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1

Flight to Faith

For *Dr. Boris P. Dotsenko*, an espionage exit from the Soviet Union was to prove an esoteric entrance into a personal relationship with God. Brought up under the ideology of scientific atheism, which he had “absorbed into the very marrow of his bones,” Boris came to faith in the Creator and Sustainer of the universe through three surprise discoveries of the Bible—one in an old barn in the southern USSR, one in a professor’s study in Leningrad, and one in a motel in Edmonton, Canada.

“Disillusionment with the ideology of materialistic Communism,” says Dr. Dotsenko, “is that common factor in the lives of Soviet intellectuals who are finding God.”

Dr. Boris P. Dotsenko received his first academic degree in physics and mathematics at the University of Lvov, in the Soviet republic of the Ukraine, in 1949. He was awarded an M.Sc. degree at the University of Leningrad, and obtained his doctorate at Moscow State University in 1954 for research in physical and mathematical sciences.

After working for three years in the prestigious Academy of Sciences of the USSR, on intercontinental and space rocket research, Dotsenko moved to the Institute of Physics in Kiev, where he was eventually appointed Head of the Nuclear Laboratory.

He sought political asylum in Canada in 1966, while he was traveling on official business. Since then, he has taught at a number of schools and colleges, including the Waterloo Lutheran University, in Waterloo, Ontario, and the University of Toronto.

Dotsenko is a member of a Mennonite Brethren Church.

During World War II, I lived in Siberia. Life was very hard. At the age of fifteen, I went to work on the construction of boilers for factory power plants. The moisture of the steam and the coal dust made it hard to see more than ten steps away. Food was scarce, and we were often very hungry.

I had always had a natural curiosity. In my harsh surroundings, I asked myself more than ever before, *Why do we live?* I read some of the works of Plato and Socrates, and I was thrilled with the clear, logical thinking of the Greek philosophers. But I was a convinced atheist; I had absorbed my political and antireligious thinking into the very marrow of my bones.

At the end of World War II, I was of university age. My family was "reevacuated" to the Ukraine. There I was able to enroll in an electrotechnical college.

One hot and humid afternoon in August, when I was at my grandfather's home recovering from a bout of pneumonia, I wandered into an old barn and fell asleep on a pile of hay. When I awoke, I discovered that I had slipped down between the hay and the rough wooden back wall of the barn. Struggling, I fell further to the floor. There, by my feet, I saw some old papers.

Reaching down, I found some copies of a very old magazine and parts of a book without a cover. Its pages, yellowed with time, were covered with two languages. One was strange, but I recognized it as Old Slavonic script. On opposite pages, in Russian, was a translation of the text. I read: "The gospel of Our Lord Jesus Christ..."

I was frightened. I knew that Christianity was frowned upon in my country. Churches had been burned down or closed. Christian preaching had become a crime, although I did not know why. But, at the same time, I was intrigued. I hid the book under my shirt and sneaked back to my room.

There I read more. The words of John 1:1—"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God"—struck right into my mind! Here was a very clear statement of what was at the beginning, underneath everything. But it completely contradicted everything that I had been taught! Psychologically speaking, reading that was an extremely shocking experience for me.

As I read on, I felt increasingly uncomfortable, and nearly ridiculous. It was so different from all I had been taught. I had thought that it was Stalin who had first said, "He who is not with us is against us." I discovered now that it had been Jesus Christ (see Matthew 12:30).

The Great Commandment of Jesus particularly frightened me. *How could I love God and my neighbor as myself if God did not exist?* I had been told that any enemy who does not surrender

must be annihilated. I had learned that I had a responsibility to betray, if necessary, not only my neighbor, but even my own family. So I resisted what I read, but the words sank deep into me.

Then, strangely, after two weeks, the Scripture disappeared from my room. To this day I know neither how nor why it happened. But what I read had left its mark on me. I kept reverting to its implications while studying physics and mathematics at the University of Kiev.

One of the most fundamental laws of nature that interested me was the Law of Entropy, which is concerned with the probable behavior of the particles (molecules, atoms, electrons, and so on) of any physical system. Put simply, this law states that, left to itself, any physical system will decay with time; matter tends to become increasingly disorganized. (One of the implications of this law is that the whole material world should have turned into a cloud of chaotic dust a long, long time ago!)

As I thought about all of that, it suddenly dawned on me that there must be a very powerful *organizing* force counteracting this disorganizing tendency within nature, keeping the universe controlled and in order. This force must be nonmaterial; otherwise, it too would become disordered. I concluded that this power must be both omnipotent and omniscient: there must be a God—one God—controlling everything! I realized also that even the most brilliant scientists in the best equipped laboratories are still incapable of copying even the simplest living cell: God

must be the Creator of life on Earth.

I did well in my studies at Kiev, and I received and accepted an opportunity to study further at the University of Leningrad.

While I was studying for my master's degree in Leningrad, I discovered another Bible in an unlikely place: the study of the late Dr. Jakov Frenkel, a Russian scientist of world reknown. I had been hesitant about deciding what priority God ought to have in the life of a scientist. It impressed me greatly that this brilliant man, who had the most intimate knowledge of the laws of nature, should keep the Book of God openly in his library.

I began to reach out to God through prayer.

In 1951, as one of the three best students at graduation in Leningrad, I was sent to Moscow State University. There I obtained my Ph.D. in physical and mathematical sciences in 1954, and was assigned to work in the Academy of Sciences of the Soviet Union. My field of research was intercontinental and space rocket research. My personal ideology continued to swing towards Christianity.

In the years that followed, I became a respected scientist, working in the nuclear branch of the Institute of Physics in Kiev. But I lost faith in others—and even myself—when I discovered that my father and my wife were reporting regularly to the KGB on my actions and beliefs.

By the fall of 1964, the strain had become intolerable. I prayed, "My God, kill me, or take me out of here!" I took an overdose of sleeping

pills. When I regained consciousness in the hospital, I remembered saying also, "My Lord, Thy will be done."

Death had not worked. That in itself was an answer to my prayer. I decided to wait and see what God had in store for me.

In 1966, I was appointed Head of my laboratory—a great honor in itself. Then, one day, I was called to Moscow, to the Central Committee of the Soviet Communist Party. I was told that I was to be sent to Canada, and after that to Vienna, as a senior member of the International Atomic Energy Agency. From there, I would be expected to send back information about the achievements of nuclear researchers throughout the world.

One of the top men, Comrade Baskakov, lifting his finger to indicate a quotation from the highest source, said to me, "Boris Borisovich, we will be able to reward your service greatly—up to the Nobel Prize in Physics!"

Two days later, I was in Canada, at the University of Alberta. When I began to unpack my luggage in my Edmonton motel room, I found a third Bible—this one placed there by the Gideons, an international group of Christian businessmen who donate free Bibles to hotels and other public institutions in many countries of the world for the benefit of their clients.

My hands trembled as I lifted the Bible. It opened to John 1:1, and I was reminded of that verse which had struck me so forcibly twenty-two years before, in the Ukrainian barn: "In the

beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." Thereafter, I spent every available moment absorbing the Word of God. Did I now accept what I read? I swallowed it all!

I became a Christian, and I was soon baptized by a minister in Edmonton, Alberta.

I quickly realized that my relationship with Jesus Christ was more important to me than my career, or even my beloved homeland and family. So I stayed in Canada and began teaching physics at several schools and universities.

Today I know that the Bible is the greatest Book of faith, in which the acts of God are recorded for believers. Its final proof will come with the return of our Lord and the establishment of His kingdom.

I believe that God is the Creator of the universe, but He is not *confined* to it. He is independent! He keeps and controls the whole universe, and each part that helps to make it up. He is the One who maintains its order. It is hard for us to conceptualize adequately His relationship with this world, because He does not belong to this "reality"—the only one with which we are familiar.

A simple analogy may help us to understand this a bit more clearly. Consider an electric field, with small particles of iron placed in it. The movements of the particles are controlled by that field, but the field itself does not become part of the system of particles. Each preserves its own "individuality." In the same way, man is circumscribed by God-ordained conditions, but he can

still behave to some extent according to his own nature.

But no analogy can do justice to God's provision for men to enjoy spiritual union with Him. Paraphrasing Francis Bacon, one may say that superficial and egocentric knowledge leads to atheism, while genuine, deep, and objective study leads to faith in God. I thank Him for bringing to my attention three times, in different places and over many years, His book for the world, the Bible. And I thank Him too for granting me the faith to know Him personally and to experience His love. As a professor, I want to train my students in science. But, more importantly, I want to help them to become people who realize their chief responsibilities: to society, to the world around them, and—above all—to God Himself.