

Chapter 1

Back when I was little, I didn't like church because I had to sit still for so long. When I got to be eleven, I still didn't like it because I had to wear shoes to church. All summer long I'd go barefoot, but every Sabbath I had to wear shoes, and I hated shoes! The wool socks I had to wear made my feet itch, and the shoes scrunched up my toes.

But every Sabbath morning Mother always reminded me, "Otho, Otho Godsmark, don't you forget to put on your shoes and socks!"

In the wintertime I had to fetch wood for the potbellied stove that heated the church. That meant that every fifteen minutes or so I'd have to get up; put on coat, mittens, and ear muffs; and go outside into the cold for an armload of wood from the woodpile behind the church. Sometimes I'd get splinters in my fingers from the wood even though I wore mittens.

If there were any visitors at church, Dad would always invite them home for Sabbath dinner. He said it was our "Christian duty." Like as not, they'd end up staying with us that night, which meant that my "Christian duty" was to sleep on the couch in the living room. You see why I didn't like church?

But this particular Sabbath I was almost looking forward to church. That was because Elder James White would be preaching that day. Elder White had a booming voice that made the rafters ring. And he preached pretty good too. Sometimes he'd preach about prophecy. He'd unroll what he called his "prophetic charts." Part of it I couldn't understand

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- all about prophetic days and weeks and things like that. But on some of the pages he had pictures of great, horrible beasts with lots of heads and horns and other scary things. And he'd always have a story for us children. So you can see why it was I almost looked forward to church that day.

When we drove up to the little church a few miles from our farm in Bedford Township, which is about nine miles north of Battle Creek, Michigan, I could see several horses, with buggies, already tied to the trees. And there outside the church stood Elder White, talking to some of the members. You could tell it was he because he was so tall. He always wore a black stovepipe hat and a long black coat with tails.

I don't remember much about church that day because it was what happened after that got my attention. I do remember that on one of my trips to the woodpile I jerked out a piece of wood and four or five came crashing down, and one hit me on the shin. I hopped around a while on one foot holding my shin until it stopped hurting.

When church was over, Elder White shook hands with the people. Then he came over to my father and put his arm around his shoulder. "Brother Godsmark," he said, "I want to talk to you about something."

I got up as close to Father as I could so I could hear what Elder White had to say.

Whatever it was, it surely seemed to be troubling him. Finally he said, "Brother Godsmark, I've got a man at my house that I just don't know what to do with." He shook his head and then went on. "He's from Canada - somewhere in Ontario, I guess. He's been at my place for at least two weeks. He wants to preach. He says he knows the Lord has

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called him to preach. Maybe so -" Elder White shrugged his shoulders and spread his hands as if in despair. "But he doesn't look like a preacher to me, and I don't think we can even make a preacher out of him. He's devoted and seems like a good man. But he has no education and can scarcely express himself intelligently." Elder White paused. Then he went on: "I wish you people would take him out on the farm. He can work enough to pay for his board and room. Will you take him, Brother Godsmark? You can see if there is any preach in him. His name is King - George King."

I knew even before Father answered what he would say. And sure enough, he agreed.

We got into our buckboard - Mother, Father and I - and followed Elder White's buggy to his house. Father and Elder White went up to the house. I followed them 'cause I wanted to see this man who wanted to preach so badly. He came out onto the porch, and I just stood there and stared at him.

I guess he wasn't very old, but to me - a boy of eleven - he surely didn't look young. He acted very formal and stiff. He couldn't seem to look either my father or Elder White in the eye when he spoke to them. He acted as if he were embarrassed about something.

Come to think of it, he had something to be embarrassed about - his clothes! Now very few people living on farms in those days had much money for store-bought clothes. Mother always did a lot of patching and darning to keep us neat and clean. And I guess all farmer families were like that.

But this Mr. King had on a coat that looked as if it had been through the Civil War and lost. He wore a faded shirt. His pants had a hole in one knee and shiny spots on the seat.

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His whole outfit looked as if he had slept in a haystack. His shoes looked as if they had never seen polish. They may have been dark brown once, but I could be off a couple of shades.

I couldn't take my eyes off him. But then Mother came up, took me by the arm, and marched me back to the buckboard.

"Othniel Godsmark," she snapped.

Othniel, you see, was my real name; but everybody called me Otho, except Mother - when I was in trouble.

"Don't stare at people like that - especially strangers," she said.

"But he's dressed so funny," I blurted out. "That's what made me stare."

"I don't care how he's dressed. He's one of God's children, and you must be polite and courteous," Mother said.

I wasn't very happy back in the buckboard with Mother. I couldn't hear what the three men were saying. However, after a short while I saw Father shake hands with Elder White. Then he placed his hand on Mr. King's arm and pointed with his other hand toward the buckboard. Father had a smile on his face, and I knew what had been decided.

I knew I had just lost my bedroom for the rest of the winter. You see, my room was kept warm by a stovepipe that came up through it from the living room downstairs. I'd have to sleep downstairs in the living room.

Father was always doing something for the church. Once - a year ago - Elder White had had another of these talks with Father after church. That talk was something about the publishing work being short of money. The very next

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morning Father took our two best oxen, Buck and Bright we called them, and gave them to James White to sell. Buck had been my favorite ever since he was just a calf. I used to help hold the milk bucket so he could drink from it. Then Father had to go and sell him. Every time we went into town to the market and stores in Battle Creek, we'd go by the Review and Herald Publishing House and listen to the roar and clatter of the big printing presses. Dad would always say, "Hear that, Otho? That's ol' Buck and Bright still pulling away. They're printing the third angel's message."

I never could figure out what he meant, because I knew they didn't use oxen to run the presses. All I knew was that if Father would give away valuable oxen for the Lord's work, my own bedroom didn't stand a chance.

We headed on home. George King sat up front with Mother and Father. I sat in the back on the floor, shoved and scraped by Mr. King's trunk as we jounced along.

"Well, Brother King," Father said as we rode along, "we're happy to have you spend a couple months with us while you decide what you're going to do."

I could tell that Father was trying to make Mr. King feel welcome.

"I - I've been ah - ah - well, I've felt that - that the Lord ah-ah - wants me to - to - ah - ah - has called me to ah - ah - to preach, Brother Godsmark, sir. That's ah-ah - that's what I - I just have to do."

How could anyone who stammered and stuttered the way this George King did ever hope to become a preacher? I wondered.

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“Yes, brother,” Father went on, “we want you to do what the Lord has called you to do. But in the meantime, you’re welcome to stay with us. You can help out with the chores a little to cover your food and your room.”

At the mention of chores, I spoke up. “That’s right, Mr. King. You can help me feed the chickens and churn the butter.”

I wanted to make Mr. King feel at home too, and I wouldn’t mind it a bit if he helped out with some of my chores. But this was clearly not my day. Mother turned around and gave me one of those looks that made me understand that this was grown-up talk and I was to stay out of it.

Father added, talking as if it was to me, but really aiming at George King, “That’s very kind of you, Otho. But Mr. King will be very busy studying his Bible and praying and seeking the Lord’s guidance.”

“Well,” George King began, “well, um, I - ah - ah - thought that, ah - ” but before he could make up his mind as to just what he was going to say, Mother cut in.

“Brother King, we want you to consider our home a place of rest and preparation for you so you can be ready to go out into the world and fight against sin and wickedness.”

I was going to say that I thought getting up every morning at five o’clock and going out into the cold to feed the chickens would be good preparation for going out into the world to fight against sin, but something in that look Mother had given me made me decide not to say anything.