

When a young man's heart develops strong feelings for a special girl, he doesn't want to hear the words, "I don't love you." However, that tragic phrase is at least understandable. But what does it mean when the girl replies, "I can't marry you"? That's exactly what happened to Sergei Debelinsky of Kiev, Ukraine.

Sergei's story began when he was born in Oboyan, Russia, in 1961. He grew up in a non-Christian home, where no one discussed God. As a boy, Sergei accepted without question what the Soviet government taught on every level of education: there is no God.

During his teen years, Sergei considered himself an atheist. Naturally, he joined the Komsomol ("Young Communist League"), a political organization for youth in the USSR.

Life seemed to be sailing smoothly when Sergei enrolled in Kiev Technological Institute of Food Industry. He planned to become a mechanical engineer in food processing, with a special interest in the science of liquid food preservation. However, when he and some friends walked to a nearby dorm to invite a girl to a New Year's celebration, Sergei met the girl's roommate. Olya not only struck Sergei as pretty, but she stood out from other girls in her demeanor. Sergei had literally never met any girl like her.

Soon Sergei was creating opportunities to chat with Olya. Their conversations touched on the typical topics of interest to young people. Within a couple months, Sergei's heart was smitten by love. Encouraged by what he perceived to be mutual feelings on her part, he surprised Olya with a marriage proposal.

Her response shocked him: "I can't marry you."

When he wondered why not, her explanation confused him even more.

"I'm a believer."

Sergei was astonished. He thought, "What kind of people are believers, that they can't get married?" His first reaction was to claim that he himself wasn't far from having a kind of faith.

Olya didn't buy it. "You don't understand what it means to be a believer."

URGENT NEW STUDIES

By this point, Sergei's heart was so strongly drawn to Olya that he resolved to learn more about her and her faith. He asked her to take him to a service at her Baptist church.

On the appointed Sunday, Sergei imagined what the service might look like. He assumed it might consist of a priest and a handful of illiterate grandmothers. When he arrived, his Soviet education left him unprepared for the unbelievable sight before him. Hundreds of people filled the house of worship. Many of them were his own age!

That first church service left Sergei unimpressed. Actually, it

frustrated him. The main reason he went was to spend time with Olya. But in those days, that church's tradition was for men to sit on one side, and women on the other! However, Sergei formulated a plan. He would research atheism and religion. He reasoned that if he could build a case using irrefutable evidence, he could lead Olya out of her "religious brainwashing." With that goal, he visited the library and checked out hefty volumes on atheism. Even though he pored over page after page, he didn't find the solid support he expected. In fact, the books were adamant but shallow.

Sergei said, "I was shocked that such thick volumes written about the fact that there is no God offered no concrete proof at all." Still, he armed himself with the best anti-God arguments he could muster. Later, when he presented his case for atheism to Olya and her church friends, his best arguments popped like soap bubbles.

American readers must keep in mind that this occurred during the 1980s. The atheistic Soviet government still locked some pastors in prison. (Olya's own grandfather had been executed for his faith in the 1930s.) Christians viewed atheists who visited church as possible government agents sent to harm the church, and some of Olya's friends suspected Sergei of being one.

From Olya's perspective, as she observed Sergei defending atheism, she couldn't imagine him ever repenting and trusting Christ. However, she and

her family prayed for God to work in his heart.

LIFE TURNED UPSIDE RIGHT

Sergei wasn't sure what to do. The most prolific atheist authors had let him down. For a time he thought perhaps he and Olya should go their separate ways. Their differences seemed insurmountable. Except . . . he loved her. He couldn't give up.

Sergei decided to attend church every week to learn all he could about the Bible and Christianity. Surely he could find errors to refute?

Although Sergei began as a skeptic, the Scripture verses and sermons gradually worked in his heart. They introduced him to a new way of seeing the world, with God as Creator, humankind as flawed sinners, and Jesus Christ as God's plan to win back from sin a family for Himself. Still, yielding to God didn't come easily. Even after he realized his need to repent of sin and embrace Christ, Sergei resisted for months. At last, on December 10, 1985, the former atheist trusted Jesus Christ as his Savior from sin. And in the summer of 1986 he was baptized.

Before long, armed with a new heart, a new life, and faith in Christ, Sergei proposed to Olya a second time. She knew his faith was genuine; he wasn't faking it. This time Olya said, "Да" — Yes!

UNFORESEEN BLESSINGS

The story of Sergei and Olya would be wonderful enough if it ended there.

But the blessings continued. Eager to delve into God's Word, Sergei began studying it, both for personal growth and for ministry.

In time, he was ordained to the ministry and as a missionary under Baptist International Evangelistic Ministries (BIEM), he planted a new church in the Obolon district of Kiev. In 2003 he was elected treasurer of the Brotherhood of Independent Baptist Churches and Missions of Ukraine. Three years later, he accepted an invitation to serve as president of that fellowship of one hundred and thirty churches.

Over the years, Sergei and Olya have had six biological children. They've also adopted seven orphans. Aiding orphans is a topic about which he's passionate: "Probably one of the most famous Scriptures concerning good deeds is, 'Pure religion and undefiled before God and the Father is this, to visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction, and to keep himself unspotted from the world' (James 1:27). God expects His people

to have a special mindset concerning orphans and widows." If asked, Sergei is ready to quote additional Scriptures about the fatherless and widows. Suffice it to say, he and Olya are definitely doers of the Word, not just hearers.

SPECULATIONS

What would have happened had Olya agreed to violate her Biblical principles and marry Sergei when he was a nonbeliever? To that question, Sergei responded, "My goal had been to lead her away from faith in God. Years later, evaluating our life together, I'm very thankful to Olya that at first she answered no. It would've been complicated to build a family without a common foundation for life. I think there's hardly any chance that I would've taken an interest in God and come to a point of repentance." Amen! ■

Rick Barry is a freelance writer, novelist, and frequent contributor to Regular Baptist Press. His most recent novel is The Methuselah Project, by Kregel Publications.



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