No one felt like breakfast anymore. Roger and Carl stood by the front window. Father sat in the old wooden rocker.

"Come to worship," he told them, his voice sounding husky.

The boys reluctantly abandoned their observation post, and Mother surrendered her attempt to rescue the meal. They gathered with solemn faces around the table on which Father's Bible lay.

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"What will grasshoppers do, Papa?" Carl asked. "They'll lay eggs, Son. Millions of 'em. I reckon they'll eat about everything in sight. And when the eggs hatch in the spring..." his voice trailed off. He seemed to be looking at something a long way off.

"But, Papa, can't we kill 'em? I mean if everybody around here—if we all help. Can't we do something?"

"Oh, we will. Everybody who can will fight 'em But I reckon there are more of 'em than anybody can kill. I never saw it so bad."

Father opened the big Bible to one of his favorite chapters, the ninety-first Psalm. "He that dwelleth in the secret place of the most High shall abide under the shadow of the Almighty."

Paula's lips formed the comforting words as Father's choked voice continued to read: "I will say of the Lord, he is my refuge and my fortress: my God; in him will I trust."

Now his voice gained power. "Surely he shall deliver thee . . ." Paula watched the worry-wrinkles smoothing on his brow. He might be old and ill, but her heart glowed with pride. Papa wasn't afraid.

When he closed the Bible and they knelt to pray, it was as if he seized hold of the gates of glory and wouldn't let go. "Thou art our God!" he exclaimed. "All Thy promises are ours. We have no fear, for Thou wilt protect us. We are helpless, but we belong to Thee."

The strength of that prayer warmed Paula's heart over the months that followed. All that Father said about the grasshoppers was true, and fear haunted the little community. The war they waged on the invaders seemed to make scarcely a dent in their numbers. Prospects for the spring looked bleak indeed.

. And on the little Christopherson farm, despair might well have settled. Father was old and Mother often sick. Every year they battled for survival. But in their little home glowed hope and courage that few of the neighbors shared.

The long cold winter melted into spring. Food supplies dwindled. Buds burst in the trees, and all nature rejoiced. But out of the ground crawled a myriad of insects. The earth moved with them. To plant seemed useless. But Father Christopherson hired a neighbor to plow the garden plot. The neighbor muttered about wasted effort as he worked, but he turned the soil, took his pay, and left.

Early the next morning Father called the family together. "It's plantin' time," he announced cheerfully. Before they went to their task, they knelt together and prayed. Then, pushing aside the hopping, crawling pests, they hid the precious seed in the earth. Without a crop they might well starve. And only a miracle could save the crop.

Each morning Paula inspected the garden. She stood and watched the grasshoppers and waited for the first green shoots. Hope and fear battled in her heart. The day the first sprouts appeared was a day she would never forget. She stood for a moment at her usual spot, and then with a shriek of delight, turned and fled to the house.

"Papa, God has answered! God has answered! Come and see!" The whole family hurried to view the garden, then stood transfixed by the sight. The tiny green shoots thrust up from the ground. And while all around the garden the grasshoppers crawled as thick as ever, inside it they saw none. An invisible wall—a barrier the insects could not penetrate seemed to restrain them.

All that spring Paula loved to walk in the garden. It seemed like holy ground. She tiptoed down the rows and touched each growing thing with gentle reverence. Never had their garden looked more beautiful, while for miles around, on every side, devastation reigned.

As the grasshoppers matured and grew their wings they flew in swirling clouds, making a sound like fast-falling hail. And where they settled, they lay in great heaps on every side. For miles around scarcely a

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green thing survived. Trees lifted arms as bare as winter, and fields lay deserted. Those who passed on the road stopped to gaze in wonder at the little oasis of fruitful beauty on the Christopherson farm.

As harvest came the earth yielded her bounty from the little garden plot: from a small patch, fifty bushels of beets; eighty-three large squashes from three vines; and much more. Paula and the boys carried in mountains of produce. It had never been such a happy task before.

Joyfully they filled the cellar with food for the winter months and sent basketfuls to the neighbors. But on a morning of late August something occurred that greatly impressed Paula.

As they sat at the breakfast table a loud knock boomed through the little house. "Someone else to buy food," Father thought as he rose to answer.

"Come in, come in, Orville." He ushered in a black-bearded neighbor.

"I reckon, Norris, that ye might have some food I could buy. Ye know we ain't got a thing after them grasshoppers got done with us. We'd a starved, I guess, if I hadn't a had a little money put away."

Father's face looked sober. "The good Lord musta known we hadn't any put away," he said. "It's only the mercy o' God that we've food to eat. And He's given us all we need and some for sharin'."

Orville Nelson stood silent for a moment, his face working in a strange way. "I never took much stock in God adoin' anythin' fer us here and now," he said. "But I never seed nothin' like that garden o' yours afore. I reckon the whole neighborhood's convinced we got us a miracle here. Seems like I heard a preacher read somethin' like this afore — about rebukin' the devourer—Malachi, I think it was. Do you folks give a tithe to God?"

Mr. Christopherson looked a little puzzled. He went and got the big Bible and put it in Mr. Nelson's hands. "Can ya show me what it says?" he asked. "I been payin' tithe fer about a year now 'cause I saw it in the Word, but I never saw what yer talkin' about."

Mr. Nelson turned the big pages awkwardly, looking back and forth. With some difficulty he located Malachi. Then his face lit up. "Here it is in Malachi 3:10-12. Listen to this: 'Bring ye all the tithes into the storehouse, and prove me now herewith, saith the Lord of hosts. I will rebuke the devourer for your sakes, and he shall not destroy the fruits of your ground.... And all nations shall call you blessed.'

For a long time Father stood without speaking. He opened and closed his mouth twice. Finally he took out his handkerchief and blew his nose. "Well, I never," he said. "I shore never saw that. Neighbor Nelson, won't you, stay and worship with us? I think we better thank God all over again."