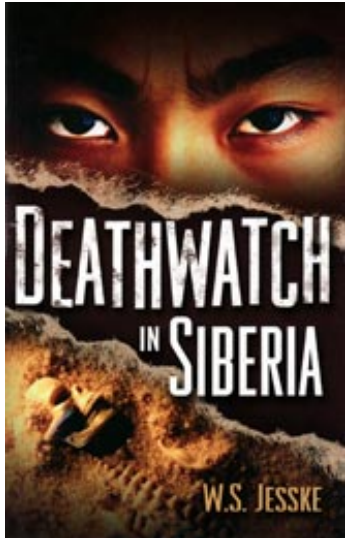


Deathwatch in Siberia



By W.S. Jesske

CHAPTER 1

“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 one of us. If we were to finish before we found the passage that we needed to find, we were to exchange sections and 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 horribly 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 19th 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 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 tongue.

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 returned 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 a ransom for all men. We were encouraged 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 the 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 men had written this book, 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 not 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 had 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 humble mud brick church.

CHAPTER 2

After those years of indescribably horrible experiences in Siberian exile, we returned to our former home in the Ukraine, a beautiful area of western Russia. Some of the other exiles had returned already. Others were coming. Many, of course, never returned. Many whole families were lost. Those who returned were happy to see each other, and many long evenings were spent discussing the breathtaking experiences we had had.

Our former homes, of course, were in ruins. But we were home and we could rebuild, and we did. So also did we restore our former beautiful Baptist church. With great enthusiasm we went about these things, for we thought that now things would be better and we could again live our lives as before. But we were wrong. Political unrest worsened. The old tsarist regime had been overthrown and the Kerensky reforms had died.

There were now many political parties, and they fought each other. This resulted in a real revolution. For years we lived in a firing line atmosphere. Many times for weeks on end the revolutionists were roaming back and forth shooting, looting, and fighting, destroying not only the opposite parties, but the very country, homes, and families. After Lenin came to power these things began to subside. But under these circumstances we had forgotten all about our promise to God. We had forgotten about keeping the Sabbath.

Our own family was alone in their belief, and of course we weren't going to be different. There were no people around us that kept the Sabbath. As far as we knew, the only class of people that kept the Sabbath were the Jews, and we were not Jews.

There was still much unrest among the citizenry. My father happened to be one of the underground leaders. He had called a Gramada meeting of all the underground movements in that particular area. They had a secret meeting place, very well protected from any intruders. It was guarded by many secretly armed men, so that no one could approach it.

One night, as my father was dismissing a rally, he noticed a stranger enter the room—a fine-looking young man with a great big mustache. Looking right at my father, it appeared that he wanted to say something, but he did not. The meeting had already been dismissed and men started to mill about. Father wanted to run back and grab this man and find out who he was. But by the time he reached the door he had disappeared. No one else had noticed him, not even the guards.

My father was greatly alarmed over this incident and summoned the guards, but no one could find the stranger. It seemed like a spirit had come and gone. Father came home and told us about this experience. We were all very worried, especially Mother. She was usually extremely anxious over things like this, and she kept

questioning him. “Why didn’t you call to the guards to grab him, hold him, and find out who he was? Why didn’t you do this, why didn’t you do that?” Her questioning continued until Father became very irritated, but Mother didn’t let up. Day after day she worried herself and everybody else. Every night we were fearful that some strangers would come to arrest us. We all knew that anyone working in the underground would be shot immediately if they were apprehended.

There was no one more beautiful and dear than my mother, but even mothers have a way of doing things sometimes that are not so good. But when she saw that she couldn’t do anything with my father, and she knew it was too late to do anything about the stranger, she and Father agreed that they would pray over this matter. Every morning and evening we prayed that the Lord would send this man back to us. It was five weeks before Easter.

One week before Easter, on a Thursday night, my father had a dream. He saw the stranger sitting in our church while my father conducted the choir. He told us the dream and on Sunday morning he said to Mother, “You stay home. Prepare an Easter dinner while I take the children to Easter morning services.” She agreed. Sunday morning my father, my sister, and I climbed onto our wagon, and he drove our team to church. It was a beautiful Sunday morning. We had prayed, and we believed that the Lord would answer our prayers. Father was sitting on the platform after directing the music of the choir.

He searched the faces of the 1,200 people in the congregation, but he just couldn’t find the stranger. He searched row after row. He knew many of the people, and he knew that he could easily detect a stranger. But he couldn’t find this young man who had that particular big, beautiful mustache.

Just before the pastor finished the sermon and Father was preparing to conduct the closing anthem, right then he saw that handsome young man with the beautiful blue eyes and the large mustache sitting on one side of a certain post, not far from the side exit. His heart began to pound. He was thankful and spoke a little prayer to God thanking Him for answering his prayer, for he had seen this very man in the dream.

When the meeting closed, he quickly went to the side entrance and met the young man, took him by the arm, and said, “Come on, young man, you are going home with me today.”

The stranger answered, “I am glad, that’s what I came here for.”

We all climbed onto the wagon and started for home. Very little was said on the road except that the young stranger told father that he had had a dream the Thursday night before that he should come to this particular church. Since he lived a long distance away, he had never visited there before. Mother had our meager meal ready.

We were hungry most of the time. Many people were starving to death. During those days of revolution, people had lost everything. The government that had been set up was not very favorable to Christian people, and this caused great hardship among the people. But my dear mother had fixed what she had, and we called it Easter Sunday dinner. After we had eaten, this young man started to talk to us. We discovered who he was. He was an Adventist lay worker. His name was Kelm, and he was keeping the seventh-day Sabbath.

This was, of course, very new to us—to see someone in that section of Europe keeping the seventh-day Sabbath that was not a Jew. We told him of our experiences in Siberia with the natives and how we had learned about the Sabbath. But we told him we had not kept it since we had returned to our own home in Europe, because it really didn’t fit into our lives at all. This was the beginning of a series of cottage meetings.

The next week young Kelm returned to our home. At that time we had called together five other neighbors to study this wonderful message. We told them of our experience in Siberia. We said the Scripture was really true and that we were not living up to it in every minute detail. We should perhaps turn to it and then trust God to bless us after obeying Him more closely. After several studies with Mr. Kelm, one each week, one of the families withdrew, but five of us did continue to study for some time longer.

We were fully convinced that this was the truth. We studied not only the Sabbath, but many other scriptural doctrines, such as the state of the dead, the millennium, healthful living, and so forth. This all seemed so real and so good to us, and above all, an answer to our prayers. We had prayed that God would send the light, and now it had come.

What should we do? With our families we made our decision and promised each other and God that we would stand united to follow in the footsteps of our Savior. Mr. Kelm, and some of the others that had come with him to give us studies, were to return the following week for final studies to prepare us for baptism into the Adventist Church. Now there was another surprise. My father and the other four men met and decided not to be baptized.

On the appointed day toward evening, Mr. Kelm and two of his friends came back to give us the Bible studies. Father was on the roof fixing something there. I was helping him. We saw these three people coming down the hill, and as they approached our yard, my father called down from the top of the barn. He told them not to enter the yard, but to turn around and leave as quickly as possible. He said that we did not want to have anything to do with the Adventist people, that they were from the devil, that all these teachings that they had brought to us were false, and we wanted nothing to do with them—just leave.

They couldn't believe what they heard. But as they were trying to come through the gate, Father called once more and said not to enter or he would loose the dog. Then they understood that he meant what he said. They tried to talk to him from a distance, but it was useless. They turned around. They walked away from the yard, the distance of a short block. There were some bushes there, and they knelt under these bushes in seclusion and prayed for quite a while. Then they arose and left, never to return again.

Mother had watched this whole procedure and was very, very unhappy. She was weeping like a little child, not only for these people who were heartbroken, but also for our own souls. She feared that we were lost, forever lost. When Father came down from the roof, Mother was there, and an argument ensued over this experience. But nothing was changed, for Father had spoken.

CHAPTER 3

Weeks and months passed by. The five men who had turned their hearts against God seemed to be at peace—at least superficially. But not so with the mothers and the children that had attended the meetings and had learned something so wonderful, that seemed so real. We gathered from time to time and talked over this horrible experience. Two neighbors met with our family one evening. My mother never kept quiet, always reminding my father of this terrible thing that he had done to these kind people and against God. She had prayed in secret almost continually that God would do something to my father to change his stubborn heart. We children and Mother and the two neighbors' children and their mothers had met, talked about these truths, had Bible studies, and prayed that God would help us to accept this new light.

Finally the time came when our father and the other two neighbor men met with us to talk about this strange experience. During all this Mother saw that it was useless to talk to my father very much about it, for he became irritated. All she did was keep praying with her children. The three of us would kneel down many times and ask the Lord to help us accept the call of the Holy Spirit, for we wanted to be saved in God's kingdom.

On this particular evening when the three families met, we made our decision that we would take up this teaching. We wanted to call the remaining neighbors of the original five to join us. We took our stand right then and there that evening that from then on we would not let anything else influence us. God only should be our guide, and the Bible our textbook.

When we called the other two neighbors, they refused to join us. One of them, Mr. Grenke, became violently angry over our decision. He promised my father and us that no Sabbath-keepers would live next to him, that he would kill them. Both Mr. Grenke and my father had been elders in the Baptist Church and had been friends for many years. They had been officers in the army long before the revolution. They had been very close and now this man swore that he would kill all of us if we became Seventh-day Adventists.

It was now Christmastime. The night before Christmas Eve about two inches of beautiful, white, fresh, fluffy snow had fallen. I was in a trade school at this time, so my father was coming after me this early afternoon to take me home for Christmas Eve. He had our two horses hitched to a double sleigh. We were sitting on a plank across the siding, talking to each other about the difficult times and what the future might hold for us. Our horses reached a certain spot under a great big oak tree that seemed to extend its branches forever. Of course we were not thinking of any danger coming to us. We were occupied with our own thoughts and conversation. As the horses were beginning to pass the trunk of this big oak tree, Mr. Grenke, our neighbor, jumped from the other side, grabbed the reins and, stopping the horses, immediately started talking to my father.

Mr. Grenke said, "Look, Sam, I have told you many times that no Sabbath-keeper will be my neighbor, and for that reason, I am going to carry out my promise. I am going to kill you both." By that time, he had moved closer to the sleigh, never letting loose of the reins that he had caught. He had a giant stick on his shoulder and was aiming it right at my father. He asked Father for his final answer. From where he stood he could have struck both of us with one blow. He was a powerful man. He told us that he would count to three and then he would strike. We spoke to him but felt that our words fell on deaf ears. He meant to carry out his threat. Father, who had on a heavy fur coat, shook it off his shoulders so that he could be freer to fight. When the time came and Mr. Grenke counted one, two, three, and struck his deadly blow, he only struck the board we had been sitting on, and nothing else. The force of the blow only injured his hand. His club fell to the ground.

Father, who was a small man, but very quick, jumped up and grabbed Grenke by the collar. I threw myself off the sleigh and ran to my father's aid. The two men were facing each other, my father with a grip on Grenke's collar. Grenke swung his strong arm around to break Father's neck. Father increased his hold on the collar and cut off Grenke's wind. He had to release his arm. As soon as he released his arm, Father released some of the pressure on his windpipe so that he could take a breath. Again Grenke swung his big arm around to break Father's neck. Again Father choked him till he turned white and began to faint, then released him again to take some more fresh air.

These two Prussian officers stood face to face in a death struggle. Every time our neighbor tried to break Father's neck, Father again cut off his breathing. Finally Father asked him if he would give up his intention. When Mr. Grenke agreed, Father raised him up and threw him on the sleigh. We took him home and never saw him again.

This was not the end of our struggle, but it was the beginning of a new life for Christ. Now we were determined more than ever to take our stand for the truth. We had learned that nothing else really matters in this world. Life is so short and can only be made happy by serving our Creator. We observed the following Sabbath with our two neighbors.

Now we wanted to find our Adventist friends, but we did not know where they were living. They had visited us

from time to time for quite a while, but we never asked them where they were living. We knew the general direction. We knew the colony that they might be living in but that was all. We prayed that God would reveal their whereabouts to us. That week Father had a dream to go to a certain marketplace that we had often gone to about 20 kilometers away. The bazaar was held on Tuesday. He went there and asked some Jews about certain people that were calling themselves Adventists and were keeping the Sabbath holy. The Jews were well-acquainted with them and gave my father the precise directions where to find them.

The following Sabbath our family and the two neighbors got up early to walk the distance, for we were not permitted to take our horses more than five kilometers away from our dwelling. We came to a farmhouse at about 9:30 that morning. Everything seemed so quiet that we thought no one was home, but Father knocked on the door. When the door opened, who do you suppose greeted us? Mr. Kelm! No words can describe the emotions that existed during this meeting. Many tears were shed. We assembled for Sabbath School. There was a group of about 15 people already there, and there were about 10 of us. After the embracing and kissing was over we settled down for the Sabbath School study and for the worship services.

They invited us to join their group, and we were quite willing to do so. But Father said, "We are Baptists, or have been Baptists. We have been baptized before and therefore we do not desire to be baptized again." But my sister and I agreed that after all this struggle that we had gone through to find this wonderful truth, we wanted nothing more to do with our former connections, and we requested to be rebaptized.

On a beautiful Sabbath morning my sister and I and some of the others of our neighbors were baptized, but my father and mother still held back for two more months, and then they requested to be baptized too. This, of course, automatically separated us from our beautiful Baptist church. We had no church building and for a while we were worshipping in our home.

Then even that was forbidden, as a law was passed that no more than two neighbors could visit together at one time. We had to find other places to assemble ourselves. This became very difficult. We often gathered in secret places in the woods and forests and sometimes among the rocky cliffs. We couldn't sing very much because that would be heard. But we could have Bible studies together, and we could pray. We talked to our God who had been so kind to us in the past and in whom we had put all our trust that He would see us through to the end.

I thank God each day of my life for a living faith in Him Who has power to save His erring children, and has promised us a home with Him throughout eternity if we are faithful to the end of life's journey here on planet Earth.

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